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Should I stay or should I go?

The First Year Experience of Undergraduate Students at Lincoln University

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Social Science

at

Lincoln University

by

Deborah May Taylor

Lincoln University
2004
Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the Degree of M.Soc.Sc.

Should I stay or should I go?

The First Year Experience of Undergraduate Students at Lincoln University

by Deb Taylor

Each year, hundreds of first year students head to the Lincoln University campus to embark on university study. Many of them, however, do not continue past the first few weeks. When students decide to leave university without completing their degree, they become one of the growing attrition statistics. Attrition represents a significant cost to both the institution and the student. With universities becoming more dependent on student contributions, due to decreased government funding and an increasingly competitive tertiary education market, attrition has become a major issue for New Zealand institutions. It is widely accepted that most attrition occurs in the first year; therefore, to understand attrition, an understanding of the first year experience at university is required.

This study sought to examine the first year experience of undergraduate students at Lincoln University. A total of twenty-three, in depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with first year students. Five students, who had been interviewed for a previous study while in their first year, were re-interviewed in their last year of university. Of the twenty-three students, twenty-one were still studying at Lincoln, while one student had transferred to another university and one student had left the university system altogether.

Results of this study indicate that one of the key factors in the retention of first year students at Lincoln is the acknowledgement that there are at least three distinct groups of students: school leavers; gap students; mature students.
These three groups arrive at Lincoln with different experiences of a number of preparatory factors such as prior academic experience, family and social background and perceptions of personal ability. It is during their first year that students have their initial experiences of interacting with various aspects of the university setting – the environment, the people and the institutional systems. The two major facets of interaction identified in this study can be categorised as social and academic. It was found that each group of students encountered these aspects of the university setting in quite different ways which gave rise to quite distinct first year experiences.

It emerged that these different groups of students require support for the different facets of the experience (for example, academic and social) at different times, for different reasons if the overall experience is to be positive. This support may be found through the students’ existing support networks, but it can also provide the foundations for specific retention strategies. Finally, suggestions were made for future research.

**Keywords:** student retention, student withdrawal, attrition, student experience, first year experience.
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Chapter One:  Introduction

A few years ago, I was a first year student starting an undergraduate degree. I was ready to embark on a journey that I knew would change, or at least redirect, the rest of my life. The first person I got to know was a young woman named Susan\(^1\). She was young (20 years old), I was “mature”. She was full of confidence where I was riddled with self-doubt. Yet Susan did not complete her first year at university – she “dropped out”. I graduated with a Bachelor of Social Science and have continued with postgraduate study. I have no idea what happened to Susan, but I often wonder what contributed to her leaving while I continued with study. There are, of course, myriad reasons why Susan, specifically, dropped out. She is not alone. Many students leave in their first year of university study without completing their intended course of study. Colloquially, the term ‘drop-out’ is often used to describe this type of student, with some literature using the terms ‘non-persister’ and ‘non-completion’ (Brawer, 1998; Kantanis, 2000; Tinto, 1996; Yorke, 1999). The literature refers to the problem of ‘attrition’ or ‘non-completion’ when describing this behaviour (Kantanis, 2000; Leys, 1999; Yorke, 1999).

It is widely accepted that attrition occurs in the first year of university and that the attrition that occurs in subsequent years is often linked to the first year experience (Boland, 1998; Burgess & Sharma, 1999; Dennis, 1998; Elliott, 1997; Elson-Green, 1999a; Johnson & Buck, 1995; Leys, 1999; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Tinto, 1993). Johnson (1994) and Leys (1999) suggest that for some students, leaving is appropriate and “should be recognised as a perfectly normal function with tertiary education” (Leys, 1999, p.2). They may find an alternative course of study better suited to their end goals, or they may decide to work in paid employment for a while with every intention of returning some time in the future to tertiary study. Others simply come to the conclusion that university is ‘not for them’ (Johnson, 1994; Tinto, 1993). For some students, however, the first year experience is neither successful nor satisfying and leaving is the culmination of financial, emotional or academic hardship that has become too much to bear (Kantanis, 2000). It can result in “disillusionment, diminished self esteem and a failed investment – by the student, the institution and the state” (Boddy & Neale, 1997, p.8).

\(^1\) A pseudonym has been used.
Attrition is a significant cost to a university (Miller & Eddy & Professional Associates, 1983; Yorke, 1999). Given that in New Zealand most degrees take three years to complete, a student leaving in the first year theoretically ‘deprives’ the university of funding for a further two years. Johnson and Buck (1995), echoed by Hotere (1997), suggest it is easier, and less expensive, to maintain existing students than to recruit new students, while Tinto (1993) states: “institutions have come to view the retention of students as the only reasonable course of action left to insure their [financial] survival.” (p.2). With this financial imperative, and knowing that attrition occurs primarily in the first year, and that attrition in subsequent years is often linked to the first year experience, it is important, from an institution’s point of view, that there be an increased focus on the first year experience of students. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to explore the first year experience of domestic\(^2\) undergraduate students at Lincoln University (Lincoln).

This chapter provides the necessary context in which to place this research. That context includes the history of Lincoln University, the developments over the past 20 years in the broader New Zealand tertiary sector and the context of the first year in the lives of the students.

The experience being explored occurs at Lincoln. To situate the experience in time and place, a brief background to the establishment and development of universities within New Zealand, and more specifically Lincoln University, is necessary. It is important to acknowledge that Lincoln operates within a wider university sector. This sector has been subject, especially since 1984, to various political reforms. These ideological changes have had practical, organisational and financial consequences for the tertiary sector. The wider, more recent, university context is, therefore, also briefly discussed. As mentioned, the first year experience also has to be placed in the context of the students’ lives. A discussion of the generic nature of the first year experience is therefore provided in this chapter.

I conclude this chapter by presenting a chapter by chapter outline of the thesis.

\(^2\) International students are not included in the scope of this thesis.
1.1 Universities in New Zealand

Institutionalised education has been a feature of New Zealand society since European colonisation in the mid-1800s. Utilitarian thought was at its heyday during the 1840s and fundamental to this was the notion of moral and social improvement (Beaglehole, 1937). The value of individual education, and with this higher education, was stressed and became increasingly accessible to some groups traditionally excluded from higher education. It was a time when "...the Dissenter and the middle class manufacturer began to envisage a university for his son (sic), if not for his workmen (sic).” (Beaglehole, 1937, p.10).

In New Zealand, the ‘Report of the Select Committee on the Establishment of University Scholarships’ was published in 1867 (AJHR, 1867, F1, pp.1-72). This report suggested sending boys3 ‘home’ (to England) for further education. The report focussed on the merit or otherwise of scholarships and, also, the notion of establishing a New Zealand University. The Committee supported the foundation of eight scholarships but could not recommend the establishment of a University due to the colony being “insufficiently advanced” in material resources and population. They did, however, recommend that several Provinces should be invited to set apart portions of Crown Lands for the purpose of endowment to a future university (AJHR, 1867, F1, p.1-72). Legislative action was taken eleven months later with the New Zealand University Endowment Act, 1868. Beaglehole (1937, p.23) points out, that, “no scholarships were ever held, and the Government’s invitation to the provinces to make the statutory reserves was met by a complete and desolating lack of interest”. This “lack of interest” was not, however, the position of one province – Otago.

1.1.1 New Zealand’s First University

Immigrants associated with the Free Church of Scotland, established the Otago province in 1848 (Gardner, 1992). The New Zealand Company4, driven by its philosophy of systematic colonisation, facilitated the founding of the province (Harrop, 1928). The value of education was illustrated by the New Zealand Company requirement that one-eighth of the proceeds from the settlement’s land sales be placed in a trust for religious and educational purposes (Beaglehole, 1937). Gold rushes in the 1860s resulted in the rapid

---

3 ‘Boys’, ‘young men’, and ‘lads’ are referred to throughout this document. No mention is made of females reflecting their exclusion from high levels of education at this time.

4 See Harrop (1928) for a comprehensive discussion of Edward Gibbon Wakefield and the New Zealand Company.
growth of both population (from 12,700 in 1860 to 76,900 by 1863) and wealth in the region (Beaglehole, 1937). With the settlers' belief in the intrinsic value of education, the need for higher education for boys leaving Otago Boys' High School (established 1863) and the training of ministers, a university in Otago was inevitable. Otago University, the first in New Zealand, was established in 1869. Canterbury College (now Canterbury University) was established four years later in 1873, and the School of Agriculture of Canterbury University College (now Lincoln University) in 1878 (Blair, 1978; Graham, 1992). Universities in Auckland and Wellington (Victoria) followed subsequently in 1883 and 1897 respectively (AJHR, 1879, H1, p.ix; Barrowman, 1999).

Participation in tertiary education has increased steadily, with around 400,000 New Zealanders participating in some form of tertiary education in 2002 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003). Enrolment in universities in New Zealand has increased steadily with an increase of 124 percent in student numbers experienced from 1985 to 2002, and an 1,150 percent increase over the fifty year period. Table 1 details total numbers of students enrolled in New Zealand.

Table 1: Total Student Enrolments – New Zealand Universities - 1950-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>% increase/decrease on previous period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>11,515</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>10,851</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>15,809</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>22,145</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>31,908</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>35,499</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>43,933</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>59,123</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>78,919</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>104,389</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>122,727</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>125,668</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>132,396</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.1.2 Lincoln University

Lincoln is situated within the Canterbury region in the South Island of New Zealand. It has the proud tradition of being the first agricultural college established in the Southern Hemisphere, third agricultural college in the Commonwealth, and the third tertiary institution founded in New Zealand (Blair, 1978). Land endowments for a school of agriculture were set aside by the Canterbury Provincial Council in 1872 (Education Unit, 1990). The Lincoln story, however, starts in 1876, when recommendations were made to the Canterbury College board:

"that steps should be taken to establish an agriculture school and experimental farm; that such should be situated not more than 15 miles from Christchurch and not more than three miles from the railway; that the school should be adapted for boarders, as well as day pupils; that the farm should be of not less than 150 acres, not more than 300 acres and should if possible comprise land of various descriptions..." (Blair, 1978, p.5).

Lincoln fitted the recommendations perfectly – located as it was 22 kilometres from the centre of Christchurch. Land purchased at Lincoln for the agricultural college totalled 215 acres by the end of 1877. By 1880, a further 447 acres had been purchased, bringing the total to 662 acres.

On July 19, 1880, the School of Agriculture opened with 16 students. Mr W. E. Ivey managed the school. He was called the ‘managing director’ and controlled all activities. Ivey had firm views on what the school should be and do. That was to "... conduct a programme that would convince farmers that the best way to prepare for their succession was not to put youth to follow the plough straight from school, but rather to train them in science and practice.” (Blair, 1978, p.10). Although Lincoln University retains its agricultural tradition, many changes have occurred over the years.

Lincoln has been known by a number of different names; the School of Agriculture of Canterbury University College, Lincoln School of Agriculture, Canterbury Agricultural College, Lincoln College and, finally in 1990, Lincoln University (Blair, 1978, Education Unit, 1990). Over the 125 years, the number and diversity of courses offered have obviously increased. Initially a Diploma in ‘Agriculture’ was offered, although ‘Agriculture’ included lectures in mathematics, surveying, English, physical geography,
veterinary science, natural science, geology, and chemistry. Lincoln, in 1896, was the first tertiary institution in Australasia to introduce the Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (Blair, 1978, Education Unit, 1990).

Lincoln has always been small (in terms of student numbers) in comparison with other New Zealand universities. Student numbers remained under one hundred⁵ for its first eighty years. Enrolments rose after the Second World War as a result of Rehabilitation training – retraining for service personnel – and the introduction of the Diploma of Valuation and Farm Management. In the early 1960s, Lincoln experienced a sharp increase in student numbers as the early ‘baby boomer’ population reached university age. The establishment and development of programmes such as the Bachelor in Agricultural Commerce (Agricultural Economics), Bachelor in Agricultural Commerce (Farm Management), Diploma in Horticulture, Bachelor of Horticulture and Diploma in Landscape Architecture, contributed to the growth in student numbers over the 1960s and 1970s (Blair, 1978). Total student numbers peaked in 1996 with 4,146, then declining and reaching a low of 3,561 in 2001. Total student numbers have started to trend upward again with 4,136 total students enrolled in 2003.

Lincoln became a University in 1990. In the 1990 Charter of the University, the four broad areas of teaching and research are stated as commerce and management; primary production and natural resources; science and engineering and social sciences. Student numbers and composition since 1991 are detailed in Table 2.

---

⁵ Key points with regard to student numbers at Lincoln are presented. For a comprehensive discussion see Blair, 1978.
Table 2: Total Student Enrolments 1991-2003\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>% International</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>% Female</th>
<th>Full-Time</th>
<th>Part-Time</th>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2,813</td>
<td>2,675</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>1,798</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>2,486</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>3,215</td>
<td>2,884</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>2,013</td>
<td>1,202</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>2,848</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>3,511</td>
<td>3,107</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>2,142</td>
<td>1,369</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>3,052</td>
<td>459</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>3,698</td>
<td>3,100</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>2,221</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>3,241</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>3,949</td>
<td>3,189</td>
<td>760</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>2,327</td>
<td>1,622</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>3,299</td>
<td>650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>4,146</td>
<td>2,875</td>
<td>856</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>2,414</td>
<td>1,732</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>3,638</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4,106</td>
<td>2,982</td>
<td>918</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>2,344</td>
<td>1,762</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3,527</td>
<td>579</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3,918</td>
<td>3,010</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>2,197</td>
<td>1,721</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>3,366</td>
<td>552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3,792</td>
<td>3,188</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>2,126</td>
<td>1,666</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>3,092</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3,688</td>
<td>3,290</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>2,097</td>
<td>1,591</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>2,799</td>
<td>889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>3,561</td>
<td>2,739</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>2,020</td>
<td>1,541</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>2,781</td>
<td>780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>3,912</td>
<td>2,531</td>
<td>1,381</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>2,219</td>
<td>1,693</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>2,908</td>
<td>1,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>4,136</td>
<td>2,278</td>
<td>1,858</td>
<td>44.9%</td>
<td>2,302</td>
<td>1,834</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>2,809</td>
<td>1,327</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lincoln University Annual Reports 1991-2003

Lincoln is both a residential and commuter-based campus. All students can apply for a place in the halls of residence. The halls of residence are situated on campus in a range of accommodation types. First year students are usually located across six buildings – Hudson, Colombo, Lowrie, Stevens, Southland and Centennial – that house a total of 445 students, whilst smaller housing-type accommodation (called the ‘flats’ – 12 in total) that accommodate up to five students in each unit are usually allocated to second and third year students, along with international students. There is a choice of catered (where food is served and eaten in a large dining room), or self-catered (cook and supply own food) options.

\(^6\) Includes sub-degree, undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments.
By 2001, the year in which this study began, the traditionally male, agricultural-based college had been a university for more than ten years, and approximately 50 percent of all undergraduate first year students were enrolled in some type of commerce degree, while 43 percent of its student population was female.

These issues emphasise that Lincoln does not operate within a vacuum. To understand the changes that have evolved at Lincoln, it is necessary to consider the changes in the broader tertiary environment.

1.1.3 New Zealand Context

Johnson and Buck (1995) suggested that the retention of students, and consequently the first year experience, only becomes a significant research topic when financial concerns are attached. Financial concerns in the New Zealand context have increasingly become a focus with the neo-liberal reforms initiated in 1984 by the fourth Labour government. In 1984, the fourth Labour Government began a comprehensive programme of restructuring which changed New Zealand from the social democratic pattern, characteristic of New Zealand society from 1935, to a textbook case of neo-liberalism (Dalziel & Lattimore, 1996; Hazledine, 1998; Kelsey, 1995).

The neo-liberal underpinnings introduced the market model of supply and demand to the university sector. Treasury drove extensive restructuring of the entire education system (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Butterworth & Tarling, 1994; Kelsey, 1997). Education was reformulated as being partly a private good (benefiting the individual), rather than just a public good (benefiting the whole of society) (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Karmel, 2000; Kelsey, 1997). As Kelsey (1997, p.327) states:

"In addition to their educational role, universities had served a range of public service functions: the creation and expansion of knowledge, research and publication; advisory and servicing functions for the state and professions; repositories and transmitters of historical, cultural and social knowledge; and... as social critics. The neo-liberal model sought to reduce the role to production of education and training – commodities which would be bought and sold in an artificially constructed education market driven by the forces of supply and demand."
As a result of the market model, competition between tertiary education providers was introduced into the tertiary education sector (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Leys, 1999; Raymore & Berno, 1996). A new education framework, detailed in *Education of the 21st Century* in 1994, removed the boundaries between educational providers. A 'qualifications framework', facilitated by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), would provide standard credentials supplied by approved delivery agents (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Kelsey, 1997). Degree programmes were no longer to be the sole domain of universities, with the "distinction between academic and vocation courses, while not completely obsolete, blurred in a modern world" (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998, p.99).

By 2002, students could choose from 35 public tertiary education institutions (comprising universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and wānanga7), 490 private training establishments (funded), 398 private training establishments (non-funded) 16 tertiary education providers categorised as "other", and 9 Government Training Establishments (Ministry of Education, 2004). Further to this, numerous overseas tertiary education providers can now be accessed through distance learning programmes (Ministry of Education, 2004).

In terms of financial contribution, the Ministry of Education (2000) reports that total spending (on EFTS [Equivalent Full-Time Student] tuition subsidies) had increased by an average of 2.2 per cent per annum from 1991 to 1999, but this spending had to fund more providers. This meant that the average subsidy for public tertiary education institutions had actually decreased by 13 per cent since 1991. The financial viability of providers, therefore, becomes more and more dependent on increased student contributions, other funding streams such as commercial research partnerships and the international student market (Kelsey, 1997, Leys, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2000; Raymore and Berno, 1996; Tinto, 1993).

For Lincoln, as the smallest of the eight New Zealand universities, increased competition and reduced funding had some real consequences. As already illustrated in Table 2, student numbers increased to 1995 and peaked at 4,146 in 1996. From 1997 to 2001,

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7 A teaching and research institution that maintains, advances and disseminates knowledge, develops intellectual independence and assists the application of knowledge regarding ahuatanga Māori (Māori tradition) according to tikanga Māori custom. (www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers/about.html.)
however, student numbers declined from 4106 in 1997 to a low of 3561 in 2001 (Lincoln University, 1990-2003). Subject rationalisation occurred from 1996, with subjects being offered to undergraduate students declining (See Table 3). It should be noted however, that overall undergraduate qualifications offered at degree and diploma level increased. Some of this increase is due to ‘named’ degrees being introduced that are comprised of mostly existing subjects. For example, the Bachelor of Tourism Management was introduced in 2002. Previous to this, tourism had been offered in the Bachelor of Parks, Recreation and Tourism degree. The degree established five new dedicated tourism papers with the other nineteen units needed for the degree being comprised of existing subjects.

Table 3: Subjects and Degree/Diploma Qualifications Offered in 1996 and 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Subjects Offered</th>
<th>Number of Degree/Diplomas Offered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A further consequence was the need for Lincoln to find funding alternatives. One of the alternatives that Lincoln embraced is the recruitment of international students, especially through ‘sub-degree’ programmes. Although Australian and British students have been enrolled at various times since its establishment, international students from Malaysia, India, Indonesia and Africa began attending Lincoln from 1954. In 2003, international students comprised nearly 45 percent of the total student population. Although, as previously stated, international students are not discussed in this thesis, it is important to note the demographic change in the student population and why that change occurred. It is also important because of the potential impact of the changing student population on the experience during the first year.

The reduced funding of tertiary institutions by government also had consequences for students. A uniform fee was imposed in 1989 and targeted allowances replaced the universal student allowance in 1991. Eligibility for the targeted allowances was extremely narrow, which meant many students borrowed fees and money for day-to-day living from the newly instituted student loan scheme (Butterworth & Tarling, 1994; Kelsey, 1997). Near-market interest rates were imposed on the student loans, with a repayment rate set at ten per cent of gross income over an income threshold. The income threshold is currently

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8 Sub-degree are certificate and diploma courses that serve as entry qualifications into degree programmes.
set at $16,172 and is not graduated in terms of number of dependants (Inland Revenue, 2004). An interest write-off can be gained while a student is still studying full-time, or if a student is studying part-time and below a certain income level. Over the twelve years of this scheme being in place, students' debt has risen to just under $6 billion, with the repayment time reported at an average of 10.8 years for female borrowers and 7.2 years for male borrowers. There are currently (to end June 2004) 418,761 students who have students loans (Ministry of Education, Inland Revenue and StudyLink, 2004).

The situation of students having more choice and tertiary providers receiving less government spending has been further compounded by the experienced decrease in the New Zealand population of 18-24 year olds. Fewer students - in the traditional core age group - actually exist (Ministry of Education, 2000)\(^9\). Fewer students and increased competition have led to many universities increasing recruitment marketing activities. Boddy and Neale (1997, p.3) suggest that such marketing strategies concentrate on “selling the sizzle and not the sausage”. This is demonstrated by universities using advertising to promote themselves. In 2003, for example, the University of Otago spent an estimated $2,353,000 on advertising, with a total of approximately $23.8 million being spent by all state-owned tertiary institutions (Gibb, 2004).

A change in Government in 1999 led to the establishment of the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC). This independent commission was established to review the tertiary education sector in New Zealand. In July 2000, the first report from TEAC, *Shaping A Shared Vision*, was released (Tertiary Education Advisory Commission, 2000). TEAC was required

> “to develop a strategic direction for tertiary education in New Zealand that best serves New Zealand’s human capability development in the future. A key objective of this strategic direction must be to enable lifelong learning for a knowledge society. Such a strategic direction must have wide acceptance and endure over the medium to long term if it is to be successful.”

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\(^9\) A ‘mature’ student is 21 years old or older and is categorised as such because of entrance eligibility. Discussed later in this thesis.
Shaping a Shared Vision was the first in a series of four reports that were released between July 2000 and November 2001. From the recommendations of these reports, the Tertiary Education Commission was established with the Education (Tertiary Reform) Amendment Act 2002. As the practical outcomes of the change in strategic direction have only recently begun to filter through to the institutions, these reports will not be discussed. It is extremely unlikely, however, that the situation of fewer students, more choice and less funding, will change rapidly. These factors, to some degree or another, will continue to exist in the macro environment within which tertiary education providers operate.

The tertiary education system has experienced yet further pressure. New Zealand, along with other western countries, has experienced dramatic growth in tertiary education participation rates (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Johnson, 1994; Karmel, 2000; McInnis & James, 1995; Yorke, 1999; Yorke, 2000a). In the ten years 1984 to 1994, Equivalent Full-Time students enrolled at tertiary institutions in New Zealand increased from 41,606 to 80,713 (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). In terms of OECD countries, it is reported that “more than half of the OECD countries will have achieved a 75 per cent participation rate by 2015” (Poole, 2000, p.70). In Australia, for example, expectations have been raised, for students and their families, to the point where “all Secondary School leavers expect to participate in tertiary education”, and it is anticipated that around “90 percent of the current cohort of 18 year olds could expect to attend tertiary education at some stage in their lifetime” (Burgess & Sharma, 1999, p.1; Karmel, 2000; p.3). These increased participation rates have resulted in wider access to university education. More people accessing university education places a higher demand on limited resources.

There are, of course, many advantages of a more educated society. At face value for the individual, having a higher level of education improves living standards, is associated with greater income, and acts as an “occupation entry without which access to prestigious positions in society becomes measurably more difficult” (Tinto, 1993, p.2). For the country as a whole, better education is deemed necessary to boost economic growth (‘Aimless’ students worrying Govt, 2004). It is important to note, however, that although wider access to university education has some positive outcomes, it does have unknown consequences in terms of the first year experience and retention of students. These issues are discussed later in this thesis.
1.2 First Year Experience

Coupled with the macro environment within which tertiary education providers operate, a micro environment exists. This comprises both the generic facets of the first year at university as experienced by all students, and specific facets of the first year experienced by each individual student.

1.2.1 Key Terms and General Information

Before the generic facets of the first year experience can be discussed, it is important to define central terms used in this thesis. An "undergraduate" is "a university student who is studying for a first degree" (Heinemann New Zealand Dictionary, 1989). Full undergraduate degree prescriptions and regulations are detailed in the Lincoln University Calendar, which is produced each year. An undergraduate degree at Lincoln comprises 24 units (papers), in total. Successfully completing a full-time year would entail obtaining pass marks (generally a C grade or higher) in eight units each year. The units are a combination of degree core and elective subjects at three academic levels: 100 level; 200 level and 300 level. Typically, a first year student would register in 100 level subjects (the lowest academic level) but this is not always the case. Certain prerequisite pathways and the use of previous credits from other institutions or qualifications may mean that some 200 level or even 300 level subjects could be taken.

A Bachelor’s degree at Lincoln generally takes three years, full-time, to complete. The diploma (usually two years) and certificate (usually one year) courses at Lincoln are referred to as ‘sub-degree’ level. All these courses can be completed on either a full-time or part-time basis. Enrolment status (full or part-time) can, however, impact on student allowance and student loan entitlements.

All of Lincoln’s degree courses are open entry. This means that none of the degree courses have a restricted number criterion. The school leavers in this thesis have gained entrance into university either through the bursary examination or sixth form certificate marks. These university entrance qualifications have recently changed. Individuals 20 years and over, can gain entrance into any New Zealand open entry degree course through the special admission provisions (Boddy & Neale, 1997). No prior academic history is required.

In New Zealand, there is government financial assistance to study in the form of the student loan and the student allowance. This thesis does not look at financial issues in any
depth, but basic information is as follows. A student loan can be provided for both fees and living costs whereas an allowance is a living cost payment only. A student loan is just that, a ‘loan’, and has to be paid back some time in the future when earnings reach a set amount, whereas an allowance does not. Student loans are available to the majority of students (18 and over), while allowances, for those under 25 years old, are based on criteria such as parents’ income, age, enrolment status, citizenship and other earnings (StudyLink, 2004).

In this thesis, ‘retention’ means that a student has remained at the same tertiary institution until they graduate with a qualification. ‘Attrition’ is when an enrolled student leaves their course of study and the university without graduating. There are, however, different categories of attrition and there are some common terms used for these different categories across the literature. Voluntary withdrawal decisions by students (attrition) fall into two broad categories: those students who decide to return after some time and those who decide never to return. The students who return after some time are called “institutional stopouts” or “stopouts” (Bean, 1982; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999). Decisions of the students who never return to the institution from which they left can be further categorised. The students who decide to continue studying immediately, or after some time, at a different institution are both categorised as “institutional departure”. Those students who decide to leave higher education altogether are categorised as “system departure” (Tinto, 1993, p.8). Using these categories, it makes sense that individual institutions would be concerned with students who are categorised by “institutional departure”, while the entire tertiary sector should be concerned with the “system departure” category.

Students also leave individual institutions in various ways. Students can undergo a formal withdrawal process where the institution is aware that the student is leaving as the necessary administration process is completed. If this process takes place within the first two weeks of the semester, a refund of fees is given. Many students, however, just disappear. At Lincoln, for example, if a student leaves in week three of the semester (not entitled to a refund of fees), often the first sign that the student has left is a DNS (Did Not Sit) on their exam transcript, together with non-enrolment for the following semester. It
may take up to 12 weeks for the administration to be aware of the DNS and up to 24 weeks to become aware of the non-enrolment\textsuperscript{10}.

‘Involuntary withdrawal’ is also discussed in the literature. It is when the departure decision of a student is made by the institution, rather than the student (Tinto, 1993). At Lincoln, students can be excluded on the grounds of “unsatisfactory progress”. This occurs rarely but there are provisions within the University Calendar for this eventuality (Lincoln University Calendar, 2004, p.51). This type of withdraw is not discussed in this thesis.

1.2.2 Attrition Rates and Cost Implications

Until recently, the actual figure of attrition at New Zealand universities could only be estimated. It was reported that approximately 24 percent of New Zealand students who enrolled in 1992 failed to obtain a degree qualification by 1995, and in 1998, it was estimated that 20 percent of students drop out in their first year of study (Clark, 2001; Fresh men and women, 1998; Hotere, 1997). Scott’s two 2004 reports, \textit{Retention, Completion and Progression in Tertiary Education 2003} and \textit{Pathways in Tertiary Education 1998-2002}, contain the first published, New Zealand-wide attrition figures for state-owned tertiary providers.

Scott (2004a) reports that of the 39,200 domestic students who enrolled for a degree course in 2000, 68 percent were still enrolled or completed by the end of 2001, and 60 percent were still enrolled or completed by end of 2002. The attrition rate, therefore, for this cohort of students is a total 32 percent after one year and 40 percent after two years. Scott’s (2004b) \textit{Pathways in Tertiary Education} dataset consists of 55,640 domestic students. These students started tertiary education for the first time in 1998, at a state-owned tertiary provider. Of the total data set, 39.1 percent started at a university. Attrition in the first year for universities was 19.1 percent. Of the students who started a degree in 1998, 42.2 percent had gained no qualifications after five years, with 32.8 percent having dropped out, while 9.5 percent were still studying.

Although it is necessary to note that these figures do not differentiate between those students who opt out of tertiary study for a while (institution withdrawal) and those who

\textsuperscript{10} On the basis of a student leaving in week 3 of semester two (July-end Oct) and not enrolling in late February the following year.
opt out of tertiary study altogether (system withdrawal), these figures do give an indication of attrition from New Zealand universities and highlight the higher rate of attrition in the first year (Tinto, 1993).

Calculating a dollar value in terms of attrition is fraught. The cost of attrition in New Zealand has not been calculated, however, for 1994-95 Yorke (2001) estimated the UK-wide cost to be “somewhere in the region of £100-120 million.” (p.36). Yorke (1999) further reports that in Australia, the 1996 “public cost of failure to be A$269 million” (p.78). It is acknowledged that these figures are not directly comparable due to differing university contexts. They do, however, give an indication of the scale of the financial issues involved.

For every student enrolled in a three year undergraduate degree who withdraws in the first year, Lincoln forgoes two years of income for that student. A crude indicative calculation for Lincoln, therefore, might be as follows. If Lincoln, for example, registered 1000 students into its degree programmes at the start of a year, and if attrition was conservatively estimated at 12 percent across that year, and if it is roughly estimated that each student brings a combined student and Government contribution of approximately $8,000 per year (total contribution), the calculation would be:

\[
12\% \text{ of } 1000 \times (2 \times 8,000) = 1,920,000
\]

This amounts to a conservative and rough approximation of a loss of income of nearly $2 million per year. This calculation is extremely crude, but it does give an indication of the potential financial burden of attrition to a university of the size of Lincoln. Further, in the current global tertiary environment, governments are insisting that university administrations become more fiscally accountable (Yorke, 1999). Leys (1999) also points out that “the true financial cost to society through attrition may well be higher if individual skills and knowledge are withheld from the labour market.” (p.3).
1.2.3 First Year Experience

It is recognised that the first year experience comprises both common characteristics, as experienced by all students, and specific characteristics of the first year, experienced by each individual student. Peel, Macdonald and Evans (Pargetter, McInnis, James, Evans, Peel & Dobson, 1998) state:

“It is especially important to note that the largest and most methodologically sophisticated studies in North America and Australia all reach two similar and basic conclusions. First, there are generic transition problems, especially in regards to changed teaching and learning environments and the match between prior expectations and early experiences (both academic and social), and general strategies which will most likely help most students with those problems. Second, transition to university is nonetheless a highly differentiated process in which a range of personal, social and institutional factors (and their complex combinations) produce highly specific pathways into tertiary environments which are themselves more and more diverse” (1998)

The first year experience represents a break with the past, whether for school leavers or mature students. It refers to a time of the defining of new roles; for younger students it often means the transition from adolescence and dependency to adulthood and independence. It is a year, for some, of ‘experience overload’. Many new students have only recently left secondary school, but they can now legally drink in public bars, financially commit to a student debt, vote and marry without their parents’ consent. Many young students are also away from home for the first time – far from parental control, home cooking and dirty clothes being replaced, as if by magic, with clean ones. Further, academic demands are heavy. At secondary school, detentions\textsuperscript{11} deter would-be ‘bunkers’\textsuperscript{12} and work is monitored consistently. At university this kind of supervision does not happen. It is up to the students to attend lectures, hand required assignments in on time and motivate themselves.

\textsuperscript{11} Detentions are punishments given to students for various misdemeanours, for example, failing to attend school or failing to submit required work on time. They involve detaining students either after normal school time, or during lunch time, on school premises under supervision.
For older students, the transition is significant in different ways. For example, as a mature student myself, I not only left secure, full-time, well-paid employment (replaced by a meagre but appreciated government benefit) but also moved cities with my two children. Apart from skill-based courses, I had not engaged in any formal academic study since leaving school some 15 years earlier.

Students do not suddenly, and completely, shed their entire individual past experiences as they walk through the gates of the university. Younger students bring family, schooling and life experiences with them, while older students bring expanded or different life experiences.

Even before their first day at Lincoln, the students in this study had one thing in common: each had made the decision to attend Lincoln. They came to that decision for different reasons, at different times, using different resources, but all decided on Lincoln. Once they started their selected courses at Lincoln, there were other experiences they shared. These are called ‘generic’ first year experiences in this thesis. These generic experiences can be academic and social in nature. For example, one generic experience would be getting to know the physical layout of the campus. Attending lectures and completing required assignments would also be considered generic experiences. Along with these common experiences, there are experiences that are unique to the individual. For example, although interaction with lecturing staff is a generic experience, the perceived quality of that interaction is entirely personal. Further, for example, perception of academic success will vary. Some students will measure academic success in terms of the attainment of passing grades alone, others will measure success by passing grades, or high grades, coupled with level of understanding gained.

Regardless of the past experiences of the students, each has to undergo a period of socialisation. Socialisation is a term used “to describe the ways in which people learn to conform to their society’s norms, values and roles” (Kornblum, 1998, p.95). The process by which socialisation occurs is through “agents” of socialisation. The major agents in the university context are other students (peers) and university staff (Pascarella, Duby & Iverson, 1983). Universities as institutions have numerous norms, values and roles made explicit through rules and regulations (for example, detailed in University Calendars). Peer

\[12\text{A colloquial term for a person who missed time in school without permission}\]
groups, such as students living in the same residential hall, may have implicit norms, values and roles, for example, “if you don’t go to the pub on a Thursday night you are socially excluded”. It is the initial interaction of the personal characteristics and the agents of socialisation that make the first year experience unique. The first year at university, according to McInnis, James and Hartley (1999), is “a process of two-way socialisation whereby the student shapes, and is shaped by, the university experience.” (p.4).

The first year experience, then, has to be acknowledged as a complex mix of existing personal factors together with new academic and social challenges (Boddy & Neale, 1997; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Evans, 2000; McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 1993). It is from the engagement with all of these issues that my primary research questions emerged: “What is the first year experience of undergraduate students at Lincoln University?” It was appropriate that the research question remain broad due to the complex nature of the experience. Unique characteristics, as well as common experiences, of each student’s experience were allowed to emerge from the data, rather than imposing an assumed set of experiences.

1.3 Chapter Summary

The purpose of the preceding discussion was to provide context for exploration and description of the first year experience of domestic undergraduate students at Lincoln University. To that end, discussion first focused on the history of university education in New Zealand and the development of Lincoln as a university. The links between the first year experience and current institutional concerns with student retention and attrition were outlined and a brief discussion was presented on the generic and specific nature of the students’ first year at university.

The first year experience discussed in this thesis occurs at Lincoln University, Canterbury, New Zealand. Institutionalised education has been a feature of New Zealand society since colonisation, with Otago University, being established in 1869. Lincoln was established in 1878, the third tertiary institution in the country. Lincoln was initially an agricultural college but today offers a wide range of courses in a range of disciplines.

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13 A hotel serving alcohol.
The first year is when each student is “socialised” into the university environment. All students are socialised whether school leavers or mature students. All first year undergraduate students begin university as individuals shaped by a complex interaction of factors. Once at university, they experience a set of adjustment challenges, learning relevant norms, values and roles. Although some of the experiences are shared with other students, some experiences are totally unique.

This thesis comprises seven chapters. The second chapter of this thesis presents some of the background literature and discusses some common topics within the literature with regard to the first year experience and retention. Chapter three discusses the methods used in the research. A brief introduction to each of the students interviewed for this study occurs in Chapter four. Chapter five presents a thematic analysis of the data, with Chapter six providing a detailed discussion of the themes that arose from that analysis. Chapter seven presents the conclusions along with suggested directions for future research.
Chapter Two: Background Literature

Literature concerning either attrition or the first year experience in the New Zealand context is lacking (Boddy & Neale, 1997; Leys, 1999; Raymore & Berno, 1996; Yorke, 1999). There is ample international literature that discusses retention, attrition and the first year experience and mainly reflects the Australian, American, British and Canadian contexts. Much of that literature, however, remains specific to particular social, cultural and geographic contexts. The focus is often on particular programmes or subjects (for example, arts/science, statistics/mathematics) or particular groups of students (disabled/mature) in particular circumstances (residential living/"at-risk"/achieving academic excellence) (see Chapter 6, Literature Review in Pargetter, et al., 1998 and Evans, 2000).

There is also ample literature dealing with attrition and student engagement models and developmental indicators devised to facilitate the understanding of the first year experience and its connection to retention (Bean, 1982; Brower; 1990; Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Johnson and Buck, 1995; McInnis, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Models are extremely useful tools: in this case the models provide a simple visual representation of the complex mix of factors present in the first year experience, or a list of outcomes that indicate a behavioural development step has been made. But implicit in any model, is the simplification of reality. Tinto’s ‘Longitudinal Model of Departure for Institutions of Higher Education’, for example, is extensively cited in the literature. Pascarella, Duby and Iverson (1983) however, believe the model is limited as an explanatory tool as it focuses on “traditional, residential institution settings” (p.99). The implication being that Tinto’s model is not totally successful in explaining withdrawal from commuter-based university settings. Yorke (1999) further suggests that Tinto’s model is criticised as it does not give enough attention to the perceptions of the students themselves. The explanatory power of a model can in this way be constrained by the context in which it was devised. Also, these models are based on studies undertaken in the United States of America, Australia and the United Kingdom, not on studies in New Zealand. There will therefore be social, cultural and economic differences between these settings. Further, these studies are generally large scale quantitative studies having few qualitative components.

Care is needed when making comparisons with this literature as each country has different admission policies, student funding mechanisms and structures of tertiary qualification
(Evans, 2000; McInnis, 2001; Pargetter, et al., 1998). It would, however, be unreasonable to ignore the common aspects across the literature, in terms of attrition and the first year experience (Evans, 2000). It is the common topics across the literature that will be discussed in this chapter.

2.1 Withdrawal Characteristics for the First Year

As has been previously stated, it is generally agreed that the factors that contribute to the first year experience are complex and as such the decision to leave is a consequence of many varied factors (Boddy & Neale, 1997; Evans, 2000; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; McInnis, 2001; Tinto, 1993). Numerous studies have tried to identify particular qualities, of both students and of the first year experience, in an effort to identify particular characteristics that may predispose some students to leaving. Personal background characteristics such as age, gender, academic performance prior to entry, type of school prior to entry, parental education and socio-economic status have all been investigated as predictive variables and all have had little success when used in isolation (Brawer, 1998; Gerdes and Mallinckrodt, 1994; Pargetter, et al., 1998). For example, age as a variable appears to have little influence in some studies and plays an ambiguous role in others (Brawer, 1998; Pargetter, et al., 1998).

Academic performance prior to entry and its relationship to academic performance at university and withdrawal decisions is one that deserves separate mention. While attending a student enhancement meeting, I heard it said: “if they have left, they obviously were not academic.” The literature does not support this notion. Johnson and Buck (1995) state that “significant attrition occurs among students with satisfactory grades.” (p.74) (Tinto, 1993). Further, these authors suggest that “many students may have failed but not necessarily nor exclusively because of lack of academic ability.”(p.74). These two points highlight two very important aspects of attrition: not all students who leave are failing academically, and not all students, who leave because they are failing academically, lack academic ability.

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14 While working at Lincoln during 2000-01 I was involved in steering committee meetings for a student enhancement project. This project was established to investigate attrition and student experience at Lincoln.
The issue of entry qualification is discussed in a study by Murphy, Papanicolaou, and McDowell (1999). This study suggested that “academic performance at later years of university study is relatively independent of a student’s performance at their final year of secondary school.” (p.21). Although caution must be exercised, as this is only one study, it does give some reassurance: The academic performance of students who seem academically challenged on entry, may improve if they are able to negotiate the first year successfully.

External factors have also been researched in terms of characteristics that may influence the decision to withdraw. Financial problems have been considered and, as above, there is no firm conclusion on this issue. Miller (1997) suggests that external factors, such as finance, “are more likely to be considered in the decision to attend than in the decision to withdraw.” (cited in Burgess and Sharma, 1999, p.4). It has also been suggested that while students indicate financial problems as the main reason for withdrawal, it is often found not to be the case (Dennis, 1998; Tinto, 1996). It needs to be noted, however, that other studies have indicated that students are under financial stress and institutions need to be aware of this issue (Boddy & Neale, 1997; Evans, 2000; Johnson, 1994).

Related to the financial issue is the rise in paid work. McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) and McInnis (2003) discuss the increase of hours students are spending in paid employment. It is believed that in Australia, full-time enrolled undergraduate students are working an average of 15 hours per week. The authors make the point that this is regardless of other financial support these students are receiving. McInnis (2003) states “that not all students are working to stave off starvation or even to just pay the rent.” (p.7). The implication is that, in some cases at least, this is a life-style choice rather than financial survival.

The individual student, with all their background characteristics, influenced by the various external factors, interacts with the institution in the first year experience. This interaction requires a process of transition and integration for successful retention in the first year.

2.2 Transition and Integration

The first year experience is often considered a ‘transition’ stage comprised and influenced by a complex array of factors (Boland, 1998, Burgess and Sharma, 1999; Johnson and
Buck, 1995; McInnis, 2000; Pargetter, et al., 1998; Rickinson and Rutherford 1995; Silver, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999).

Transition indicates a passage of time over which change occurs – an interruption to “previously predictable situations and life sequences” (Mandler, 1990, p.13). Green and Latham (cited in Elson-Green, 1999a) describe this experience as “a rite of passage that involves a journey which moves forward in search for what counts within the new context of the academic institution” (p.11) and Shaw Sullivan (1997) suggest that going to college is the “first major life passage” (p.4). It is a time when students are separated from their previous environments and may experience an initial sense of loss (Elson-Green, 1999a; Latham and Green, 1997; Shaw Sullivan, 1997). Further, Cope and Hannah (1975) draw on Erikson (1963) and Chickering (1969) when describing the college years as students “trying out different alternatives in the complex process of identity formation” (p.35). This makes for a confusing and anxious time, where even the most “academically gifted and socially mature students experience difficulties.” (Tinto; 1996; p.2).

The success or otherwise of the transition and the degree to which students integrate into the institution, both academically and socially, is extremely influential on withdrawal decisions (Bean, 1982; Burgess & Sharma, 1999; Kantanis, 2000; McInnis & James, 1995; Pargetter, et al., 1998; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999). Put simply: “Students who integrate into the university tend to stay, while those who are not integrated tend to withdraw” (Tinto cited in Burgess & Sharma, 1993, p.3). Although most students make a successful transition, some students require support through this transition time (McInnis & James, 1995; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). McInnis and James (1995) reiterate: “for some students the transition to university represents a challenging hurdle, while for others it is an intimidating gulf.” (p.x). Research suggests that the most critical period of time for first year students is the first six weeks of the semester (Dennis, 1998). Research confirms clear indications in the literature of common transition issues which are likely to impede the transition and integration process and which issues facilitate the same (McInnis & James, 1995; Pargetter, et al., 1998).

Firstly, social and academic isolation impedes integration and therefore transition (Burgess & Sharma, 1999; Kantanis, 2000; Leys, 1999; Tinto, 1993). McInnis and James (1995) found that a sizeable proportion of students were neither socially, nor academically, connected to the university. Others, however, were totally immersed in university life.
What is interesting in this study is that the students who were isolated (disconnected) comprised both commuter and residential students. Literature discussing residential situations tends to suggest that they assist in transition and integration (Boyer, 1987; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Pargetter, et al., 1998; Peel, 2000). Based on more recent research, McInnis (2003) suggests that “it is already the case that, on average, about 25 percent of first year students do not have any significant contact with other students on campus.” (p.4). Some of the residential students experience anxiety and homesickness (Fisher, 1990; Kantanis, 2000; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). Kantanis (2000) points out that many students “overlook the fact that others share their anxieties, believing that they alone feel alienated.” (p.105). Homesickness and anxiety can interfere with normal coping resources: The students are not only anxious and missing home but they are often unable to obtain help for themselves. This is supported in a study by Rickinson and Rutherford (1995), who found that “at least a third these of ‘at risk’ students did not seek help from any source.” (p.166), and by Hall (2000) who also reported that “very little use was made of... services even among those students who reported experiencing difficulties adjusting to university” (p.32).

Second, being academically under-prepared for university is a contributing factor in attrition (Dennis, 1998). Many school leavers felt academically unprepared for university and this flowed into their being dissatisfied with their university experience (Boddy & Neale, 1997, Boyer, 1987, McInnis, 2000; Pargetter, et al., 1998). It is too easy in this instance to blame the student: ‘They were not up to standard’. An Australian Vice-Chancellor (cited in Boddy & Neale, 1997, p.1) stated: “Once you have admitted students, you have a moral obligation to ensure they have the support required to enable them to succeed.” One way universities can assist academically border-line students is to identify these students and establish support measures before they fail exams (Tchen, Carter, Gibbons and McLaughlin, 2001).

Third is the importance of academic staff to a positive transition experience. The issues of under-preparedness can be successfully mitigated with the help of academic staff. Dobson (in Pargetter, et al., 1998) found strong links between the quality of staff-student academic interaction and successful transition. Academic interaction, including the formal type of interaction taking place in lectures and tutorials and also in the informal type of interaction which takes place outside of the classroom context, as part of a successful transition
experience is well supported in the literature (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Peel, 2000; Yorke, 1999).

The previous discussion has concentrated on the individual student and their first year experience. York, Bollar and Schoob (1993) suggest there is a lack of research in terms of the institution’s role in preventing withdrawal. The next section examines this side of the process of producing the first year experience.

2.3 The Role of the Institution in Preventing Withdrawal

2.3.1 Institution-Student ‘Fit’

The institution is not a passive player in the first year experience and, thus, student retention. The initial ‘fit’ between the institution and the student is crucial. This ‘fit’ is a catalyst to the student establishing a commitment to the institution and once that commitment is made, it is unlikely that the student will leave (Burgess & Sharma, 1999). Cope and Hannah (1975) called this commitment “holding power” (p.102) and is perceived to be stronger in those students who have a clear academic goal in terms of course choice. Further, James (2000) suggests that if a sufficient match exists between the student’s expectations of their course, and the reality of that experience, it forms a major determinant of a successful transition. If this is true, then the opposite would follow: Those students who are uncertain of their academic goals would have weak commitment to the institution and those whose experience was incongruent with their expectations would be more likely to leave. Literature supports this view (James, 2000; McInnis, 2000, McInnis & James, 1995; Pargetter, et al., 1998; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999; Yorke, 2000b). The solution to this problem is seen to be efficient course advice. Burgess and Sharma (1999) cite three studies in which “intrusive proactive advising is critical to reducing attrition.”(p. 3). McInnis (2000) and Leys (1999) both point to the uncertainty of students as motivation for institutions to provide appropriate, effective course advise.

One of the reasons course advice is considered important is that students make decisions regarding courses on limited, subjective information (James, 2000; Raymore and Berno, 1996). Brennan (2001) asserted that “research into student decision making is considered to still be in its infancy in most countries” (p.220) and there is limited literature with regard to how students make decisions about which course they will enrol in. The concept of
student choice, along with the current competitive tertiary environment, is predicated on
the assumptions that students are informed consumers and they have perfect information
(Baldwin & James, 2000; Brennan, 2001). In reality, neither assumption may hold. Peel’s
research (cited in Pargetter, et al, 1998) found a significant information gap between
universities, secondary schools and students. Students accept the information they are
given in good faith and in many cases believe they know all the information they need to
make an informed choice (Brennan, 2001; James, 2000). Choices are made considering
inaccurate information, with some of this misinformation being provided by the institution
(Brennan, 2001; James, 2000). James (2000) goes so far as to say: “Broadly speaking, the
findings of the study suggest that some applicants are not in a good position to judge the
appropriateness of programs for them or to judge the quality of courses overall” (p.84).

Another important part of the first year experience that institutions can influence is the
teaching component as it employs the academics and tutors required for this task. The
literature supports the crucial nature of quality teaching in the first year experience.

2.3.2 Teaching
There is a body of literature that supports the notion that effective teaching practices and
positive interaction with academic staff at university play a significant role in retaining
students (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Burgess and Sharma, 1999; Elson-Green,
199b; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). There is, however, substantial variation in teaching
methods and attitudes of academics towards students.

The disparity between the expectations lecturers have of their first year students and the
students’ actual ability has been documented (Boyer, 1987; Elson-Green, 1999b; Latham
& Green, 2000, Pargetter, et al., 1998). In recent research carried out by the Centre for the
Study of Higher Education in Australia, discussed by McInnis and James (1995), “the
number of Australian academics who say they are dissatisfied with the academic quality of
students has more than doubled since the late 1970s. More than 70 percent of academics
now believe students have become more demanding of their time, and most feel students
are lacking in purpose and application.” (1995). The implication is that the problem lies
firmly at the feet of the students. Academics often place the blame for the lack of skills
with the secondary school system and academic staff are neither willing nor expecting to
teach remedial courses (Boyer, 1987; Kantanis, 2000). Increased demands on academics
to be teachers, researchers, administrators, etc. mean that they are constantly juggling
competing priorities. Further, with remuneration and promotional prospects focused on research and publications, undergraduate teaching is generally an undervalued and unrewarded activity (Boyer, 1987; Miller, et al., 1983; Pargetter, et al., 1998; Yorke, 2000b). In some countries and contexts, this first year teaching is often delegated to postgraduate students who have no teacher training, and has high staff-student ratios that translate into impersonal teaching environments (Pargetter, et al., 1998; Peel, 2000). The irony is, however, that the quality of teaching in the first year is crucial to retention (Leys, 1999).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) place academic interaction on an equal footing with social interaction in terms of the importance to the transition experience. Further, they highlight the influence academics have, in both non-teaching and formal teaching roles, on students’ decisions to remain at university. Tchen, Carter, Gibbons, and McLaughlin (2001) assert there is a “strong association between the level of lecturer support and enhanced academic performance”. (p.9). Students are quick to recognise ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teaching. ‘Good’ teaching was identified as including the teaching skills, enthusiasm, and accessibility of the teacher along with clearly-explained subject objectives and clear criteria for assessment. ‘Bad’ teaching was identified as including poor teaching skills, the lack of enthusiasm and the inaccessibility and lack of willingness to help on the part of the teacher, along with unclear subject objectives, few or no criteria for assessment and inadequate guidance in how to carry out assessments (Peel, 2000, p.25). Attributes of good teaching are “skill of communication information and presentation... enthusiasm, approachability and the demonstration of interest in students” (Peel, 2000, p.27). Peel also suggests that students, in some specific courses (for example, in Lincoln’s case, say, a ‘sub-degree’ programme) “receive direct messages, from very early in their university careers... that they are unimportant, [and] that they have no real place other than to take up space in lecture theatres and that no one really gives a damn how they fare” (Peel, 2000, p.27). This attitude does nothing to encourage the students to engage and be active in the learning process and, in terms of retention, this is essential (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan; 2000; Burgess & Sharma; 1999; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). The importance of quality teachers in the university environment is summed up by Cope and Hannah (1975): “We suspect that persistence in college requires the personal touch that only dedicated professors can give” (p.45, emphasis in the original).
The institution can, however, initiate and maintain various retention strategies to address attrition.

### 2.3.3 Retention Strategies

The international literature suggests that, because the attrition problem is complex and we are dealing with contrary human behaviour, attrition can only be minimised, never totally avoided (Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999). Retention strategies receive less than favourable co-operation or support from some quarters in the university sector as they are seen by some as ‘spoon feeding’ or ‘hand holding’ (Yorke, 2000b). Institutions are limited in regard to what they can do to retain students and as each university has unique characteristics - for example, in terms of size, location, courses offered, student demographic, etc. - retention programmes must be based on solid research and be tailored to meet the needs of the specific student population (Chapman & Pascarella; 1983; Cope & Hannah, 1975; Dennis, 1998; Evans, 2000; Smith, Lippitt & Sprandel; 1985; Tinto; 1993; York, Bollar & Schoob, 1993).

There are many different types of strategies that can be put in place; from mentoring programmes to academic orientation workshops. Leys (1999) observes that retention programmes are most effective when efforts and programmes are concentrated on the first year. In light of the literature already discussed, this is not surprising. To be effective, retention programmes have to be integrated into the lives of the students. As Tinto (1994) emphasises, “After more than a decade of research in this field, I am persuaded that the roots of successful student retention lie in better education during the first year” (p.3).

The last section of literature that will be discussed is slightly more problematic in that it concerns less direct but still significant influences on the first year experience. It relates to the factors of wider access, increased competition and decreased government funding all occurring at the same time within the tertiary sector, and what that means in terms of the retention of students.

### 2.4 Wider Access

When discussing the issues of wider access to tertiary education it is clear that Australia and New Zealand share a similar situation. During the time that university participation rates have increased, government funding has decreased (per student) and competition
within the tertiary sector has increased (Burgess & Sharma, 1999; Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Statistics New Zealand, 2003; Leys, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2000; Raymore and Berno, 1996). These issues have consequences for all participants in the tertiary education sector.

Some of the consequences are straight-forward, others not so. Wider access to university education means more diversity. The demographics of the university student population are changing. The picture twenty years ago was of school leavers, studying full-time, who completed their chosen programme without interruption (El-Khawas, 2000, p.40). As the student population is becoming more diverse, the picture changes. For example, many more students today will study while in paid employment and may even take a break some time during their study. Many will be the first in their family to attend a university and more mature (over 20 years old) students are enrolling (Karmel, 2000; McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999). Assumptions previously made about the student population have to be revised (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Diversity “now characterises the student populations in most countries” (Wagner, 2000, p.62). The concern of Boddy and Neale (1997) and McInnis and James (1995) is that universities and academics are not adequately aware of the increasing diversity and what it means for them.

For institutions it may mean providing funds for academic support or offering a wider range of qualification options. For academics it could mean rearranging lecturing schedules to accommodate students who work and reassessing teaching delivery. In one sense it is not so much what form the consequences take: they all represent increased pressure on already stretched resources.

Increased competition provides the student with greater choice. This, coupled with more flexible delivery technologies (for example, internet delivery), gives students greater control in the way they accommodate university into their lives. McInnis (2003) refers to this process as ‘negotiated engagement’ (p.3). University is becoming only part of a student’s life. This lack of traditional engagement frustrates traditional academics (McInnis, 2003). There is also a danger of giving students too much “power” to dictate what is taught. If students are, as Boyer (1987) suggests, becoming more concerned with narrow vocationalism, the line between universities and polytechnics will blur further. As
Kannel (2000) argues, “surely the institutions and their scholars are in a better position to construct coherent programmes than relatively inexperienced students?” (p.9)

Burgess and Sharma (1999) believe the consequences for students of reduced funding and wider access is straight-forward: “increased class sizes, fewer tutorials and larger tutorial groups” (p.1). Also, the tension between wider access as a government priority and the funding of other government policies is straight-forward. Governments decide how much funding to attribute to the number of different government priorities. Increased funding into one area, in this case tertiary education, may mean decreased funding into other areas (e.g. health, military) (Yorke, 1999). The issue is, however, that universities believe they have been under-funded for some time and wider access means increased demand on already limited resources. If government funding does not increase then it is reasonable to assume that more of the financial burden will be either placed directly on the student (increased fees) or on the institution (pressure to attract other funding revenues). Both of these scenarios could have consequences that negate any policy of wider access.

If more of the financial burden is placed on the student, for example, students will be less likely to consider university as an option. One possible consequence of this increased financial burden is that university will only be attended by those students with the financial resources (Kelsey, 1998; Matthews, 2001). Even if a variety of loans are available to students to finance their education, it could be suggested that decisions on what to study may be directly associated with the potential earnings subsequent to that study, due to the level of the loan requiring repayment. Education becomes a commodity – a private good for the individual as opposed to a public good that benefits all of society (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; El-Khawas, 2000; Kelsey, 1997). Further, if the financial burden is placed on the institution, in terms of securing other funding revenues, it is likely that only narrow fields of “commercially viable” research will be undertaken (those that can produce profit for investors), possibly limiting the funding of courses that are deemed to have no commercial potential (a variety of social science research areas). If this happens to a wider extent than it already has, it will challenge one of the fundamental roles of the university: “to disseminate a wide-range of knowledge and to let the student explore and discover what she or he wishes to investigate in greater depth” (Johnson & Buck, 1995, p.75).

There is a further issue that is particularly relevant in the current New Zealand context. Although wider access means more individuals are able to enter tertiary education, a
responsibility lies somewhere to ensure that they are directed into the most appropriate form of tertiary education. The Tertiary Education Minister, Steve Maharey stated recently: “Too many students are enrolling in universities instead of going into industry training and that has led to a heavily eroded skill base. New Zealand needs to encourage a wider range of educational choice for students” (Too many going to university, 2004).

This is not solely a New Zealand problem. Ronayne (2000) relays: “A colleague of mine attended a UNESCO conference in Melbourne just a few weeks ago on education in the 21st century. The Ministers for Higher Education from Syria and Jordan were there. They expressed concerns that demand for higher education was so strong that few students in their countries wanted to study at the technical and further education level, yet their economies were in desperate need of skilled tradespeople” (p.46).

Further to the above, Finance Minister, Michael Cullen, said recently: “Education is too important to us to allow large numbers of young people to wander aimlessly around the system using up resources and putting themselves into debt and then having no completed qualification to show for it.” ('Aimless' student claim, 2004). This comment was suitably summed up by cartoonist David Fletcher, in the Otago Daily Times.

![Figure 1: Politician: Fletcher](Source: Southland Times, 20 April 2004)

I am unsure as to what ‘aimless’ means in this context, but if ‘aimless’ means the lack of completion of a course of study that an individual had embarked upon, then maybe part of the problem is that the student has not been directed into the most appropriate educational option.
The relationship between student and university is continually evolving. Corcoran (2001) discusses the way in which universities have had to renegotiate their relationship with students:

“Originally the student viewed the university as finishing school, then later as a source of social control, instrument of government policy, provider of education services, and recently as a supplier of educational services under contract. The university, on the other hand, has seen the student as a member of the social elite, a child (running the spectrum from wilful brats through to everything that a parent would want), a citizen, a recipient/consumer of education services, and recently as a client or customer of those services.” (p.1)

2.5 Chapter Summary

All the factors discussed in the literature have implications for understanding the first year experience and withdrawal decisions. Individual characteristics alone are not helpful in predicting withdrawal behaviour and much has been written regarding the importance of transition and integration in the first year. This integration must be in both social and academic areas of the first year experience, with institutions having a vital role to play in preventing withdrawal. Proactive course advice that endeavours to ensure a good institution-student fit; quality first year teaching that is valued and rewarded; and retention strategies based on the specific context of the institution, are three strategies for encouraging student retention. The issue of wider access, which exposes the university to a more diverse student population, makes trying to create a “typical” first year student experience more complex (McInnis, 2003). Also, with students having more control over where they choose to study and when, ‘institutional departure’ “no longer becomes a statement of what the institution does; it is a statement of what the student is choosing to do.” (Karmel, 2000, p.4). Because of this the university sector may become vulnerable to the ebb and flow of student fancy.
A concluding thought:

"Education is a participative process. Students are not products, customers, consumer, services users or clients – they are participants. Education is not a service for a customer (much less a product to be consumed), but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant" (Harvey & Knight, 1996, cited in Corcoran, 2001, p. 6).

This thesis is, in many ways, based on the assumption that education is a participative process, viz the participation of undergraduate students in their first year of university. Chapter three describes the method used for this thesis and discusses the research undertaken.
Chapter Three: Method

The primary research question of "what is the first year experience of undergraduate students at Lincoln University?" is extremely broad. Some terms in the question are relatively straightforward to define. A geographic description of the location of Lincoln University, a brief history of the institution and general student details, for example, have been provided in Chapter One. Further, "undergraduate" has also been described and defined. What is not easily defined is "experience". Although each student may take part in common activities, each one's experience is unique. The challenge was to find an approach that would enable the research question to be explored in a way that allows some sense of both the common and unique aspects of the students' experiences to emerge. This chapter discusses the research approach taken and describes the way in which the research, for this thesis, was conducted.

3.1 Research Method

The purpose of this thesis was to gain an understanding of the first year experience of a number of undergraduate students at Lincoln University. The nature of the research question recognised the need for a broad-ranging, data-rich research project that captured the detail of the students' experiences, enabling observations to be made of Lincoln's and, more generally, New Zealand's particular tertiary environment.

Given this need, I decided that the most appropriate research method would be face-to-face, semi-structured, qualitative interviews underpinned by a grounded theory approach.

3.1.1 Grounded Theory

A grounded theory approach provides a "powerful means both for understanding the world "out there" and for developing action strategies that will allow for some measure of control over it" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.9). This is because the themes are allowed to emerge from the data collected. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) explain:

"One does not begin with a theory then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge." (p.23)
Face-to-face, semi-structured, qualitative interviews enabled students to ‘tell their story’ – to give an interpretation of their own world (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). I hoped that this method would capture the complexities and uniqueness of each experience, while enabling the exploration of some commonalities. The ‘semi-structured’ nature of the interviews was such that I wanted each student to try and recount their experience chronologically, while also addressing particular topics I wanted to cover in each case. Each student was first asked “Tell me about yourself?” Prompts included “How old are you?” “Where did you go to school?” “What is your family situation?” “How did you do academically at school?” “How is education viewed in your family?” as well as probes into their prior work and other experiences. Then questions on “why did you decide to go to University?” and “why did you decide to attend Lincoln?” were asked. The next question, “Why did you decide to do the course you’re doing?” was only asked explicitly if it had not already been addressed. I then asked each student to tell me about their first week at Lincoln (who did they have lunch with, how did they find their way around, etc). The topics of academic achievement, social interaction and access/utilisation of support services were discussed at different points within each interview, depending on the direction of the developing narrative. Dependent on what stage during the semester the interview was conducted, some students (school leavers living away from home) were asked if they had returned home since starting at Lincoln. If they had returned home, the experience of returning home was discussed. When I felt that issues had been explored sufficiently, I asked each student how they had found (so far) their overall experience at Lincoln (see suggested questions and prompts in Appendix 1).

3.2 Sampling and Selection

Due to the exploratory and therefore broad nature of the research question, I considered it important to interview a cross-section of students. Boyer (1987) in his investigation of the undergraduate experience in American colleges found “that residential and commuter students live in two separate worlds” (p.5). If, as Boyer suggests, students who live on campus have different experiences from those who live off-campus, it is reasonable to conclude that other identifiable groups have varying experiences. For example, mature students are known to have distinct experiences from school leavers (Elliott, 1997; Pappas & Loring, 1985; Yorke, 2001). On this basis, I decided to interview as many different ‘types’ of students as practical. It is important to note at this point that qualitative research does not enable statistical comparisons to be made between different groups and this was
not the intention. The interviewing of different types of student was to gain a sense of the diversity within the first year experience. Having said this, international students were not interviewed for this research, neither were students who had withdrawn actively sought.

International students bring different educational expectations and cultural backgrounds to the first year experience than do domestic students and therefore the experience of international students deserves to be a study in its own right. For these reasons, the focus of this study was directed at domestic students only. Further, students who had withdrawn from the university proved extremely difficult to contact and, mindful of time constraints, these students were not actively pursued.

Once approval was granted by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee, a total of twenty-two domestic students were interviewed. These students comprised two specific groups. The first group - Group A – consisted of seventeen students. Six were interviewed in the second semester 2001, eight were interviewed in the first semester 2002 and three were interviewed in the second semester 2002. The second group – Group B – consisted of six students. These six students were interviewed during 2000, but only five were formally re-interviewed in 2002.

3.2.1 Group A

To establish contact with students who would participate in my research, several strategies were used. A notice briefly explaining my research was placed in the halls of residence newsletter (Appendix 2), which is given to every student accommodated in the halls of residence. This strategy was not very fruitful with only four students contacting me regarding participation and only two being eligible (two were overseas students). I then spoke with a school liaison officer. She emailed first year students whom she had had contact with, asking them if they would consider participating in my research. Six students contacted me and agreed to participate. Three students were contacted through acquaintances; one student was a friend of a post-graduate colleague, one the son of a friend, and another, someone I worked with fifteen years ago in Auckland! Six students were found through personal contacts gained through my employment as project manager for the Enhancing the Student Experience project at Lincoln.

From February 2000 until December 2001, I was employed at Lincoln University as project manager for the Student Enhancement project. My role as project manager was to
investigate, propose, implement and monitor student retention strategies. As part of this project, I became involved with ‘Unitry’\textsuperscript{15} and the New Start\textsuperscript{16} programme. I was asked to talk briefly about my experience as a mature student. After these presentations, I would stay and talk to interested participants. Weeks later I would recognise participants from these information nights around campus and ask how they were going, or participants would approach me and initiate conversation. If I felt it appropriate I would ask if they were interested in being interviewed. Four students (all who were asked) agreed to participate.

As part of my employment with Lincoln, I attended a Treaty of Waitangi seminar. At this seminar in speaking with other Lincoln employees about my research, a participant suggested a student I could contact. This student agreed to be interviewed. Also, while working at registration, I helped a student who I noticed was quite distressed during the process. I kept in (infrequent) contact with this student during the second half of their first semester and she also agreed to participate.

Of the seventeen students interviewed as part of Group A, twelve were female and five were male. One self-identified as being of Maori ethnicity. Eight had started attending Lincoln immediately after completing secondary school, the other nine had various lengths of time between secondary school and study. At the time of their interviews, fifteen of the students were enrolled at Lincoln University and, although not actively pursued, two had left Lincoln: one of whom was enrolled at Canterbury University at the time of the interview, and the other studying by correspondence.

It should be noted that two of the students in Group A were enrolled in ‘sub-degree’ courses at the time of their interview. Both students originally enrolled in degree courses, however, one student decided to ‘down-grade’ to a diploma course and the other did not attain the required bursary result to gain entrance into a degree course. The bursary results of the latter student were delayed, and she had ‘shadowed’ the degree course for a week before she was told she could not continue. She decided to remain at Lincoln and ‘down-grade’ to a certificate course. I made the decision to include both participants in this study. This decision was based on the fact that both students initially enrolled into degree courses and they arrived at Lincoln assuming that they would be undergraduate students.

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Unitry’ was a one-night presentation to prospective students.
3.2.2 Group B

During 2000, I completed the course work component of my Masters of Social Science. One of the papers completed was 'Qualitative Methods'. As a qualitative project for this paper I interviewed nine first year students about their general experience at Lincoln. I was able to re-interview, for this study, five of these nine students during their final year (three females and two males). Although I was unable to re-interview another of these students (male), he gave written permission for the original interview transcript to be referred to in this thesis. The ability to re-interview these students has given a limited, but unique, longitudinal perspective to the first year student experience.

3.3 Process

Once a student agreed to participate in the research, a letter of explanation was given to them explaining the research, together with a consent form (see Appendix 3 and 4). The time commitment required for the interview was highlighted, as was the ability to withdraw, at any time, from the research and the fact that the interview would be tape-recorded.

It should be noted at this time that the consent form comprised two parts: part one asked for consent for participation in the study and part two asked for consent for access to their individual academic records. Initially, I thought it would be interesting to look at an individual’s actual academic performance in relation to their views of their overall experience. Although I was not entirely sure that this issue would be investigated, I decided that it would be time effective to ask for this consent at the beginning of the process. As the themes emerged from the data, it was clear that academic achievement was only one of many factors that influenced the overall experience. High grades did not equate directly with a positive overall experience, nor failing grades with a negative experience. Academic records were viewed only to establish whether the full-time students interviewed graduated and whether part-time students were still studying. A student could participate in the study irrespective of consent being given to view their academic record.

The first two interviews were held at outside locations. This proved relatively unsuccessful in terms of tape-recording. The background noise severely impacted tape

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16 A day course for (mainly) mature students starting university study.
quality and made the interviews difficult to transcribe. Eighteen of the interviews were conducted in various offices supplied by the Undergraduate School. Two of the interviews were conducted in private homes.

Each interview varied in length. The shortest interview was approximately 45 minutes with the longest being 1½ hours. Each interview was transcribed and coded in chronological sequence. After the chronological analysis, data was analysed again to reveal emerging themes. For the Group B participants, permission was given by both students and supervisors to refer to initial interview transcripts. These transcripts were coded in the same way as the re-interview transcripts.

3.4 Methodological Limitations

There are a number of methodological limitations to this study. There are well documented strengths and weakness in using a qualitative approach (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). This particular study has some specific limitations. It is the story of 23 students in a particular place at a particular time in their lives. The first year experience will be different from year to year as the cohort of students (where they come from and their individual backgrounds) will be different. The university may well be different from year to year, in terms of adopting new retention strategies. Further, this study was carried out at Lincoln—a semi-rural environment and the smallest of the eight New Zealand universities and so will have specific circumstances that differ from others.

Another limitation of this study was that the students were unavoidably self-selecting, both in terms of still studying at Lincoln, as well as enjoying an overall positive experience. Only two of the students interviewed had left Lincoln. It was my intention to interview more students who had left Lincoln, but they proved very difficult to contact. Students I tried to contact who had left Lincoln had either moved accommodation or ‘moved-on’ in their lives. In any case, they are either not easily traced or do not have time to discuss their experiences. I decided not to pursue them as part of this study very early in the process.

The students who were interviewed reported very positive overall experiences at Lincoln. Even those students who reported times of homesickness or had found the experience at Lincoln extremely challenging indicated that the overall experience had been a positive one. This was not surprising, as those having a difficult time are not likely to discuss their
experiences with a total stranger completing a master's thesis. Many students are just interested in the experience itself and not interested in talking about it.

Furthermore, all the 'school leaver’ Group A students, and three of the five Group B students interviewed lived on campus. Therefore the insight gleaned with regard to commuter students' experiences is based on a very limited sample. Also, all the mature students are female, so no insight has been gleaned into the male mature student experience at Lincoln.
Chapter 4: The Students

This chapter introduces each of the students who were interviewed for this thesis. Confidentiality was assured to each student so all names have been changed. As identifying the specific degree in which each student is enrolled may make identification possible, I have used the board categories of Commerce, Science and Primary Production, Environment Society and Design (which includes Social Science, Maori Studies, Landscape Architecture, Recreation Management, Tourism and Resources Studies) and Sub Degree. The age of the student (in the case of the ‘mature’ students) may also help to reveal their identity, but an indication of age is useful for the purpose of understanding the experience. Therefore, Group A students have been categorised into three groups: mature students (those who have had more than a ten year break between secondary school and university); gap students (those who have had at least a two year break between secondary school and university), and school leavers (those who have attended university straight from school\(^\text{17}\)). Other characteristics that may suggest a student’s identity have been omitted.

4.1 Group A Students

4.1.1 Mature Students

Wendy – Environment Society and Design

Wendy is the mother of two children and has been a sole caregiver for most of her adult life. She stayed at secondary school and completed seventh form, much to the surprise of her peers. After leaving school she completed a polytechnic course and while her children were young she undertook some correspondence courses. She was employed in an office until the birth of her first child. Working while her children were young, she held a number of administration and policy employment positions. She has also been very involved with her community. She has three brothers, one of whom attended Lincoln and one sister who also attended university as a mature student. She has lived in a South Island city for most of her life. Her parents were both trained school teachers. She lives in her own home.

\(^{17}\) I have also included one student that only had one year out of school before attending Lincoln. As she was one of the younger students in her secondary school year, she was only a few months older than the other school leavers in halls.
Louise – Science
Louise left school at 15 with no formal qualification. She worked for a while after leaving school and then travelled overseas. She spent all of her childhood in the North Island, moving to the South Island ten years ago with her husband. She has completed a one year polytechnic course before enrolling in Lincoln. She withdrew from Lincoln after one week. She has two brothers and two sisters. One of her brothers has completed some academic course while in the Air Force. Neither parent completed tertiary education. She lives in her own home.

Davina – Commerce
Davina attended a boarding school until sixth form where she attended a state coeducational secondary school. Her focus at school was sporting rather than academic achievement. Leaving school after completing sixth form, she attended a skills course for a year before travelling for a number of years. When she returned to New Zealand, she completed an academic course at a polytechnic. She married and continued working and travelling. On returning to New Zealand she found she was unable to get positions similar to those overseas as she lacked the academic qualifications. She has a brother who completed a postgraduate qualification at Lincoln. Her parents work on the land. Her father has not participated in formal tertiary education. Her mother completed formal vocational training. She lived in a small South Island town all her life before leaving to go overseas. She lives in her own home.

Jemma – Environment, Society and Design
Jemma left school after seventh form and admits she stayed at school to play sport rather than academic pursuit. She completed a four year apprenticeship, then worked for a few years. She decided to change careers and started a course at a polytechnic. Gaining full time work in her desired field before finishing her academic qualification, she then worked for a few years before travelling overseas. Jemma married and returned to New Zealand with her husband. She is an only child and neither parent participated in formal tertiary education. She lived in a North Island city for her entire life before travelling overseas. She lives in her own home.
Laurie – Environment, Society and Design
Laurie is the sole caregiver to her child. She left school when she was 15 years old with no qualifications, and experiences a challenging home environment as an adolescent. A few years ago, she completed sixth form by correspondence and a year long academic course through a private provider. She has a disability. She has five siblings, none of whom have been tertiary educated. Her sister did enrol for a university course but left after three weeks. Neither of her parents have completed tertiary academic education. She has lived in the South Island all of her life. She lives in her own home.

Annie – Commerce
Annie left school after sixth form and attended vocational training at a polytechnic. She left this training after completing two and a half years of a three year course. After leaving this course she worked in various office-related jobs. She has one sister who has not completed any formal qualifications. Her father completed work-related courses but no formal tertiary education. Annie’s mother completed a polytechnic course as well as teaching qualifications. Annie is the sole caregiver to her two daughters. She lived in Auckland before and after travelling overseas, moving to the South Island only very recently. She lives in her own home.

4.1.2 Gap Students
Adrienne – Science
Adrienne left school and enrolled at Canterbury University leaving part way through the second semester due to the illness of a family member. She worked for a while and then enrolled at Lincoln. Adrienne completed one semester at Lincoln and then returned to Canterbury University. She has one sister who has not completed any university study. Her mother is a trained school teacher and her father has not participated in any tertiary education. She has lived in Christchurch for all of her life. She lives in a flatting situation with other students.

Katrina – Environment, Society and Design
Katrina attended an all-girl’s secondary school in the South Island. After seventh form she worked for a while then completed a short term course in horticulture. She has one younger brother who is in full time employment. Katrina’s father completed a university qualification at Lincoln and her mother has not completed any formal tertiary qualification. She lives at home with her father and brother.
Mark – Sub Degree
Mark attended an all boys secondary school, initially as a boarder and then as a ‘day boy’. During seventh form he was involved in many sporting activities. He left secondary school in the middle of seventh form to take up an opportunity to finish his schooling overseas. He remained overseas for three years, returning to New Zealand to attend Lincoln. After a week at Lincoln, he transferred from a degree course into a sub-degree course. He has a sister and a brother. His sister has just finished her degree and his brother is still attending university. Mark’s father completed university education at Lincoln and his mother has no formal tertiary education. He had lived in the South Island all his life before travelling overseas. He lives at home.

4.1.3 School Leavers

Richard - Commerce
Richard was a boarder at a North Island secondary school, with his school life revolving around avoiding encounters with bullies and participating in sporting activities. He has two sisters who have both attended university. His parents work on the land and neither participated in any formal tertiary education. Before moving to Lincoln he lived in the same rural North Island town his entire life. He lives in the halls of residence on campus.

Maria – Science
Maria attended a local secondary school and was involved in many activities, both social and academic, in her seventh form year. She has three sisters. Two sisters are undertaking tertiary study. One sister is still at secondary school. Her parents both completed tertiary education at Lincoln. She lived in a South Island town before moving to Lincoln. She lives in halls of residence on campus.

Gary – Commerce
Gary attended an all boy’s secondary school in the South Island before coming to Lincoln straight from seventh form. Gary was involved in many activities, sporting and academic, in his seventh form year. He has a brother and a sister who are both at school. His father completed a diploma course at Lincoln and his mother is a trained teacher. He has lived in a rural town all his life where his father farms. He lives in halls of residence on campus.
**Carrie – Sub Degree**
Carrie attended a local area secondary school and left after seventh form to attend Lincoln. Carrie was involved in many activities, sporting, academic, community and social, in seventh form. She has one sister who is still at school. Her parents are currently completing a tertiary qualification by correspondence but before this had no formal tertiary education. She did not achieve the required entry standard for the degree programme so enrolled in a sub-degree course with plans to progress to the degree course. She has lived in a number of South Island rural towns. She lives in halls of residence on campus.

**Rebecca – Environment, Society and Design**
Rebecca attended a local secondary school and left after seventh form to attend Lincoln. In seventh form she was involved in many academic and community activities. She has two brothers who are still at school. Her father completed tertiary study at Lincoln and her mother has completed polytechnic courses. She has lived in the same rural town all her life. She lives in the halls of residence on campus.

**Garth – Commerce**
Garth attended an all boy’s secondary school in the South Island and left after seventh form to attend Lincoln. During seventh form he was involved in many sporting, social and academic activities. He has two older sisters, neither of whom attended university. His father has no formal tertiary education while his mother is a trained teacher. He has lived in the same rural town all his life. He lives in halls of residence on campus.

**Nigel – Science**
Nigel attended the local secondary school and left after seventh form to attend Lincoln. He was involved in many sporting activities during seventh form. He has a younger brother and sister still at secondary school. Both of Nigel’s parents are tertiary qualified: His father has a law degree and his mother is a trained teacher. He has lived all his life in the South Island. He lives in halls of residence on campus.

**Josie – Environment, Society and Design**
Josie attended a local secondary school and left after seventh form to attend Lincoln. During seventh form she was involved in many sporting, academic and social activities. She has a sister who is currently undertaking postgraduate study and a brother who is still
at school. Both her parents completed tertiary education. Josie has lived in the same South Island town her whole life. She lives in halls of residence on campus.

### 4.2 Group B Students

#### 4.2.1 School Leavers

**Samantha – Science**
When the first interview was conducted Samantha was 18 years old. She was 20 when the second interview was conducted. Attending a local secondary school, Samantha had left school after seventh form to attend Lincoln. She spent one semester of University studying overseas. She has one brother who also completed a qualification at Lincoln. Her parents have both completed tertiary education. Samantha has lived for most of her life in a semi-rural South Island town, spending one year (during secondary school) overseas with her parents. At the time of both interviews she was living at home with her family.

**Mary – Science**
Mary was 18 years old when the first interview was conducted and 20 years old when the second interview was conducted. Attending a local rural secondary school, Mary had left school after seventh form to attend Lincoln. She has two brothers, neither of whom have attended tertiary education. Her father completed certificate level tertiary study, and her mother has no formal tertiary education. In her early teens, Mary moved from a South Island town to a rural Far North town. At the time of the first interview, Mary was living in halls of residence on campus. During the second interview she was living on campus as a Residential Assistant.

**Ariel – Science**
Ariel had just turned 19 years old when the first interview was conducted and 21 years old when the second interview was conducted. Attending a local rural secondary school, Ariel worked for a year before attending Lincoln. She has three sisters, one who completed tertiary education, one who completed a polytechnic course and a younger sister who is still at secondary school. Her father completed tertiary study at Lincoln, and her mother completed apprenticeship training. Ariel has lived in the same rural South Island town her whole life. At the time of the first interview, Ariel was living in halls of residence on
campus. During the second interview she was living on campus as a Residential Assistant\textsuperscript{18}.

**James – Environment, Society and Design**

James was 18 years old when first interviewed and 20 years old at the time of the second interview. He attended the local secondary school and left straight from seventh form to attend Lincoln. He has two brothers who have both completed tertiary education. Both of his parents are teachers. He has lived most of his life in the South Island. At the time of the first interview James was living in halls of residence on campus, while at the time of the second interview he was flatting with other students.

**Bob – Environment, Society and Design**

Bob was 19 years old when first interviewed and 21 years old at the time of the second interview. He attended the local secondary school and left straight from seventh form to attend Lincoln. He has two brothers and a sister who are all still at school. Neither of his parents have a tertiary education, but at the time of the first interview his mother was undertaking some polytechnic courses and his father had been completing work-based education. He has lived all of his life in the South Island. At the time of both interviews Bob was living at home with his family.

**Carl – Science**

Carl was 18 when first interviewed. Carl was not formally re-interviewed but telephone and email contact was made. Carl gave his permission for his first interview to be used in this thesis as well as any information gleaned in the informal correspondence. Before attending Lincoln, Carl lived in the North Island with his mother and younger sister. He attended Lincoln immediately after seventh form. His mother has completed polytechnic qualifications and his father has no formal tertiary education. Carl had a break of twelve months between his second and third year.

The next chapter presents the themes that emerged from the interviews held with these students.

\textsuperscript{18} Person living on campus acting as a supervisor for students in halls of residence
Chapter Five: The Themes

The first year experience is acknowledged as a complex mix of existing personal factors together with new academic and social challenges (Boddy & Neale, 1997; Gerdes and Mallinckrodt, 1994). To gain an understanding of the complexity of the experience, data was analysed to enable broad themes to emerge. These themes are: ‘Preparing the Way’; ‘I’ve arrived’; ‘With a little help from my friends’; ‘I’m here to get the degree’; ‘Should I stay or should I go?’; and, ‘Looking back – Looking forward’. These themes are discussed using the students’ own words. The quotations used were recorded and are presented verbatim. Three dots (...) within the quotation represent a pause by the student. Where information within a quotation was omitted, six dots (... ...) are used.

The broad themes were further analysed for sub-themes. This process can give the illusion that the students’ experience is made up of discrete ‘parts’ that make up the ‘whole’ – this is not the case. In reality, the themes are inextricably connected and the ‘whole’ proves to be more than the sum of its parts.

In the process of analysis, it emerged that there were three broad categories of students. I have categorised the students as:

- **Mature students** (those who have had more than a ten year break between secondary school and university)
- **Gap students** (those who have had at least a two year break between secondary school and university)
- **School leavers** (those who have attend university straight from school)

5.1 Preparing the Way

The first year as an undergraduate student at university is a unique experience. Each student has their own unique set of existing personal factors. Some are school leavers with very recent memories of academic work, study habits and examinations. Some are older students. These mature students may, or may not, have achieved other educational qualifications or goals before entering university. Some of the students have had parents, siblings, or other family members attend university, while others may be the first in their family to attend a tertiary institution. Family and friends are there to encourage and support some students, while others are there by themselves. Each student has decided to
support some students, while others are there by themselves. Each student has decided to enter tertiary study, and further, a particular course of study at Lincoln. It is the combination of these factors that form the foundation on which the students begin their first year.

The first questions asked of each student when being interviewed was “tell me about yourself. Your background, where you grew up, your parents, brothers and sisters...?” A précis of this information has been provided in the previous chapter. Once that topic had been covered, questions moved on to experiences at secondary school and work. From this line of conversation, the decision to participate in tertiary education and the decision to enrol at Lincoln was covered.

5.1.1 Secondary School and Prior Learning

For the school leavers, once their background information had been recorded discussion turned to their experience at secondary school. They discussed their experience readily, as for them it was still a very recent event. All of the school leavers had gained entry into university through the bursary examination and all had stayed at school until the end of seventh form. All but one had positive experiences at school and had been extremely involved in school activities. The school leaver who had not had a positive experience at school was subject to frequent bullying:

“Heaps of stuff... debating... multi-sport... played in a band... swimming club... head girl.” (Josie)
“I was a prefect... organised house choirs... haka group... leading role in the drama... soloist in the choir... rugby.” (Garth)
“I also had problems with being in a boarding situation... you have problems with the bullies and like... ...I got treated pretty badly but other people got treated a lot worse ... because I was quiet everyone thought I was pretty thick.” (Richard)

The gap students talked about their school experiences, but quickly moved on to talk in detail about the events after school. They had all gained the necessary academic entry qualifications at school. Three of the four gap students decided not to go straight to university. The fourth gap student enrolled at Canterbury University straight after school, however, she withdrew from study during the first semester due to the illness of a family member. The school experiences of the gap students did not appear important to them in
any meaningful way. The three gap students that did not go straight to university were
certain they made the right choice in delaying attendance:

"That was one of the best things I've ever decided... not to go
straight to university until I knew exactly what I wanted out of it."  
(Katrina)

"If I came straight out of school, I would have just completely
stuffed up... I know for a fact I would've." (Mark)

The mature students spent little time talking about their school experiences. Three of the
mature students had not enjoyed school at all and had quite negative experiences. Two of
the mature students spent most of their time at school playing sport to the detriment of their
academic achievement. Regardless of school experiences, however, all the mature students
had completed some form of education since leaving school.

"I felt that I had failed in the school system... ...I went to Polytech
and I did a horticulture course there." (Louise)

"I thought when I was at high school that I was just, you know,
bona fide thick... ...When my daughter was two, I went back and
did sixth form by correspondence um and a twelve month degree
(sic) in [subject] at the same time." (Laurie)

5.1.2 Decision Making
The decision to attend tertiary education was just another step for the school leavers.
Expectations were held by them and their parents that secondary school then university
would be the natural course of progression. There seemed to be no connection between
parental encouragement and the parent's educational experience. One school leaver did,
however, make the decision to attend university because he “didn't want to live the life
[his] parents lived” (Carl).

"I always expected that I would finish high school and go to
university." (Maria)

"I said to mum one day, oh I want to be a farmer and... she rolled
her eyes ... mum said I was too bright to be a farmer... thought I
had too much potential just to leave school and become a farmer."  
(Garth)
For this group of school leavers, the decision to attend Lincoln specifically seemed to be purely vocational. Comments about Lincoln being ‘the best place for this course’ or ‘the only place that offers this course’ were repeated often. Where another university did offer a similar course, however, the school leavers had considered the other options. Although some parents of the school leavers had also studied at Lincoln, this factor seemed to be irrelevant. For one of the school leaver students, enrolling at Lincoln was a way of establishing her own identity as her sister had studied, with very successful results, at Otago:

“Lincoln’s like the best place for [subject] isn’t it, I think? [DT: That was your perception?] Yeah, that.. that’s my perception... that it’s been around the longest and was the best place in New Zealand to do it.” (Josie)

“Spent a bit of time looking at brochures and stuff like that but... yeah, Lincoln sort of came out on top... just because it’s a degree programme basically.” (Nigel)

“When I was a little kid I had always said I was going to go to Lincoln like my parents... but as I got older my parents encouraged me to explore all my options... ...it offered me a course that actually caught my interest and sounded to me to be the best of the range of options I had available to me.” (Maria)

All of the school leaver students had investigated the financial cost before deciding to attend Lincoln and all contributing to the cost of their study. Some were paying both fees and living expenses out of money saved, while others had paid their fees and were receiving government assistance for living costs. None of the parents were paying for the total cost, but some were helping by either supplementing spending money or paying for accommodation costs.

“Out of my pocket. I’ve worked since I was 15... I’ve saved up enough money... not taking any handouts, I’m doing it myself.” (Garth)

“I’m getting a student loan for living allowance... I’ve been working part time work like since I was about form two, and I had a pretty good job over this summer and the summer before that... so I’ve save up quite a bit... I’ve got another good job for this summer.” (Josie)
It took Mark, one of the gap students, over six months to make his decision with regard to studying, as it meant him returning to New Zealand from the United Kingdom. For Mark, Lincoln was convenient (‘just down the road’) and had the particularly qualification he was interested in. Katrina made the decision to attend university after completing a short course in permiculture and after travelling for a few months. She chose Lincoln for two reasons. Firstly because it had the exact course she wanted and second because her father studied there. For Adrienne, the decision to return to study, and do the study at Lincoln, was made impulsively, over a weekend. The gap students did not discuss any financial concerns. Adrienne did, however, mention finance when discussing her decision to leave and this is discussed later in this thesis.

“...finally I found what I wanted to do... a permiculture course up in Takaka in organics and growing... ...then got all that sort of itchy feet thing out of my system and thought oh, ok, I really want to get some structure to what I want to do... Well, [degree] isn’t offered at Canterbury... I really, really like the idea of following in my dad’s footsteps... I’m using his briefcase... the same briefcase he used here.” (Katrina)

“So straight from full time work... to Lincoln... I thought it’s either go now or probably don’t go until I’m about 30-odd so might as well now... It’s kind of something I decided over a weekend.” (Adrienne)

For four the mature students, life events encouraged them to consider studying. One student experienced the death of her partner, another student was made redundant and two students had arrived at what they called ‘emotional crossroads’ in their lives. The other two mature students decided to study because their employment opportunities were stymied because of the lack of formal qualifications. The reasons for the mature students choosing Lincoln was in line with the school leaver and gap student groups – it had the particular course they wanted to do. Two of the mature students, however, commented they had, in part, also made a decision based on emotion. In general, financial issues in terms of deciding to study were not a major factor for the mature students. Three students, however, indicated that they were receiving government financial assistance.

“I was talking to my brother who had been a student out here... I don’t think he realises he talks about it quite poetically... he just
loved it out here... he'd just say “oh it’s just magic”... I never considered going anywhere else really.” (Wendy)

“I would have to train somewhere and there’s no better environment than here. You know... when you look at what else is out there... there’s no better... more encouraging environment than Lincoln... they make it easy to a degree to come out here, you know, they offer huge supports um... a beautiful campus... nice lecturers, friendly people, I mean you can’t ask for better... you know... so, it’s a neat place to be.”

5.1.3 Expectations of University

Expectations of what university would be like varied. Some of the school leavers thought it would be like school, with others not really sure what they expected. Two of the gap students had very definite expectations of what university would be like, with Adrienne basing her assumptions on what she had experienced previously at Canterbury. For the mature students, there were no real expectations, but one student did express that she thought coming to university would be ‘scary’.

“I didn’t really know... no, I didn’t really have a clue what it would be like.” (Gary)

First year should be just go to lectures... and they should be timetabled nicely... ... like, first year, I honestly expected like, 10% of my degree would be my first year effort.” (Adrienne)

“I thought there’d be a lot of people coming here straight from school who were here because they didn’t really know what they wanted to do... I thought it would be more relaxed than Canterbury I thought that I’d make friends really quickly and I expected I wouldn’t get very good marks.” (Katrina)

5.1.4 Theme Summary

This theme centred on the students before they arrived at Lincoln. They had previously either attended school, or work, decided to study and enrolled at Lincoln. Some of the mature students found school academically challenging and this, and in some cases the lack of qualifications, impacted on choices available to them after leaving school. The negative experience, however, did not stop them from completing educational courses later in their lives. The school leavers, with the exception of Richard, had extremely positive
experiences at school and were involved in numerous activities. The decision to study at university for the school leavers was just the next step and the reasons for choosing Lincoln vocational. The gap students had various factors in their decision to study, but again Lincoln was chosen mostly for the specific course. The decision for mature students to study resulted from either a life event or being hindered pursuing specific employment opportunities.

The students possess personal attributes and have encountered diverse life experiences before attending Lincoln. They all, however, will share some common experiences as they begin their journey of their first year at university.

The next theme, “I’ve arrived”, presents the stories of the first few weeks of the students’ first year experience.

5.2 I’ve Arrived

Every student has a “first year” experience. Not all have a “second year” experience as, in some cases, the first year experience lasts mere days or weeks. The first few weeks are crucial in the retention of students (Dennis, 1998). It is over this time students learn to juggle the many facets of their first year experience, and it is the management of this experience that influences withdrawal decisions.

There are two sub-groups of school leaver at Lincoln: the school leaver who lives in the halls of residence on campus, and the commuter student who lives off campus. It is important to recognise these two sub-groups as their experiences can be very different. For ease of description, when writing about the school leavers who live in halls, I will term them ‘halls students’, and when writing about the commuter students, I will term them ‘commuter students’. When discussing the group as a whole, I will term them ‘school leavers’.

Most of the school leavers I interviewed chose to live in halls of residence for their first year. This played a major role in their first few weeks. These halls students arrive on campus a few days before commuter students. For some school leavers, this is the first time they have had to look after their own domestic needs, such as washing and, in some cases, cooking.
The first experience on campus for commuter students is registration. Registration usually takes place the week before lectures start and is the process every student has to fulfil to become an official student. There is a two week period once lectures start that students can gain a full refund of fees should they decide to formally withdraw.

Some students have to organise the addition of tertiary education into their daily lives as it impacts on their dependants and partners. All students have to become familiar with the physical layout of the campus.

All students experience academic and social facets of the first year experience in the first few weeks. These have been discussed in relation to the particular contexts discussed in this theme but are discussed in more detail as separate themes later in this chapter.

5.2.1 The First Few Weeks

The first few weeks were easy for some students and incredibly difficult for others. As McInnis and James (1995) advise: “for some students the transition to university represents a challenging hurdle, while for others it is an intimidating gulf.” (p.x). One of the school leaver students met with a hurdle during registration. I was working at registration and talked to her as she was very upset. She was confused about her course choices and did not know who to talk to. She wrote about this day in her diary:

“I was looking at that day [in my diary] when I lost it and I’d written about two lines... “oh shit, I’ve lost it... What the hell am I doing? I don’t know what to do.”

Katrina found the first week very stressful.

“It was confusing as all hell trying to find places... learning the names of people... changes were made to timetables constantly throughout the first week... I was in information overload... really I just couldn’t process anything... was quite stressed out actually... felt quite floored.” (Katrina)

The academic experience begins once lectures start. Many of the students found finally starting lectures exciting, while others took it in their stride. One student found being informed about the assessments and exams in his first lecture rather overwhelming.
"You know, my first lecture I sat in I thought "oh my God I'm in a lecture, my God", I was like blown away by it all." (Davina)
"Oh a little bit nervous... but once we got in there it wasn't too bad." (Nigel)

The campus environment and juggling other commitments were all factors mentioned when discussing the first few weeks. The campus environment was mentioned by many of the students, with Lincoln perceived to be a small, friendly, relaxed campus compared with other universities.

"The environment here is so... it's quiet... there's almost a serene feel about the campus at Lincoln. There's so many open spaces and... yeah... the buildings aren't so industrial looking." (Laurie)

Juggling other commitments, such as domestic chores and significant others, was a concern for some students. Many of the mature students had dependants or partners and they had to organise study around the other people in their lives. They have to work out how much study is appropriate for their personal situations. The mature students who had children mentioned the positive effect study had on their households. Both mentioned that their children enjoyed doing 'homework' with them.

"I have to say, no one really knows how to cook... we don't eat well.... there's never anything in the fridge... no one does laundry... it piles up in the laundry and then... someone will put a load through... it's actually quite stressful." (Katrina)

"I don't think I would have done as well if I'd taken on more than one paper... that was enough to fit in around the kids and um most of my work is done after they've gone to bed... and of course I can't be [at Lincoln] whenever I'd like to be because I've got to be at work." (Annie)

One of the school leavers who decided to live at home while studying, noticed the difference not living in halls had on her first few weeks:

"Ah, I'd made the decision to go to Lincoln and live at home because economically it made sense... I knew it would be different and that I was missing out on a neat experience, but... the reality still hits you when you get there and you know, its like, first week,
and I’m wandering round not knowing what to do and ending up going home... even though I knew it would be different... the reality of really not having anything to do was difficult.”

(Samantha)

One student I interviewed left during her first week. Louise had trouble dealing with insecurity. Her other withdrawal reasons are discussed later in this thesis.

“...I don’t know, but I still felt very insecure and I still... I remember one time I was sitting there... I just didn’t want to... I just didn’t want everyone else to know that I was feeling insecure and perhaps I’d answer something wrong and all these intelligent people around me would think... oh, she shouldn’t be here... (laugh), you know.” Louise

Generally, the students had positive experiences in their first few weeks, with many of the school leavers’ experiences being mediated through living in halls of residence.

5.2.2 Halls of Residence (Halls)

All of the school leavers I interviewed in Group A chose to live in halls. For the students from out of town, halls were the obvious choice. One of the students had other accommodation options offered to him but chose halls to ‘have good time and meet lots of people” (Garth). Mary’s story about her first night in halls, illustrates the intensity of the experience:

“I mean, first night in the halls, down to Bob’s19... people pissing out my window (laugh)... and it was just like “oh wow” oh... its just so different.”

Halls are perceived as a good way of establishing a social life and making friends. Friendships were made instantly – for one student before she managed to unlock the door to her room.

“I was always going to go into halls... um, like it had been recommended... you know... its good for first year students to meet people and make friends.” (Mary)

19 “Bob’s” is the name the students use for the local pub.
“I was just about to unlock my room and then… my neighbours came over… they introduced me to themselves… we sat and talked in one of the girls’ rooms for about half an hour, there were heaps of people in there and I didn’t think I was ever gonna get my stuff unpacked.” (Rebecca)

In terms of domestic matters, some students were still taking washing home to mum. All the students were in catered halls, so did not have to do their own cooking. The domestic incompetence of some students was difficult to understand by a few of the more competent students.

“I used to cook food for the family when I was about 10… three nights a week… I can cook my own feed, do my washing… like some guys in the halls, they’ve never washed before, they wouldn’t know how to use an oven or anything… and I look at them and I’m like, you dickhead.” (Garth)

“…I’ve taken two massive big washing bags home… in the weekends… its kind of hard because you always say “oh yeah I’ll do that in my hour off between lectures” but then it never happens [DT: so when you took it home did you do it?] Mum did it for me.” (Rebecca)

The students that lived in halls did, however, recognise the need for some time away from the environment and for all students living in halls was acknowledged as a ‘first year’ experience only. It was interesting to note however, that even though the students living in halls all planned to flat the following year, the people they were planning to flat with were invariably their ‘halls’ friends.

“This year only yep. Flat definitely next year.” (Garth)

“I’m so glad I played hockey this year because it’s just been my kind of escape out of uni life… if you just lived in the hall… you just get dragged into the uni way of life and… we’re so isolated… …[you] forget about the real world you know.” (Josie)

5.2.3 The Challenges

Students met many challenges in their first few weeks. Having a timetable with long breaks in between lectures were “hell” for Samantha initially because she did not know
anybody on campus and had nobody to talk to during the breaks. A couple of the school leavers who lived in halls had come to Lincoln from rural environments. They found the physical closeness of halls living difficult to adjust to. On a lighter note, the challenge for Wendy, was ‘biting her tongue’!

“My biggest challenge I guess was um, because of my pep talk from my brother (laugh) was really about not saying too much... I’ve got an opinion about most things.”

The perceived abundance of free time and the issue of self motivation were mentioned often. Some students found it hard to motivate themselves to study. Other students found learning to balance their social and study lives difficult at first.

“Probably the fact that you had so much more free time... you got to do whatever you liked... you didn’t have to study and in the first week I didn’t study... and then that was about it (laugh)... for another month, until assignments arrived.” (Bob)

“I sort of... went out with a crash and a bang... I mean, yeah, I’ve got my independence, I’ve got my freedom... basically it’s just up to me to sort out what I’m gonna do.” (Mary)

“Um... the first year’s going to be more social I think for me, but um... I’ve got to be careful I don’t get too social... it’s just a balance really.” (Gary)

Some students had strategies worked out early in the semester:

“...it’s just better being able to like manage your work and your social life at the same time... like last night after we had our test... I had to do a couple of drawings... and then um... and then I said to myself “Right, if you get these done, you’re allowed to go out” and so I got them done.” (Rebecca)

“It’s just the same as school to me... I could have gone home early today but I treat it like school... I go till the day’s finished.” (Garth)

Many of the female school leavers mentioned they felt homesick soon after arriving at Lincoln.
"When I first arrived my Dad was still with me so that was good... he left and that immediately plunged me into homesickness...”
(Maria)

“...I'm quite close to my Dad and stuff... so when I first got here I was like “oh no... what have I done”... I was quite upset... it was quite hard the first week... ...and then I went away to my Auntie’s for four days... and I came back and I was all happy, so that was good... ...once you sort of get in a mix in with people it's OK.” (Carrie)

5.2.4 Theme Summary

The first few weeks at university are challenging for all students and a major influence of whether a student will continue with their first year. Those that chose to live in halls have to adjust to their living environments and, for many, it is the first time they have been away from home for an extended length of time. They are placed in an artificial environment of youth and freedom, where motivation comes from within and you have to wash your own dirty socks. Some students cope exceedingly well during these first few weeks, while others struggle with the challenges. The students who chose to live at home have different challenges. It can be isolating being the only commuter student amongst a group of halls students that appear to know each other. The first week is hectic but, as the students have expressed, is also exciting. Learning to juggle other commitments can be stressful but rewarding. Further, identifying and adopting successful coping strategies gives a sense of self-satisfaction.

The two main themes of the first year experience are the social and the academic facets of the experience. The social experience is the next theme to be discussed.
5.3 With A Little Help From My Friends

The social facet of the first year experience is one of the major themes that emerged from the data. Making friends is an important part of the first year experience (Thomas, 2000). Those students that achieve a successful social interaction at university are less likely to leave, and those who feel socially isolated will be more likely to leave. Some students arrive on campus with friends, while other do not know one single other person in the entire university student population.

In halls, the social experience is explicit – it is there as soon as you walk out of your bedroom door. For commuter students, however, it can be much harder making personal connections. Orientation events are held, but these are not always well attended and if you don’t know anyone, would you be comfortable going alone? Socially, many of the students’ activities revolve around alcohol, but perhaps contrary to the beliefs of the general public, not all students drink. How do students manage in an “alcohol-driven” culture? For mature students, ‘New Start’ featured as a way to make initial friends.

5.3.1 How Do You Make Friends?

The uncertainty of whether you will make friends is a cause for anxiety for many students. One student had a nightmare:

“I had this really nasty nightmare one night... I walked into a room and I didn’t know anyone and everybody else knew everybody else... and I was the only one that didn’t know anyone... and then that kind of got me worried... it is hard starting in a new place.”
(Rebecca)

Halls students have an advantage over commuter students in the speed with which they can establish friendships due to the close living environment. Even with this advantage, however, making friends can still be an activity in which you have to make yourself participate. Some students found halls made them widen the types of people they were friends with.

“I mean it would be quite easy to curl up in your room... shut the door... pull the curtains and yeah... but... that wasn’t why I came so... its like, you know, gotta get out there... it’s gonna be difficult but it’s the only way to meet people.” (Josie)
“I met some good people straight away… they’ve become really good friends.” (James)

For commuter students, social orientation and lectures are two ways available to meet people. Jemma did not find lectures very helpful in making social connections, while Samantha did not find either lecturers or orientation events helpful:

“…because obviously you just walk into the class… you might see them five minutes prior and have a wee chat but then that’s it really and then you go into your class… so during the class not really because you’re a bit more focused.” (Jemma)

“Didn’t know anybody… lectures aren’t a good place to meet people.” (Samantha)

“A couple of them [orientation events] sounded interesting but when you’re on your own it’s not something…didn’t want to go to on my own so I didn’t. I just didn’t go.” (Samantha)

Samantha decided on a strategy to make friends:

“One of the things I did… …a friend and I decided to play touch rugby at the university games as a deliberate… deliberately to get to know people. We thought it would be a good way of, you know, finding out new friends and getting into things.”

All of the mature students attended New Start, an introduction day facilitated by the Student Learning Centre, specifically for mature students. Other mature students share their stories about studying, various support service representatives provide information and academics are available for course advice. For mature students it facilitates establishing friendships and also allays the mature student’s fear of being the only “old’ person in an environment of youth.

“…we all met on that day, because I came to the mature students day, so there’s three… yeah three of us out of that that still stick together.” (Jemma)

“The New start programme introduced me to a person through that… who I have lunch with twice a week… so, yeah, that New Start programme, you know, was amazingly beneficial…hugely beneficial.” (Laurie)
5.3.2 How Important Are Friends?

Although Katrina said that she made some good friends in the first week, I stopped the tape during the interview as she became upset.

“You know what I want to say is that... all my passions... all my friends are in [place]... like, my real friends.” (Katrina)

Katrina was still attending lectures, doing well academically, but did not feel she had made enough ‘real’ connections with other students. The gap students find themselves in a bit of a no-mans-land – too old for the school leavers and too young for the mature students. This was an issue for Adrienne and was another issue that contributed to her leaving. She felt also, that because she did not make the effort to make friends initially, she considered it too late to try by mid-semester. On the whole, friends were considered extremely important by the school leavers, while they enhanced the experience for the mature students. For the school leaver students, friendship and social life were linked, for mature students, however, friendships at university were often seen as quite separate to their social life – there was much more of a separation.

“Very important. I would have probably never have managed as well without my friends... just generally coping.” (Maria)

“I don’t think it would be very enjoyable just going into university everyday, going to your lecture, going to the library and going home.” (Davina)

“...some I’ve met here... I cannot actually relate to them very well outside of university. Like it’s alright in university but outside the university we’re just so completely different.” (Jemma)

Many of the students had romantic attachments – some lived with partners or had partners living in the same city, while others were pursuing long distance relationships. For some, this alleviated the perceived pressure of having to make friends. One female student, who had a boyfriend, spoke about the pressure on students to enter into relationships – or in her words to ‘hook up’. She felt relieved that having a boyfriend meant she escaped this pressure. The girlfriend of another student followed him to Christchurch and he spoke about the tensions of trying to keep her happy while trying to establish a social life and balance academic demands.

“I’m not going to fail over any woman!” (Garth)
Friends are also considered a source of academic assistance and are important to making some academic subjects tolerable:

“I’ve got quite a few friends in my subjects as well so, there’s always somebody to turn to if it need a bit of help on the subject.”
(Maria)

“I’ve made some really cool friends... I think that’s made it bearable, especially in [subject]... we’ve got a good group of friend.” (Jemma)

Overall, friendships and a busy social life can completely change the first year experience:

“Changes it completely. Definitely. If you’ve got social things happening then university’s great – who cares about lectures!”
(Samantha)

5.3.3 Meet You At The Pub

For the school leavers, much of their social life revolves around the pub – even the students who do not drink alcohol. The pub emerged as the place to meet people.

“[DT: How do you find the best way of getting to know people?] Oh, I just stand at the pub and sort of have a yarn with them usually... that’s where everyone congregates a bit I think.” (Gary)

“...but I found you meet more people at the pub... like I didn’t really meet that many people until I went out of a few nights and I met heaps.” (Garth)

“I think you kind of meet people more when you least expect it kind of... like... at the pub um... on the first night when everyone went down to the pub you meet so many people that night.”
(Rebecca)

And as for the drinking, it can be the focal point of some students’ experience. There is growing concern from ALAC (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand) that drinking is more important than academic study in the experience of students at universities (Towl, 2004).

“Like everything doesn’t have to revolve around drinking but... it’s usually where it ends up.” (Garth)
"I’ve gotten drunk more times this year than I have, like my entire life." (Mary)

Some of the older students (mature and gap) did not appreciate the drinking culture of some students:

“The only thing that I have found is that Lincoln seems to be really geared up to the farm boys getting pissed type scenario and I can’t stand it and most people that I know can’t stand it so I really, really struggle with the whole, you know... all these other events that are totally based on alcohol.” (Davina)

“I’m not a fierce drinker, I don’t go out and get slaughtered at the pub and wolf-whistle at the girls and... vomit in gardens... and so I didn’t... I don’t know, I didn’t really fit in anyway.” (Carl)

“There are guys in our class that are, you know, absolute idiots... just maturity levels at an all time low... um, you know they’re straight out of school and the most important thing in life is beer, you know... there’s guys that sort of turn up for about three lectures a week and of those three lectures they’re pretty much hung over or still drunk.” (Mark)

5.3.4 Theme Summary

Friends are an extremely important part of the first year experience. Those that make friends quickly have an easier time adjusting to university life. There is an anxiety for school leavers that they may not make friends at university, even though they have had many friends at school. There are several ways of meeting people in the first year, but by far the easiest seem to be living in halls and at the pub. Even students who did not drink frequented the pub as a place to meet other students. A social life does, however, have to be balanced with the academic demands of the first year. For some school leaver students this is a hard lesson learned. For the school leavers, the social side of the first year experience can be all consuming at times, whereas for the mature students, a social life at university is not necessary. Friendships for the mature students make the experience a lot more pleasant, but they are not as dependent on the friendships as school leaver students seem to be. For some students a social life at university is mostly seen as the ‘icing on the cake’ – the academic work (or the qualification at the end) is regarded as the cake.
The next theme that is discussed is the academic experience of first year students.

5.4 I'm Here to Get the Degree

The primary reason students enrol at university is to attain a qualification, whether it be a certificate, diploma or degree. There is a debate in the academic community that the academic standard of school leavers has decreased over the last few years (Ross, 2000). In light of this, it was particularly interesting hearing what the school leavers thought about their academic experience. Assessment can produce inordinate levels of anxiety in students – not only in the process of completions but also in waiting for the results. It is the first tangible indication of their academic progress and this can be either a motivating or a demoralising experience. Also discussed under this theme is a key component of the first year experience – the lecturer. Staff student relationships are considered another important factor in the decision to withdraw. This sub-theme discusses how the students interacted with their lecturers and their thoughts on the quality, or otherwise, of the teaching they encountered. Other issues covered in the theme of academic are: timetable, workload, subject relevance and study groups.

5.4.1 How Difficult is the Academic Work?

It was interesting talking to the school leavers about the academic level of the course material in the first year. They agreed unanimously that most of the course work was a repeat of seventh form. Subjects that they had not studied in seventh form were a bit more challenging, but overall the academic work was manageable.

"I was expecting quite a step up... I was expecting straight away it just to be tough... but it wasn't." (Garth)

"I don't think it was harder than bursary was... not at all... I don't know if they are just easy on the first years... there's a few people which get really stressed out because they've never done [subject] before... and they're not good at [it]." (Rebecca)

Mature students experienced different challenges with regard to the academic content of their papers. Some students overestimate the academic requirement, doubting their academic ability solely based on being at university. For example, one student found it hard to believe a tutor when he told her she had met the requirements of an assignment. For another student, writing was a challenge:
“it’s university, it’s an assignment, you know, its got to be like 10,000 typed words… …like my expectations and what I was trying to do were much higher than what they were expecting… that was quite hard to sort of work out… just how far to go.”

(Annie)

“Because being out of the education system for a while, I’m just not used to putting ideas into written form… I didn’t think it would be as hard… I’m pretty articulate when I write, and I just assumed that it would be easier than what it’s proved to be.” (Laurie)

5.4.2 Assessment

University is based on assessment. It is only by achieving academic passing grades that you can advance. Receiving the results of academic work, then, can be extremely stressful for some students. From my interviews it was clear that both good and bad results can be a spur to continue (or do better). A number of students were surprised how well they were achieving academically. One student talked about leaving work out for her father to see and how he was surprised at her marks – not surprised that his daughter was doing well, but surprised that the level of work was producing A grades. He felt the work was not “A” standard. Mature students seemed more anxious, on the whole, with assessment. This makes sense as mature students may have been out of the education system for a while. The majority of the students interviewed stated they were doing well academically, with only one of the school leavers admitting to not achieving passing academic grades.

“Just getting those marks back just makes me realise that I can do it.” (Katrina)

“Yeah, I failed a test… about three weeks ago, that was a big low point, but that’s given me the necessary boot up the arse I needed.” (Mark)

“I haven’t had any marks back from assessment yet… I think it will reinforce to me that, you know, I get this subject even though its hard to get back into learning…. … I’ve had a test mark back… I thought I’d bombed out majorly badly… but I didn’t, I passed which was a big thing.” (Laurie)
5.4.3 Academic Staff

Together with academic content, the other side of the academic experience is the interaction with the lecturer. For first year students, the lecture is the primary mechanism by which the academic content is delivered. Interaction with academic staff is another major influence in terms of retention. Those students who have positive interactions with academic staff in formal, and informal, settings are less likely to leave (Cope & Hannah; 1975; McInnis, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1993; Tinto 1996). All the students talked about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ lecturers.

Students appreciate good lecturers. The good lecturers are invariably passionate about the subject, communicate their subject well, friendly and accessible. Good lecturers can make difficult subjects worthwhile – even enjoyable. One student admired the academic challenge presented by the lecturer:

“Every lecture she’d just be kind of thrashing our brains about... like just putting in new ideas and new ways of looking at things... and it was all about... taking in other people’s opinions and then moulding them together... it brings a lot to your whole life as well.” (James)

“I was very, very sick, it wasn’t pleasant... and problems that I had, the lecturers that I had for [subject] was excellent and the tutor I had for [subject] was excellent so there was always someone to turn to.” (Davina)

Inconsistency of teaching quality however was an issue for the students:

“Different lecturers have different standards. Like some of them get through a lot of work, but then other’s don’t... I suppose I’m not allowed to say this... our [subject] is not very good... ...[first lecturer] keeps moving around in the room and um doesn’t really stay on topic... ...makes it really, really hard for you to concentrate in class... We’ve just had a break and we’ve got another [second lecturer]... I reckon in the two lectures that we’ve had with [second lecturer]... I’ve learnt more than I have with [first lecturer] the whole year.” (Rebecca)

“I found the tutorials challenging, when the ah, postgrad students taking them, who quite frankly didn’t give a toss about what they
were doing, and really had no time for the people that they were there to tutor.” (Wendy)

A number of students commented that they did not attend a certain subject because of the ‘bad’ lecturer. Two students in particular experienced ‘bad’ lecturers. In one case the student had recorded his concern, but because the lecturer continued to teach the course he felt that his, and those of his class, were not taken seriously. In the other instance, the perceived implication of complaining about a lecturer was that you became a ‘marked-man’.

Informal interaction with academic staff was mentioned by only one student. One academic division organised a semi-informal function where students were invited to meet the academic staff in the on-campus bar:

“... it was a way of getting to know them out of that “I’m the lecturer – you’re the student” role... like just getting people more on even ground.” (Annie)

5.4.4 Timetable and Relevance

In terms of timetable, the major gripe was 8:30 lectures. Not many students complained about the workload, however, this may relate to the particular time in the semester that interviews were conducted. A few students commented that they did not see the relevance of their papers and this caused frustration and lack of enjoyment.

“Get rid of 8:30am Monday morning lectures... don’t like them.”
(James)

“I just couldn’t believe the 8:30am lectures five days a week... just killed me.” (Adrienne)

“Some of the subjects I feel like “why am I doing this?” This is such a waste of my time.” (Jemma)

5.4.5 Study Groups

None of the school leavers and only a few of the other students had experienced a study group. These are groups of students, either formally put together by the lecturer or just a group of ‘like-minded’ students that meet together outside of timetabled classes to discuss academic subject content or complete assignments. The reason for this may have been the time that interviews were held – too early in the semester for study groups to be established
— or that they were not encouraged within the courses they were taking. Three of the four students who had positive experiences with study groups were mature students, with the fourth student being a gap student. For one mature student the study group proved a valuable contact to establish a social network.

“There’s me and two other fellas... when we’ve got an assignment on we all go to the library and suss it out... we pretty much share information... I think it’s perfectly legal to do that as long as you sort of say that you’ve collaborated information with... [DT: And that’s worthwhile?] Oh definitely, oh without a doubt yeah... our grades in our assignments reflect it.” (Mark)

“I was in a study group last semester... [DT: And that worked well?] No. It could of worked better. It just didn't happen... we started off with one time, then we found out that wasn’t a good time, changed it, and that was fine everybody knew, but even though we changed it where everybody could be there it was sort of in dribs and drabs so there wasn’t any real commitment to it... I was just as bad as the rest.” (Wendy)

5.4.6 Theme Summary

The speed with which students adapt to the level of the academic content and workload of their subjects, together with the interaction, both formal and informal, with academic staff is important to the first year experience. It was interesting that all the schoolleaver students felt their first semester subjects were academically easier than they anticipated. Students are quick to discern ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teaching. Academic staff who are passionate about their subjects and challenge their students to think were held in high regard by the students interviewed. When confronted with a negative experience regarding a lecturer, they felt helpless to change the situation and, further, they felt negative academic repercussions would be possible if they did complain. Study groups were not experienced by all of the students, but those that had experienced a “successful” study group found them beneficial to the learning process. An area of consensus with the school leaver students was the dislike of 8:30am lectures!
5.5 Should I Stay or Should I Go?

This theme is concerned with the decision to either leave the university or to stay. I asked each of the students, still enrolled, whether they had thought about leaving, and I also asked them about their intention to complete. The literature supports the strong relationship between intention to complete and actual persistence and the reverse of this: intent to leave having direct influence on withdrawal (Bean, 1982; Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). Pascarella, Duby and Iverson (1980) found that “intent to continue at the institution had the strongest direct effect of any single predictor on freshmen year persistence/withdrawal decisions” (p.99). Two of the sub themes discussed are support services and course advice. Support services operate in many areas of the institution: Academic support is provided through the Student Learning Centre; health assistance is provided by the medical centre; psychological support is provided by counselling staff; and, those with permanent or temporary physical or psychological challenges are supported through inclusive education. Further, course advice is included as the literature emphasises the uncertainty of many undergraduate students with regard to their course decisions (Leys, 1999; McInnis, James, & Hartley; 2000). Many students decide to leave because the course is not quite what they expected or they change their mind. Good course advice can reduce these types of withdrawal decisions as students can be directed into more suitable courses before the academic year has begun.

5.5.1 Intention to Complete

When asked if they intended to complete their chosen course of study, or whether they had thought about leaving university, some students were adamant that they had never entertained the thought. Others admitted to giving some thought to leaving, but quickly dismissed the idea. Some students said they would leave but only in specific circumstances, these included; failure, job prospects and personal circumstances.

“What would I do? What would be the point in that? That hadn’t actually crossed my mind.” (Josie)

“...it’s a choice I’ve made and I’m going to stick with it for the three years. I mean... this year, I got a bit... recently I got a bit disillusioned and started looking around for other courses I could be doing down here, but then I went back and looked at what I’m doing next year and there’s more of the papers I want to do, so I thought right, here to the end of the three years no... see what happens.” (James)
“Damn straight [I’m here to finish]... unless my heart falls out of it.” (Garth)
“If I could get a job that was what I wanted, then I wouldn’t finish” (Davina)

The two students who I interviewed once they had left Lincoln mentioned various reasons why they decided to leave. For Louise it was the lack of confidence in her academic ability and the inability to study part-time due to government financial support regulations.

“... I think self doubt... deep down inside me I knew that I was going to struggle and I knew it was going to be a continuous struggle.... I know my limitations and I felt that I could do it but I’d have to do it part time... I tried for part-time but I couldn’t for financial reasons.... I decided it was a lot of money, it’s an awful lot of money and if I’m not going to get through it, it’s an awful waste of money.” (Louise)

For Adrienne, Lincoln did not meet expectations previously experienced at another university. Timetable issues (large gaps and 8:30am lectures), lack of social contacts and financial issues all contributed to her deciding to leave.

“I didn’t like it at all. I hated it. I just thought... I don’t know if it’s because I went into it with not a very positive attitude... like, just because I’d just finished work and straight into it... didn’t get myself all hyped up and yeah, I didn’t know anyone there... um... and so I don’t know whether it’s because of that I went into it with kind of a negative attitude and not wanting to put the effort in or anything like that.... I think there’s a lot of reasons I didn’t like it.” (Adrienne)

“I know it’s a stupid reason... but the final thing is probably I was going to be saving myself forty bucks a week petrol as well... even though the fees are more expensive [at Canterbury]... like weekly expense like petrol hurts the budget a lot more than a one off, once a year fee.” (Adrienne)
5.5.2 Course Advice

Course advice is the process whereby students have their course of study approved. At the start of each new academic year at registration, the student is seen by an academic who checks their course of study. The actions of the academic staff vary considerably in terms of course advice. To some, course advice is about checking the student has a coherent course of study: it is purely an administrative task of checking that the courses fit into the timetable blocks, they have selected the correct compulsory courses for their particular degree and that any prerequisite conditions are met. For other academics, it is a process of finding out why the student has chosen the course of study they have. Students experienced great variety in their course advice interactions. Course advice in itself was not considered positive or negative by the students. Some were more than happy in having to decide subjects with very little input from academic staff.

"... oh you had to go see a certain person to get your course approved. Basically they left it up to me, which I found quite good... ...it makes you think: of, you know, is this what I really want to do?" (Mary)

As previously discussed, Josie was very upset when I spoke with her at registration. She wanted to discuss her choices with someone but didn’t know where to go. She had found her initial course advice confusing and off-putting. One of the gap students enrolled into a particular degree believing it would provide the necessary qualifications for a career path, only to find out at the end of her second year that she had not taken the necessary prerequisite courses that she needed. She did not discuss her career aspirations with a course advisor – she just had her course of study approved. One of the mature students was very disappointed with her experience of course advice. It did not stop her from enrolling at Lincoln but did colour her subsequent attitude with regard to that particular academic.

"... I was kind of looking... to go and see someone who I could say, you know, this is what I like doing... I just wanted to go to someone and say, you know, this is what I want to do in the future... this is like what I’ve done in the past... what should I do? ...someone who knew kind of a bit of background behind both the degrees would have been quite useful." (Josie)
“... I actually went up to [course advisor’s] office. He was in his office because he was on his phone because I got the lady to check and he was in there for ages and I knocked on the door about four times... he never opened it, never came to the door or anything, so I just gave up on him and went to see someone else. That was pretty crap. I wasn’t very impressed with that.” (Jemma)

Course advice can direct students into the most appropriate course choice. Mark initially enrolled for a degree course. At the registration process he spoke with a course advisor, as is required, and had his course of study approved. He started lectures and within a day had decided that he lacked some of the academic skills necessary to succeed. He sought course advice immediately.

“I mean I was going to do a [degree] and I went and saw the course advisor and he’s oh yeah... [degree] he goes “your first year’s pretty prescribed” signed a piece of paper and said, “there you go”... that was it... and I was like “oh Jeez, that was easy.”

“I actually went and had a chat to [lecturer] about it and he said “oh what are you like on your maths” and I said “nah, I’m not very strong at all” and he said “well, you better do [sub-degree] then... ...yeah [lecturer] helped me out and got me sorted and I was on my way... ...helped me catch up on the notes and the introductory stuff that I missed, yeah it was great.”

5.5.3 Support Services

Accessibility to support services is important to the first year experience. Many students that encounter problems; academic, personal or physical can be appropriately assisted through the many support services available on campus. Providing the appropriate help can mean the difference between a student staying or leaving. Lincoln has a full range of support services, from academic support in the guise of the Student Learning Centre to medical support provided by the on-campus medical centre.

Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee president, Professor John Niland has said: “In future, universities would differentiate themselves by the way they support students”
(Elson-Green, 1999b). Yet it is often these very support services that are the first to feel the pinch of budget constraints.

The students had varying degrees of knowledge with regard to student support services available on campus. The most mentioned service was the Student Learning Centre. The Student Learning Centre is a unit that provides academic assistance to students. One-on-one sessions as well as timetabled group workshop sessions are held throughout each semester. Students that had used the Student Learning Centre were positive about their experience, however, some school leavers either had no knowledge of the Centre at all or regarded it as a place you go to only if you are experiencing particular academic problems.

"... went to like a learning centre thing on how to make the most of lectures... and that was quite good." (Josie)

"I've heard of it but I haven't been there." (Carrie)

"I haven't had anything to do with them actually... if you feel you need extra help then these are the people to go to... And I suppose because last semester I didn't feel that need I didn't." (Samantha)

Other support services, however, were rarely mentioned. Inclusive education was mentioned by two students, whereas the counsellors were only mentioned by one student. The medical centre was not mentioned unless I mentioned it first. Inclusive education, employment and industry liaison unit, and the library were all mentioned once. None of the students mentioned that they had accessed the support services, when or if, they were thinking of leaving.

5.5.4 Theme Summary

Some of the students interviewed acknowledged that they had considered leaving the university, while others reported they had not even entertained the idea. For one student, the decision to stay was based on the friendships that had been made. For other students, the increased relevance and interest in the subsequent semester's subjects encouraged them to stay. The students interviewed who had left Lincoln had a number of reasons for leaving. Neither could pin-point one reason. The students who were uncertain of their course choice found the course advice process unhelpful. Further, the students who had considered leaving, and the two students who did actually leave, did not discuss or access any of the support services available to them.
5.6 Looking Forward – Looking Back

Often processes only emerge in retrospect. When the students start their first year, they do not think in terms of “now I’m going to make a transition from this to this”. It is often only when students reflect on their experience that they realise that they have changed – in thought and behaviour. I also wanted to gain some sense of the students’ overall experience – whether positive or negative – and whether they recognised any high or low points of their experience so far. Furthermore, I was interested in whether the students had any future plans. Sometimes these plans would manifest and be discussed at the start of the interview when the students discussed their course choice, sometimes it was not until the students were explicitly asked that future plans were discussed. As well as these three sub-themes, I was in the unique position of being able to re-interview five students whom I had interviewed for a master’s papers project. When interviewing these students, I asked them to reflect and discuss their first year with me with the benefit of hindsight. This theme, then is presented in four parts: in what ways did the students demonstrate that they had undergone a ‘transition’ (if at all); the thoughts of the students on their overall first year experience (so far); the students’ future plans (if any) and the presentation of the experience in hindsight – the thoughts of the students re-interviewed in their last year.

5.6.1 Transition

\[
\text{The art of walking upright here} \\
\text{is the art of using both feet}
\]

\[
\text{One is for holding on.} \\
\text{One is for letting go.}
\]

Glenn Colquhoun ‘The trick of standing upright here’

As previously stated, the first year experience is often described in terms of a ‘transition’ or a rite of passage. (Boland, 1998; Burgess and Sharma, 1999; Johnson and Buck, 1995; Kantanis, 2000; McInnis, 2000; Pargetter, et al., 1998; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Shaw Sullivan, 1997; Silver, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 1999). I was interested to find out whether the students had a sense of this transition process. For the students living away from home, I asked if they had returned home since their arrival at Lincoln and asked them; what was different, what was the same, etc. For the students still living at home and the older students (both gap and mature) I followed a line of questioning that asked about
any changes in the social networks and whether their friends and family had thought they had changed, etc.

Students discussed different changes in their lives. The obvious change for the school leavers who lived in halls was the change in living situation. Many had returned home, at least once since the semester had begun. Although they look forward to seeing family and friends, it was often the first indication to them that things had changed. Many of the students found the way they interacted with their family had changed. Some found that their bedrooms had either been taken over by other siblings or changed into an office or a guest room. Having to live under parental control (no matter how lax) after a period of relative freedom was mentioned often. One school leaver who had not returned home was apprehensive about a forthcoming trip. Even the students who lived at home, however, noticed change. One school leaver spoke about the changing relationship with his parents. 

"[DT: how do you feel about going home?] Apprehensive and excited at the same time. Apprehensive because I know things have changed at home. [DT: How?] I now my place at home has changed... I know that I’ve become independent and used to being independent now and so I’m going to probably have a few issues trying to get back into being told what to do a bit more.” (Maria)

“It was good to catch up with everybody and you know, see family and friends again... but it made me realise that I couldn’t go back there and live... there’s just nothing there for me... and the first few days I really enjoyed it... but I can only stand so much.”

(Mary)

Relationships with friends whom students had before attending Lincoln were also discussed. Some students found keeping in contact difficult and there were various reasons for this. Some students spoke about feeling ‘left out’ of their friends’ new experiences, while time pressures and enjoying the newly established friendships were other reasons mentioned.

Students spoke of many other changes that they had noticed in their lives. These changes included the recognition of becoming more independent and the establishment of new routines. One student spoke of being surprised at compromising her personal values, while another realised that she was not more intelligent than when she was at school, but she now
had the desire to achieve. Some students realised the practical changes that had occurred—the gaining of new skills—while others noticed subtle changes in their behaviour, for example, becoming more confident and less biased. A couple of students recognised that being at university had “expanded their minds”.

“It’s little ethical things... my friends would recoil in horror if they saw me drinking out of plastic cups and throwing them away... eating on the run, drinking coffee, not having time for yoga... yeah I’ve really, really changed.” (Katrina)

“So much has changed... like quite a different person to who you are now and you’ve gone through so much. Just being so... so naïve but you know... just so little girl from the country... ...haven’t had all these other experiences and had to get out and met new people and just generally be totally independent and do your own thing... like we were just, you know, little school girls.” (Josie)

5.6.2 Overall Experience

All of the students were positive about their over experience at Lincoln. Even Louise who withdrew after only a few days said she felt she would have enjoyed the experience had she persisted. Enjoyment of the experience was derived from various experiences. Students spoke of enjoying social aspects, while others spoke of enjoying their academic experience. For some, the progression towards achieve a particular goal gave satisfaction and enjoyment, along with the recognition that they had personally grown through the experience. Many of the mature students spoke of being surprised at enjoying the academic experience. The influence of lecturers on the enjoyment of the experience was also mentioned by some students. There was also the recognition by some students that the quality of their experience was totally in their control.

“The experience overall... oh I love it.” (Wendy)

“My life’s been all built up to this stage and I’m not going to stuff it up... that’s the way I see it.” (Garth)

“Lincoln is completely what you make of it.” (Carl)

5.6.3 Looking to the Future

The ‘future’ symbolised different time horizons to different students. In answer to the question “tell me about what you plan to do in the future”, some students spoke about
career aspirations once they had finished their degrees, while others spoke in terms of the coming year. Some students had very clear goals when starting at Lincoln. The course was the vehicle by which they would be transported to their life after Lincoln. Some students, when discussing the future, looked only as far as the coming year. All of the school leavers were planning on changing their living situations and they spoke about the possible impact that may have on their university experience. Some students were planning to travel overseas while others were uncertain about the future. Louise, who withdrew after just a few days, was still interested in study. She had already enrolled in a correspondence course and did not discount returning to university in the future.

“Hopefully travel, once I’ve done this... like to the States or Europe or somewhere like that and just work.” (Nigel)

“The most important thing for me is that I want to get my degree.” (Jemma)

“Well, by doing my degree... this is my big plan... I’ll be able to create high capital so I’ve got better purchasing rights... and therefore I have bigger interest dividends so therefore I can run the farm with profit and not just paying the mortgage off and getting nowhere.” (Garth)

5.6.4 Looking Back

For this research I was able to re-interview five students that had taken part in a previous research paper. All of the students were in their final year with some being interviewed in their last semester and others in their penultimate semester. Many changes had occurred in the lives of the students. In general, the students spoke about changing friendships, the future, and all still regarded their first year as important and one they enjoyed.

The students spoke about the changes in their friendships. All spoke, in their first interviews, of the importance of friends but these social networks had changed over time. Friendships waxed and waned. Friendships were described in the first interviews as 'lasting a lifetime'. This proved true (at least for three years) for some, while others found they lost contact with those friends once they were in their second year. Changing priorities in individual lives meant, for some, less time for social experiences. Others found they had many different groups of friends over the course of their time at Lincoln. In this regard the challenge was balancing the amount of time spent with each group. One student spoke about feeling isolated in her second year because she was attending totally
different classes to her friends. Overall, friends remained a high priority in all years for the students.

The first year was, in all cases, described in terms of being their most social year. By second year, those who had not worked during their first year were in some form of paid employment. One student had moved into a flating situation, while two were living on campus as residential assistants. Two were still living at home. The student who had moved into a flating situation spoke of the pressure of having to study, work part-time as well as juggie the demands of his girlfriend and domestic requirements. The two students living at home were unsure as to whether they would move out of home once they had completed their degrees. This would obviously be influenced by employment prospects. The two students who were still living on campus recognised that their living situations would change in the subsequent year. None of the students seemed particularly anxious about the change in their living situations. Some were, however, uncertain about the future, with one student being unconvinced that her degree would gain her the work she desired.

The first year was recognised as a time of making new friends, gaining an understanding of the academic systems, and learning one’s own limits. The students related the positive experiences first. When asked what they remembered of the first year, stories of ‘cheese missions’, late night rendezvous and numerous social occasions were relayed. There was no mention of assignments or the stressful situations that I know they had experienced. Learning the ‘academic ropes’, in terms of how much academic work had to be done, and how much effort had to be expended to pass (or in some cases, how well you could do without attending early lectures) was also mentioned. By the third year the students had a very clear picture of their academic strengths and weaknesses. Some of the students realised they had become independent – in thought and action – and others spoke of generally just ‘growing up’.

“We went over to Akaroa to Barry’s Bay and got cheese and then came back and bought a bottle of wine, sat on my bed and ate cheese and drank the wine…. And then all promptly fell asleep.” (Ariel).

“I can quite happily, you know, go out for dinner now.. a meal, have a few quiet drinks and… you know... have an enjoyable time rather than going out and raging (laugh).” (Mary)
“I think last year I was a lot more certain about my degree... this year... I’m suddenly not so sure where I’m headed.” (Samantha)

“It was a great learning curve... I grew personally and I just developed so many more skills... it was just an awesome year of basically self discovery to use a cliché.” (James)

“I guess I learned in terms of study... when I came in I did none the first semester and just scraped through... I knew I should be doing some but hadn’t really developed that habit at school... in the second semester things changed and I started to learn... studied harder for exams and stuff.” (Bob)

The first year for these students was generally seen as providing important building blocks which formed the foundation of their university experience. In looking back at their first year experience, the students spoke of various factors they considered important. First, establishing and maintaining friendships, second, gaining academic confidence and third, learning to cope with, and adapt to, the various experiences.

“I mean it is university... I’m the one who’s in control of my life”

(Samantha)
Chapter Six: Discussion

This thesis investigated the first year experience of undergraduate students at Lincoln University. The themes that emerged from the data were able to be organised in a semi-chronological way. Background characteristics and decision to enrol at Lincoln, followed by their arrival and first few weeks were an obvious starting point. The social and academic challenges students encountered and the decision for some to leave, and the working through for others of the decision to stay, occurred once the first year on campus had begun. Finally, the ability to look back at the experience while looking forward to the future facilitated a natural finishing point. The discussion, however, is not so easily segmented. As previously stated, the themes, in reality, are inextricably linked and it is impossible to discuss one issue without reference to another.

6.1 Overview of the Experience

McInnis (2003) suggests that “diversity in the student population makes the notion of a typical student experience increasingly problematic” (p.5). I agree to a point – there is not just ‘a first year experience’, there are ‘first year experiences’. My research initially set out to understand the first year experience in its broadest terms. When analysing the data, however, it became evident that even though there was vast individual diversity in the experience, there were common threads with regard to specific types of students. There emerged, from the data in this research, three distinct groups of students that had common aspects of the first year experience due to being at a particular ‘life stage’: school leavers, gap students and mature students.

The first year experience of these students can be presented in a diagram (Figure 2):
These three groups arrive at Lincoln having had different mixes of various sets of preparatory factors. They all have had different life experiences and family backgrounds, and all arrive with a perception of their personal ability but within each group the ‘mix’ is distinct. They then all arrive at Lincoln to begin their first year.

The first year at university, as previously discussed, has the highest rate of attrition. It is during this year the students have their first experiences of interacting in the university setting – the environment, the people and the systems. Dennis (1998) believes it is the first six weeks of the first year that are the most critical, and it is widely agreed that successful integration, facilitated through social and academic interaction, is the key to retention. Positive initial interactions are crucial as they “provide a kind of ‘script’ or path which powerfully shapes subsequent interactions with the institution and its staff” (Peel, 2000, p.28).

Twenty-one of the students in this study had successfully navigated, at least, their first six weeks at Lincoln. Burgess and Sharma (1999) state: “Little is known about the factors that facilitates student staying at University, but it is likely that the reasons are the opposite of those leading to attrition; for example, good social adjustment, commitment to study and
academic success.” (p.1). From the data, it was possible to draw out factors that I believe facilitated these students staying at Lincoln.

I suggest that, based on this research, one of the key factors in the retention of first year students at Lincoln is the acknowledgement that there are, at least, three groups of students (school leavers, gap students, mature students) with differing support requirements. These students require support for the different facets of the experience (for example, academic and social), at different times, for different reasons. This support may be found through the student’s existing support networks, but it can also provide the foundations for specific retention strategies at Lincoln.

The two main facets of the first year experience are the ‘social’ and ‘academic’. The following discussion addresses each group in turn, summarising their academic and social experiences during their first year, and presents the challenges that these particular experiences present for the student and the institution.

6.2 School Leavers

School leavers attend University straight from high school and, as previously mentioned, it is important to note the two sub-groups of school leaver students that exist: those live on campus and those who live off campus.

6.2.1 Academic Experience

“People think you have to be really brainy to go to university... but you don’t really”. (Carrie)

The school leavers have gained entry into Lincoln through a standardised examination system. They all had an expectation to attend university – it was a natural progression from secondary school. Most chose Lincoln because it provided a specific degree programme. They arrive at Lincoln still very connected to their secondary school experience. They expect university to be harder than school, but much of the academic experience is familiar to them. It would seem, then, on the face of it that the school leavers are in the best academic position to enter university of all new students. School leavers are, however, more likely to change course and seriously consider deferring (stopout). Some also consider that secondary school did not prepare them adequately for
university (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Pargetter et al., 1998). From the experiences of the students interviewed, I recognise some parallels. One student felt initially academically ill-prepared for his course, while another changed her original degree choice during the registration process.

School leavers enter university with limited life experience. They have pursued a course of study at secondary school that may, or may not, have prepared them for the degree they are planning to undertake. One of the school leavers interviewed had completed a full science course at secondary school, and enrolled into an Environment, Society and Design degree course at Lincoln. He had achieved the minimum pass mark for English. The assessment method for most of the papers, within the degree he chose, are essays. This particular student could be termed ‘ill-prepared’ for the course. Needless to say, he struggled through the first semester before obtaining some help with essay writing.

Further, the school leaver applies for the course of study months before attending registration. They have limited exposure to the wide range of subject choices and study paths available and it cannot be assumed that they have received adequate, or appropriate, career advice. While some academics may recoil at the suggestion that they become career advisors, often students misunderstand the requirements for particular career pathways and assume that the academic is the best person to advise.

One school leaver interviewed was uncertain as to what degree she should study. She had planned to study one degree, but when she arrived and attended that degree’s ‘information session’, she found out that she was unable to take some papers she was specifically interested in. As she had not formally completed the registration process, she was able to enrol directly into a different degree that better suited her interests. As previously noted, I intercepted this student on registration day as she was upset and was able to direct her to the appropriate course advisor. I can only assume that had I not intercepted her, she would have found appropriate help, but it could well be the fact that somebody did help that contributed to her staying.

I am not suggesting that school leavers should only be able to enrol in degrees that they have the school background for, or further that they are unable to transfer into a different degree once they have enrolled. I do suggest, however, in the cases described above, appropriate course advice could have provided a more positive academic experience. The
ability of proactive course advising is supported in the literature (Burgess & Sharma, 1999; Leys, 1999).

Course advice at Lincoln, as briefly mentioned previously, is a compulsory part of the registration process. The process is facilitated by academic staff from each of the university divisions. The main administrative reason for course advice is to ensure that the student has a cohesive course of study that is able to be credited to a degree. Subjects are checked to make sure that there are no timetable clashes, that specific compulsory subjects are included and that prerequisite conditions have been met (if necessary). There is no standard procedure for course advice sessions and each academic has his or her own attitude towards it. For some it may well be seen as a chore – an administration process that should be handled by administrators. For others, it may be understood as a chance to discuss the expectations and aspirations of the student. This level of potential disparity between divisions and, especially, individual academics, is not helpful to the student. There is no active process of intercepting those students who are uncertain about their course. It has to be remembered that, for the vast majority of school leavers, this process is part of registration and often, their first interaction with academic staff. There are time constraints during registration and students are unlikely to discuss their feelings of uncertainty with an academic who seems only interested in signing the course of study and moving them on to the next queue.

The problem remains, however, that consistent course advice processes do not exist across the university and that students who are uncertain about their course do not know where to go for help. I believe appropriate proactive course advice could mitigate attrition by helping guide students into more appropriate course choices.

Once the academic experience had begun, all the school leavers spoke about the academic content being very similar to what was covered in their last year at secondary school, and all but one was happy with their academic progress. I found it interesting that although two students had attended Student Learning Centre workshops, the other school leavers did not believe they needed academic support – these students believed you went to the Student Learning Centre if you were failing, and only if you were failing.

20 It is possible to meet with an academic before registration, however, as many of the school leavers are out of town students this is not always possible.
6.2.2 Social Experience

The social experience at Lincoln, for school leavers, is dependent on whether you are a halls student or a commuter student. Literature suggests that living on campus increases retention (Boyer, 1987; Burgess & Sharma, 1999; Cope & Hannah, 1975; Dennis, 1998).

Living in halls provides a ‘ready made’ set of social networks. Even though these students are leaving the familiarity and social networks of home to attend Lincoln, they all share this experience. They may be the only student in their secondary school attending Lincoln but this does not appear to be crucial as the experience is that ‘everyone is in the same boat’. It is because of this shared experience that social connections are made quickly. The students interviewed made friends in the first few days of being in halls, which means they already had, albeit limited, social connections established before lectures commenced.

One issue for halls students, especially, it seems, for the female students, was homesickness. Only one of the halls students interviewed had lived away from home for any length of time and he was a male student. All the female halls students spoke about feeling homesick. This was remedied by spending time with friends, but it may be helpful for students to realise that this is a completely normal part of the process of leaving home. Some of the halls students were surprised that they suffered from homesickness as they considered themselves well-adjusted, generally happy young women.

The commuter students do not have the same initial social experience as halls students. Even though they may live locally, they may be the only one in their peer group attending Lincoln, or attending tertiary study altogether.

“The first few days were... the first couple of weeks were quite... were hell” (Samantha)

Samantha, a commuter student, was interviewed in Group B of this project. She is a confident young woman, with plenty of friends but none of her friends decided to enrol at Lincoln. She decided to live at home for the duration of her degree for economic and convenience reasons. Although she completed registration, the first real day of Samantha’s first year experience was the first day of lectures. For the first week, during the large breaks in her timetable, Samantha went home. She felt lonely and isolated and felt she had limited chances to make friends in the lecture situation. She was aware of the student
orientation programme\textsuperscript{21}, but did not want to go alone. Samantha’s experience is echoed in the literature concerning commuter students (Boyer, 1987; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Pascarella, Duby & Iverson, 1983).

It should be noted that tutorials (smaller class groups) and ‘labs’ (held in laboratories to enable scientific experiments) form part of various undergraduate degrees at Lincoln but they often do not begin until the second, or sometimes, the third week of semester. This is to allow student numbers to consolidate over the two week ‘add and drop’ period which is the period of time that a student can officially add or drop subjects from their course of study.

In Samantha’s experience, it was not until she started to recognise people in her lectures, towards the end of the second week, that she started to make social contacts. Meeting one friend who lived in halls changed her experience as it introduced her to an established network of friends, who became her friends. It is vital that commuter students are given the opportunities to make social contacts in the first few days of university.

“You always hear that, you know, you make life-long friendships at University” (Mary)

It is clear from the data that, for school leavers, learning to balance the competing demands of an active social life and academic work is vital for a positive experience. All of the halls students were aware that their social activities could impinge on their academic success. This applies to both halls and commuter students.

6.2.3 Summary

I have briefly discussed and described some issues in the academic and social experience of School Leavers at Lincoln. In terms of the retention of this group of students, I have suggested that appropriate proactive course advice and opportunities for commuter students to establish social networks are necessary. The benefits of a successful introduction to the first year at university are clear, as one school leaver interviewee made clear:

“Actually wrote the other day “well, this probably has been the best year of my life” (Josie)

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\textsuperscript{21} Social orientation programme organized by the Students’ Association.
6.3 Gap Students

Gap students are those students who have left school but did not immediately enrol in tertiary education. Although a small group of gap students was interviewed there were common issues that emerged. Three of the gap students interviewed made purposeful decisions to study. They either gave up work or travelled back to New Zealand to enrol at Lincoln. This group have had time to gain life experience and seem focused on what they wanted to do and why. Gap students do not generally live in halls, but this is dependent upon how much of a gap they have had between school and university. On the whole, they would be commuter students. It is possible that they already have social networks established outside of university, but it may be that they are the only ones in their social group who are studying and this could be isolating.

Adrienne was the gap student who did not return for the second semester of her first year. Her experience is useful in evaluating the issues for gap students.

6.3.1 Academic Experience

The academic experience for gap students is irregular. Although they are not long out of school, they are still removed enough from the experience to have adjustment issues. Katrina found the first few weeks extremely stressful as initially she felt she did not have the practical skills needed to achieve academically. During the first semester, however, she discovered the student learning centre and attended a course. It proved invaluable for her, while Mark was going to make an appointment while he was enrolled in the degree but as soon as he ‘down-graded’ to the diploma, did not see the point.

“I went to “What every new student needs to know” which was fucking beautiful... so good.” (Katrina)

Mark also had a difficult academic start. He initially enrolled into a degree programme but realised, after the first week, that the academic content was going to be too challenging for him. He sought out course advice and rectified the situation by ‘down grading’ to a diploma course. I asked Mark if he had course advice at registration and he replied that “some joker signed off my course”. The degree course he initially enrolled in has a 100 level maths paper in it. Mark had been out of the education system for a period of time and it would have been useful for the initial course advice to ask about any academic learning since school to ascertain his level of maths competency.
There is also one disturbing incident from Mark’s interview.

“[The lecturer] had no respect for our class... we’re second class citizens... ...he was as good as gold with the [degree students] and we get him in the [subject] class and he’s just yeah... I couldn’t believe it, it was a different lecturer and I was like phew... “Jesus, you bumped your head since I last saw you” it was unbelievable... ...in this one subject we had two lecturers right. We had one lecturer who was great... you know, top full marks, he was bloody awesome and everybody was up here [high marks] and with the other fella we’re all down here [low marks]... simply just the way he taught us... ...no-one seems to listen to us really... ...it’s not really in our hands so we’ve just gotta sort of shut up and put up which is unfortunate” (Mark)

This incident of a particular group of students feeling victimised is supported in the literature. Peel (2000), while conducting his focus groups looking at university transition, found “… some students – and perhaps many in particular courses – receive relatively direct messages, from very early in their university careers and from those individuals who are the institution as far as the students are concerned, that they are unimportant, that they have no real place other than to take up space in lecture theatres, and that no one really gives a damn how they fare.” (p.27).

Mark had experienced life, for a week, as an undergraduate student and then as a diploma student. He found the two experiences extremely different.

Adrienne had an exceptional academic experience if grades were the measure. She was an excellent student. Adrienne had attended Canterbury University for nearly a semester before she left due to the sickness of a family member. I believe this prior experience at Canterbury played a major part in Adrienne withdrawing from Lincoln. Her expectations before starting at Lincoln were all based on her prior experience at Canterbury. She continually spoke in the interview of Canterbury having a better timetable (in terms of lectures starting later in the morning, and days free of lectures), better food facilities, better library... better everything! This dramatically illustrates how, with gap students, prior tertiary or work experience may affect interpretations of the ‘first year’ at a subsequent
institution. This contrasts with those students who have no other experiences beyond school on which to make comparisons.

Along with the above, one of the issues for gap students was establishing effective study habits after being out of the school environment. Therefore, ensuring that gap students are aware of the Student Learning Centre, and are given the encouragement to attend workshops and make use of individual sessions, should enhance the academic aspect of their first year experience.

6.3.2 Social Experience

The social experience for these gap students was also non-standard. As Adrienne commented, “I’m too old for a school leaver and I’m too young for the mature students.” Katrina also found it hard initially making friends, while Mark could not relate to the young males in his class. The difference between Adrienne’s experience and Mark and Katrina’s experience is that Katrina and Mark did make the effort to make some social contacts, while Adrienne did not. Mark found he related better to the older students in his class, while Katrina found a like-minded friend. Gap students therefore also need to have the opportunities to make social contacts in lectures, especially as they form a minority that does not straightforwardly identify with either of the other two groups of students.

6.3.3 Summary

For gap students, course advice and social opportunities for commuter students are, again, necessary. Further, Mark’s experience of feeling like a ‘second class citizen’ indicates that experiences can be quite different depending on course level, decisions about which gap students may have difficulty making given that their study has not progressed directly from school. The students in ‘sub-degree’ courses are often next year’s undergraduates. If they have a negative experience, they may look elsewhere to complete their undergraduate degrees.

6.4 Mature Students

“There’s a myth out there that only certain people can go to University”. (Wendy)

The mature student group was categorised as those students who had left secondary school ten years ago or more. Six mature students were interviewed for this study. They were all
female and had all completed some form of prior learning before attending Lincoln. At the time of the interview, five were studying and one had left to find work and study a correspondence school paper. All students in this group gained entry to university through special admission provisions. Life events and the inability to obtain specific employment were the catalysts for these students to study. Some of the students explained the emotional aspect of the decision to come to Lincoln. They spoke of feeling relaxed and the campus being friendly. One student based part of her decision to come to Lincoln on a positive experience with a course advisor.

Louise was the student who left in the first week. She was incredibly insecure and, from the outset, unsure that she would be able to manage the academic work. She had achieved well in a polytechnic course but felt that university was definitely a ‘step up’. Although she reported having an extensive support network outside of university, she admitted to making no social contacts in the week she was at Lincoln. When prompted about other (than academic) reasons for leaving, Louise mentioned financial issues and the distance she lived from the Lincoln campus (thirty minutes in the car). She did say, however, that she believes she would have enjoyed the experience had she persisted.

6.4.1 Academic Experience

“That’s the way university is and you either survive or you don’t”

(Jemma)

The academic experience for mature students is more complex than for the other groups. One of the issues for the mature group was incongruence in terms of expectation and reality of academic standards. The mature students, through their interviews, often spoke about feeling anxious about not being able to achieve the academic standard expected. One student had convinced herself that she could not have answered the question correctly for an assignment because she understood the question, as well as her answer. When she took her work to the tutor he reassured her that it was indeed what was required. Another student spoke about her husband coming home and finding “her head in the books still” (Jemma). It appears that these mature students initially found it difficult to understand what exactly was required. They all had extremely high expectations of themselves and all
had the desire to achieve at a high level. Often, because of these expectations and any initial problems they experience, they often do not perform as well academically (at least initially) as they want to. They have extremely high standards of what constitutes academic success, so even if they pass with a better than average mark, in their estimation they have not achieved.

Other students spoke about doing very well academically but it taking huge amounts of time and effort. One mature student was advised by her brother to “sit up the front because” he warned her “if you sit up the back you will end up turning around and telling somebody who’s talking to please leave the lecture because you’re trying to learn” (Wendy). This indicates the seriousness and commitment with which they approach their study. They appear, however, also much more likely to experience outside events that will disrupt their learning.

All the mature students had positive interactions with academic staff and, once the initial anxiety of being at university had subsided, were able to interact with lecturers with ease. This is markedly different from the experience of school leavers, in particular.

Academic workshops would be ideal for these mature students, but because many of them have commitments outside of university, these are often difficult to attend. They would, however, benefit from some initial advice with regard to study skills. The students in this study all attended New Start so were aware of the Student Learning Centre and the services they offered. I did get the impression, however, that some mature students would be slightly embarrassed to admit to needing help. To some of them, it would be an admission that, academically, they could not cope.

6.4.2 Social Experience

The mature students all had established social contacts outside of university. They anticipated, however, that their decision to study would slightly alter these networks. Social networks on campus were important to them but not as important as the other student groups and not as important as their academic experience.

All the mature students attended the New Start course. All found the course extremely beneficial which suggests that this type of retention strategy may well be appropriate for this group of students. The friendships that the mature students form on campus tend to be
through such academic connections. It is important for the mature students to connect with people that are having similar experiences to them in order to overcome any feelings of isolation or illegitimacy in the university environment. It was probably no coincidence, then, that study groups featured as networks for some of the mature students.

6.4.3 Summary

Mature students have the most complex academic experience, but become independent quickly once they have realistic understanding of what is expected. New Start is an excellent strategy for both the academic and social integration of these students. Since not all mature students attend New Start or similar initiatives, and as with other commuter groups in this study, mature students need opportunities to make contacts in lectures.

Mature students are more likely to have either children, partners, and in this study, work commitments. It was interesting to note that three of the six mature students were sole parents. Organising study around school hours and school holidays, can be stressful. Concerns over these matters clearly affect the first year experience so any support aimed directly at alleviating such problems is likely to enhance their university experience quite directly.

6.5 General Issues

There are some general issues that arise from the results of this study. First concerns the impact of international students; second is the importance of quality teaching; third, the use of exit interviews and fourth, wider implications.

I have purposely left any discussion of international students out of this thesis as I believe they are a student group that requires extensive and intensive research. It is important to note, however, that many students commented about the impact of international students in their lectures and their tutorials as part of their first year experience. They often reported feeling frustrated in a tutorial situation when having problems with language took up valuable time. At present, international students make up 44 percent of the total student population at Lincoln. Clearly it would benefit any institution to conduct research on the full impact of international students on the domestic student population and experience (and, of course, vice versa). Mitigation strategies could then be derived from the research.
However, this issue shows how the external environment, established via policy initiatives over many years, ultimately has an impact on individual experience.

A similar point can be made in respect of the issue of teaching. Quality of teaching is considered to be a crucial factor in the retention of students (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Pargetter et al., 1998; Peel, 2000). It was reasonable that students discuss their lecturers and other teaching staff during the interview process. Generally, students had very positive experiences with academic staff. Students appreciate good teaching. Lecturers who were considered passionate about their subjects were considered 'good'. Teaching that was well structured and well presented was also considered 'good'. There was, however, inconsistency across the teaching staff. One student spoke of a tutorial she attended that was taught by a postgraduate student. She believed the student was totally disinterested and she felt like they really did not want to be there. She never returned to the tutorial.

Universities are operating under increased financial pressure and academics are already feeling pressure with all their competing priorities. It is suggested in the literature that undergraduate teaching often is delegated to junior staff and that teaching is undervalued in a context where promotion and funding is based on publications and research (Boyer, 1987). Miller, et al., (1983) remind us of a basic human motivation that, generally, people will not continue to do things which go unrewarded, and will increase activities which are rewarded. The provision of quality teaching must be one of the cornerstones of an institution that is serious about retaining students. The situation Mark encountered is therefore of concern and should be noted not only in relation to institutional practices, but also in relation to policy initiatives, funding regimes and other extra-institutional factors. The link between such 'high level' processes and an individual's experience may seem tenuous but the data reveals it to be surprisingly direct.

One interesting 'finding' of this research was the insights provided by the use of qualitative research methods. This turns out to have a direct implication for the practical issue of retention. In particular, although it is understood that the majority of students leave without completing a formal withdrawal process, exit interviews should be conducted wherever possible. Qualitative data seems necessary to gain an insight into the rich diversity of withdrawal decisions. It is too easy for a student to 'tick a box' on a questionnaire rather than to sit and articulate reasons for leaving.
A final general point is worth emphasising. During the interviews, Lincoln was continually referred to as a “friendly” and “relaxed” campus, which students appreciated for its smaller size and unique character. This has long been considered, by the institution itself, as one of its strengths. It was interesting, then, to talk to students and hear their stories. I do not, however, believe I received the total “warts ‘n’ all” version; the students who stay may tend to forget the bad and remember the good experiences. Nevertheless, I also believe, from personal experience as well, that the majority of Lincoln’s academics do sincerely care about their students. It makes me wonder, therefore, that if a small sample of students, at a small university that purports a pastoral (in both senses) image, can have negative experiences during the first year, as they report, what hope is there for larger institutions to address retention issues? Given its size and location, Lincoln in many senses may provide a ‘conservative’ account of any difficulties the modern student faces in their first year of university study.
Chapter Seven: Conclusions

The university context in New Zealand has changed over the last twenty years with the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s establishing a competitive model for tertiary education. This has resulted in an increase in tertiary providers which in turn has resulted in a decrease in total government spending per student. Wider access has resulted in a more diverse student population, placing further demands on already under-funded tertiary institutions. It is ironic, however, that universities spend millions of dollars every year in advertising campaigns to recruit new students, while funding, or even recognition, for retention efforts remains sadly lacking.

There is insufficient New Zealand research into retention and attrition. Positive steps forward, however, are the recent publications of Scott (2004a, 2004b). These are the first reports that give data for attrition in New Zealand universities. As an aside, it should be noted however, that care needs to be taken with the application of this data. For example, the use of attrition data as a ‘performance indicator’ to assess the effectiveness of particularly institutions would be, at best, misleading. This is much needed baseline data but this qualitative study has shown that institutions must also be prepared to undertake context specific research for their own institution. The goal should be to find out what students are leaving, why they are leaving and when are they leaving, but it should also locate their experiences in context. This combined research can then be used to determine where best to place retention efforts.

It is generally understood that the first year has the highest attrition and it was on this basis that this study interviewed undergraduate students. If information with regard to their experience could be captured, an understanding of the facets of that experience in terms of decisions to stay or leave could be made. Due to the nature of this enquiry, a qualitative research method was used. Semi-structured interviews were held with 23 first year undergraduate students. Five further interviews were conducted with students that had been interviewed for an earlier project and all interviews were transcribed and analysed.

There were several themes that emerged from the data. The experience of first year students can be understood in a semi-chronological fashion. Students arrive at Lincoln with pre-existing personal characteristics, they then interact with the university through various experiences; the main two being social and academic interaction. Perhaps the
The clearest finding of this was that three distinct groups of students exist and that they have quite different experiences. These groups of students are school leavers, gap students and mature students.

School leavers are the closest to their school experience and need proactive course advice to assist them into the most appropriate choice of course. They have relatively little life experience and, perhaps because of this, may not always have a sense of a clear direction. School leavers who live on campus in halls of residence have intense social experiences that facilitate the establishment of friendships. School leaver commuter students, however, have very different social experiences and need assistance in making social connections at the beginning of their first year.

Gap students are a problematic group as they are too old to be accepted, in the most part, by the school leavers and yet are often too young to want to associate with the mature students. Specific efforts to assist these students in forming both effective study habits and social networks are essential to retain these students.

Mature students have a more complex academic experience than the other groups. They often have various commitments and established social networks outside of university. The social contact is not as important as the other groups, but remains necessary. The social networks for mature students can, initially, be organised around their academic experience.

All students need to learn how to accommodate competing demands on their time and energy. School leavers need to balance their social life with their academic life, while mature students have to organise study around their outside commitments.

There are a number of strategies that could be used to aid the retention of these three groups of students. For example, initial, proactive course advice is essential. All of the students would benefit from this, but perhaps particularly the school leaver group. All commuter students would benefit from opportunities for making social contacts in the first week of lectures. Academic assistance in the form of workshops offered by the Student Learning Centre received positive feedback, but some students still perceive such services as “where you go if you need help”, the implication often being that if you need help, you are not academically capable. Attempts to ‘normalise’ such support services may be useful in
enhancing access to them and thus, assuming use of the service is successful, enhancing the first year experience as well.

Quality teaching was discussed at length. Students appreciate good teaching — teachers who are passionate, can communicate clearly and provide well structured lectures. ‘Bad’ teaching was a source of frustration and anxiety.

As discussed, most students have positive and successful first year experiences at university. It is important for any tertiary institution to study these experiences to assist in understanding the factors that contribute to the successful retention of first year students. In an external environment where funding is limited, the retention of students is crucial as it is much cheaper to retain a student than it is to recruit others to take their place.

Given that imperative, it behoves each institution to continually monitor their student population to gain an understanding of the specific causes of attrition in their institution. To this end, exit interviews are recommended as essential for understanding the qualitative factors of the experience — as noted, it is too easy to ‘tick a box’ on a form.

The first year experience is unique in the life of students. Every student who enrolls experiences some part of a first year. Whether that experience is positive or negative depends on the integration of both student and institution. Institutions must respond to the evolving character of the student population, or they will perish. Institutions should always remember - take care of your first year student today because they could be the academic you employ in the future.

### 7.1 Directions for Future Research

There are some clear directions for future research that arise from this study. It is important that large scale quantitative and qualitative data be collected on a longitudinal basis. It is only over time that a richer picture of the first year experience will be gained.

Further, this study included two students who had withdrawn, but who were not actively pursued as participants. There are two sides of the retention/attrition coin: the students who stay and the students who leave. It would be beneficial to research this second group of
students in detail. I note, however, that most students do not formally withdraw from the
university system and simply disappear; making them hard to contact due to the time elapsed
between finding out they have left and attempting to contact them. This type of study would
be difficult to do on an institution-wide level, but could possibly be carried out with co-
operation from a division with regard to a specific programme.

Finally, it has been implied in this discussion that institutions have responsibility for the
student experience. That is true, but it may also be useful to research current and potential
future efforts by students themselves, and their organisations, to help enhance what amounts
to an initiation into a new phase of a person's life.
Postscript

This thesis took much longer than originally anticipated to complete. Consequently, students interviewed for this study who were completing a full-time degree, if they had passed all their papers, would now have completed. As a point of interest I have set out in Appendix 5, the student’s pseudonym used in this study, their study status and whether they continued in their original degree choice. It should be noted that ‘withdrawn’ in this sense does not mean any more that they have not returned to Lincoln University to complete their initial course of study.
Acknowledgements

To the cast of thousands...

The completion of this thesis has been a long time coming. At times, it has seemed like the loneliest process in the world, while the actual reality was quite different. There have been scores (yes, more than twenty!) of people that have encourage, bullied, cajoled, and, more importantly, believed in me.

To the students interviewed for this thesis who generously gave their time – thank you.

To my principal supervisor, Dr Kevin Moore; my immense gratitude. But for you, I could well have become a statistic for someone doing a study on the attrition of master’s students. You continually maintained a calm voice and rational thought – I thank you for your guidance and wisdom.

To my associate supervisor, Professor Grant Cushman, my thanks for providing the catalyst for this study. The time I spent working on the ‘Enhancing the Student Experience’ project provided a vital link between theory and practice. Many thanks for your support and encouragement over this time.

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To my ‘unofficial’ supervisors, Nicky Murray (Dr Jones) and Karyn Taylor-Moore – your support has been overwhelming – and to the best damn ‘cheerleader’ any gal could have, Dr Jim McAloon, for not giving up on me, even when I did.

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To my sister Jane, and her husband, Murray – how can I thank you enough for providing a bolthole during the roughest five days of my life – it is worse than giving birth!

To my extraordinary parents, who I’m sure at times failed to understand why I would want to put myself through all of this. Your constant practical support has been amazing. I could not have managed any of this without either of you.

To the two most important people in the world – Samantha and Emily – your mum has finally finished. Your childhoods can resume – oh, wait – while I’ve been busy studying you’ve both grown into beautiful young women – I am proud of you both and love you to pieces.

Now, where’s the gin…
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Appendix 1: Sample Questions

Sample questions:

"Tell me about yourself?" (where did you go to school, what is your family situation, how did you do academically at school, how is education viewed in your family)

"Why did you decide to go to University?"

"Why did you decide to attend Lincoln?"

"Why did you decide to do the course you’re doing?"

"What papers do/did you enjoying/not enjoying and why?"

"How are you performing academically?"

"How does your academic performance fit with how you thought you would do before coming to university?"

"Are you happy with your academic performance?"

"How important is it for you to achieve academically?"

"What social activities are you participating in?"

"What have you enjoyed about your first year experience so far?"

"What have you found easy/difficult/useful/frustrating in your experience so far?"

"Do you intend to complete your course of study?"
Appendix 2: Notice to Halls of Resident Students

Hi Halls Resident!

My name is Deb Collins and I'm a master's student at Lincoln. My thesis topic is the first year experience of undergraduate students at Lincoln and I need students to interview. If you can spare any time and you are a first year student who is a New Zealand citizen or resident, I would appreciate being able to talk to you. My email is collinsd@lincoln.ac.nz. Please email me and we can arrange a time – I'll even buy you a coffee!
Appendix 3: Information Letter

Lincoln University – Human Sciences Division - Information

You are invited to participate as a subject in a project entitled “The experience of first year undergraduate students at Lincoln University”. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. The aim of this project is to gain an understanding of the mix of factors that comprise the first year experience.

Your participation in this project will involve one interview of approximately one and a half to two hours in length. In the performance of this interview, there is the possibility of personal sensitive information being discussed. You do not have to answer any questions that you feel uncomfortable in answering. Further, if the interview does raise issues that you need further help with, on-campus counsellors and chaplains are available.

As part of this research, I am interested in the link between academic performance and the first year experience, and ask for your consent to look at your academic record held in Registry. With this information letter is a consent form asking for this permission. You do not have to give your permission. I will only access your academic record if permission is given in writing. Information from the Calendar indicates end of year results will be posted on November 20th. If you give your permission for me to access your academic record, I will contact you during the week of 3rd December to gain further confirmation of this consent. I will not access academic records until 17th December and you will have until this date to withdraw your consent.

The results of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation. The identity of all participants will not be made public without consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all participants will be given other names and all data will be stored in a locked cabinet. Computer files will be password protected.

The purpose of this research is for the fulfilment of the thesis component of a Master of Social Science. I do, however, work in a part-time capacity for the Undergraduate School at Lincoln University, and this research may be used in the Enhancing the Student Experience project.

As the principal researcher of this project, you can contact me on 325 2811, extn: 8962 during the day or by email at collinsd@lincoln.ac.nz. Supervision for this project is given by Dr Kevin Moore ph: 325 2811 extn: 8644 (email: moore@lincoln.ac.nz) and Professor Grant Cushman ph: 325 2811, extn: 7806 (email: cushmanj@lincoln.ac.nz). Dr Moore and/or
Professor Cushman will be pleased to discuss any concerns you have about participation in this project.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely

Deb Collins
Postgraduate Student
Human Sciences Division
Lincoln University
Appendix 4: Consent Form

Consent Form

The experience of first year undergraduate students at Lincoln University

I have read and understood the description of the above-named project. On this basis I agree to participate as a subject in the project, and I consent to publication of the results of the project with the understanding that anonymity will be preserved. I understand also that I may at any time withdraw from the project, including withdrawal of any information I have provided.

Signed: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

I also consent to Deb Collins have access to my academic record held by Registry.

Signed: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________
## Appendix 5: Student Status

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<tr>
<td>Davina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jemma</td>
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<td>Carrie</td>
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