War of Attrition: 
An investigation of student attrition in two first year foreign language courses and the development of a prognostic approach to identify students at risk of withdrawing

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about student retention and attrition rates in higher education have been steadily increasing over the years. Efforts to identify and treat potential withdrawers have grown considerably; now, more than ever, universities are getting more competitive and financially driven, as the issue of student attrition is threatening to affect the way in which universities continue to run (Harvey, Drew & Smith, 2006). More universities are now developing strategic retention plans that aim at keeping students enrolled in their courses, as there is no doubt that as attrition rates increase, universities’ funding could be at risk (Schwartz, 2007).

Literature on student attrition and retention in higher education shows that there has been a substantial amount of research conducted into the issues of attrition and retention in general. Varied conceptual models have been developed to explain and acknowledge student attrition as problematic and these models have focused on determining the factors contributing to student withdrawal, as well as the elements that contribute to student success. However, until now, the literature available shows that there seems to be a shortage of research into the area of foreign language student attrition and retention. As the number of students learning a foreign language in Australian high schools is at its lowest ever, this lack of research is worrying (Group of Eight, 2007). This ultimately illustrates the importance and significance of research studies conducted to determine the reasons why students are withdrawing from foreign language classes at tertiary institutions.

This study investigates student attrition and develops a prognostic approach to identify students at risk of withdrawing from their courses. The study was divided into three stages. The first stage examined class assessment reports to provide a picture of
existing attrition rates in the course being examined, Elementary Spanish. The second stage explored factors contributing to withdrawal, using survey and interview data collected from 12 students who withdrew from Elementary Spanish, identifying probable factors triggering withdrawal, and comparing these factors to those identified in the literature. These data were contrasted with those collected from 24 students who did not withdraw. The third stage saw the development and piloting of a prognostic instrument and approach aimed at identifying students potentially at risk of withdrawal, using theoretical insights gained from the previous two stages. Previous studies have taken a diagnostic approach to attrition—that is, looking at the problem after it has taken place. The prognostic instrument was piloted with a group of 18 first year Elementary Spanish students in 2007 to identify those at risk of withdrawal, and to evaluate the performance of the instrument. As a result of the pilot in 2007 parts of the approach were improved and in 2008 it was implemented on a group of 31 students. The results were positive in determining which students could be at risk.

While the study examined Spanish language students, and thus the results may not be applicable to other languages or other disciplines, this study was the first of its kind in taking a prognostic rather than diagnostic approach to an issue of great importance to both education providers and students.
Statement of Originality

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

Signed:
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The first year experience and tertiary student retention and attrition have been the topic of research and comment in academic publications worldwide for over 40 years (Harvey et al., 2006). Models and theories have been developed around the issue of retention and these are dominated by the social and academic theories in the US, the quality of the experience theories in the UK, and a combination of both in Australia and other countries (Harvey et al., 2006). Due to the importance of the topic, conceptual models developed to clarify the issue of tertiary student retention and attrition began appearing in the early 1970s (Astin, 1971; Rootman, 1972; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). These models and other research have shown that there are a multitude of factors that can contribute to student withdrawal (See: Bailey, Daley & Onwuegbuzie, 2003; Barrett, 2000; Beekhoven, De Jong, and Van Hout, 2004; Darlaston-Jones, Pike, Cohen, Young, Haunold & Drew, 2003; Glenn, 2007; Harvey et al., 2006; Henry, 2007; Lowe et al., 2003).

The importance of this topic is derived from the fact that universities are becoming increasingly financially driven, with the issue of student attrition ultimately affecting the way in which universities continue to operate (Harvey et al., 2006). The reality is that universities are now as competitive as any business, competing for students, staff,
research grants, industry contracts and donations (Schwartz, 2007). As a result of the intense competition felt in the tertiary sector in the US, Europe, Australia and in other countries, universities must actively promote themselves in order to succeed. In terms of student higher education choices, a university with a high student withdrawal rate is not a desirable university to attend, according to the universities themselves (Schwartz, 2007).

Currently, in Australia government funding to support tertiary education is decreasing, and is often linked to teaching and learning performance. As attrition rates rise, universities’ funding comes under increasing threat. Thus, more universities are developing strategic “retention plans” (Elliott, 1997; Waters, 2003), the aim of which is to keep students enrolled in their university courses and so safeguard funding. The issues of retention and lack of funding are affecting all universities, with some disciplines affected more than others (Harvey et al., 2006). This is certainly the case with attrition rates in humanities and language courses. Therefore, the issue of retention in language courses is an issue worth exploring.

### 1.2 AIM AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is an investigation of student attrition in Elementary Spanish courses at an Australian University, and the consequent development of a prognostic approach to identify students who are potentially at risk of withdrawing from these courses.

The study was motivated by the realisation that although there was ample literature
available in relation to student retention and attrition in general, only a very limited amount concerned the attrition of students from first year foreign language classes. Over the years, the attrition levels in first year language courses at Australian universities have been reasonably high (Anderson & Ramsay, 1999). However, the existing literature concerning the attrition of students in first year foreign language classes was directly associated with “foreign language anxiety” (Aida, 1994; Ferguson & Grainger, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986).

Motivated by the lack of research in the area, this study aimed to document the issue further through investigating the following two research questions:

1) Why are students leaving the Elementary Spanish courses during the semester?
2) How can potential in-course attrition be identified?

It is important to point out that unlike other studies on student attrition, the attrition being discussed in this study is \textit{in-course attrition}. In-course attrition differs greatly from the attrition that occurs between academic semesters, as in-course attrition refers to students withdrawing from the course/s during the 13-week semester. This type of attrition will always be referred to as in-course attrition in this study.

In order to find an answer to these two research questions, this study comprised three stages. The first stage aimed to examine the class assessment reports for the Elementary Spanish courses in order to acquire a background of the course assessment and discover whether student attrition was problematic for the courses in question. The second stage aimed to gather data from withdrawn and non-withdrawn students from the selected
courses through questionnaires and interviews. Finally, as an outcome of what was found in stage two, the third stage aimed to develop a prognostic approach to help identify students who were potentially at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses.

This study is aiming to make a significant contribution to the current knowledge of language study and student attrition through the exploration of the above research questions in the context of two Spanish first year language courses (Elementary Spanish 1 and Elementary Spanish 2) in one Australian university.

1.3 DISSERTATION OUTLINE

This thesis is divided into six chapters, beginning with this introduction chapter which discusses the study and its aims, structure and layout.

Chapter Two reviews the literature pertinent to this research study. The chapter starts by describing the terms student retention and attrition and offers descriptions used in the literature as well as in the context of this study. It then discusses the main factors that contribute to student withdrawal internationally. This section illustrates how the factors have been studied in the literature. It also shows how important these factors are in terms of how tertiary students believe they are significant to their decision to withdraw from university courses. The next part of the literature review chapter considers the strategies suggested and implemented to improve student retention and attrition performance
internationally; it also describes how far these strategies have been successful when put into practice in tertiary institutions. Conceptual models of student retention are described in the last part of Chapter Two. Models of student retention are explained, taking into consideration how they work and the processes that were used in order to develop each model. Overall, the review of the literature in Chapter Two finds that there is a deficit of research into the area of foreign language student retention and attrition. Therefore, there is a real need to conduct studies in this area.

Chapter Three of this thesis discusses the research methodology and instruments used to carry out this study, which were qualitative and interpretive, utilizing a combination of questionnaires and interviews. A rationale for the use of each research instrument is given and a discussion of the justification of their usage, their administration and their advantages and limitations is included. This chapter also discusses the use of the case study. Also, the use of documentary data collected from class assessment reports is explained, as is the process of data analysis, with a final note on subjectivity issues.

Chapter Four is the first of two chapters that discuss the findings of the study. Chapter Four begins by describing the findings from the data gathered from the class assessment reports for the Elementary Spanish courses taught between 2001 and 2006. The reports discuss the student numbers attending the course, the numbers who withdrew, the assessment items used in the courses, and the overall results of the students. The chapter then moves on to discuss the analysis of the first research question. It shows the findings of the data collected from student questionnaires and interviews in this part, and places the findings in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The chapter divides
the results of the data analysis findings into the individual semesters in which the data collection took place. Finally, it discusses the main factors that contributed to the withdrawal and continuation of students according to the data collected.

Chapter Five is the second chapter in this thesis that discusses the research findings of this study. It narrates the development and evaluation of a prognostic approach to identifying potential students at risk of withdrawing from courses, and explains how the different conceptual models of student retention reported in the literature and the research findings of the study reported in Chapter Four were used in order to develop the prognostic approach. This approach to student retention uses an evaluative instrument and model that could help to identify potential student withdrawal. The development of this instrument was considered relevant to the issue of university student attrition, as it offered an approach to student attrition in the first year language courses different from those seen in the literature.

The chapter discusses how the prognostic approach developed was piloted on a small scale with a group of Elementary Spanish students in 2007, and in 2008 was implemented with an Elementary Spanish course. Although the prognostic approach proposed in this thesis is in its early stages, the results of this small-scale study appear to show potential. The results of the pilot were promising in terms of helping the teacher to identify which students could be at risk of withdrawing. This could ultimately allow university lecturers to help these students by pointing them in the right direction so that they can obtain guidance and support before considering withdrawing from the course.
Chapter Six summarises all the research findings presented in Chapters Four and Five. In this chapter, the main outcomes and the limitations of this thesis are discussed. The chapter argues that further research studies with larger numbers of language learning students are needed to establish the impact that the use of a prognostic approach could have on student retention. Furthermore, it explains that it is worthwhile to explore and research the application of this prognostic approach to student retention in other disciplines. The chapter concludes by discussing the dissemination strategy proposed to share the finding of this thesis with other scholars in Australia and the rest of the world.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The topic of student retention and attrition is not new to the area of applied linguistics or to other areas of education. For over 40 years researchers have been discussing this issue and trying to deliver answers as to why students, and more specifically first-year students, withdraw from their university courses. There is a large body of research studies from higher education that discusses the factors that affect retention. These studies have investigated first-year performance and persistence in tertiary education, but their findings show that there is not one simple reason for students’ withdrawing from tertiary education: rather, a large combination of factors ultimately contributes to student withdrawal (Harvey et al., 2006). Educational institutions are increasingly held accountable for retention rates by state governments, policy makers, business leaders, consumer advocates, parents and students. Some of these bodies have direct accountability measures that associate funding with retention rates (Roman, 2007).

This chapter offers a review of the literature in the area of tertiary student retention and attrition. It describes the reasons why students from universities around the world are withdrawing from their first-year tertiary courses. It also discusses current emerging trends and issues that can be directly linked to tertiary student attrition.
2.2 STUDENT RETENTION AND ATTRITION

Student retention has been identified for decades as an important measure of institutional effectiveness. This is because student enrolments represent and can be translated into amounts of revenue for educational institutions (Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Although tertiary student attrition and retention are not new areas of research, their literature shows mixed views as to the precise meaning of both terms. According to Riggert, Boyle, Petrosko, Ash, and Rude-Parkins (2006), defining retention has created some notable difficulties for researchers and educational institutions alike. Disagreement about whether to define retention as “re-enrolment from year to year” or from “semester to semester” has been notable and definitional inconsistencies have been a continuing shortcoming in the empirical literature (Riggert et al., 2006). Seidman (2004/2005), the editor of the *Journal of College Student Retention*, discussed the challenges involved in defining retention. Overall, he mentioned that one definition does not always fit all situations for all institutions of higher education, and that “often definitions are created and data compiled by those who are not close to the problem or do not understand it sufficiently to define it properly” (Seidman, 2004/2005, p. 130). He also believes that if retention definitions are not developed and applied uniformly, we will continue to get conflicting and inaccurate results of how our interventions are affecting student retention (Seidman, 2004-2005). Both Riggert et al. (2006) and Seidman (2004/2005) pointed out the apparent inconsistencies with definitions of retention and documented the difficulties this study experienced when trying to find a common definition for retention and attrition. The lack of workable definitions was definitely an area of difficulty in this present study, as it was found that many of the studies in the literature did not include a clear definition of these
terms. As the concepts of retention and attrition are at the centre of this thesis, their definitions are discussed below in order to provide a better understanding of the different meanings used in the literature and also how they are used in this study.

2.2.1 Student Retention

Starting from a more general definition accessible to the general public, the Oxford English Dictionary defines retention as the “action of retaining or the state of being retained” (Soanes & Hawker, 2005), while the reference website “Answers.com” defines retention in a work-related context as “keeping personnel within the organisation from departing” (Answers.com, 2007). However, in the tertiary education context in Australia, the Department of Education, Science and Training (Department of Education, 2004) refers to student retention as the students enrolled in one year of a course or degree who are then enrolled in the subsequent year. These students are retained by the university and have subsequently remained enrolled as part of a course or degree. Retention statistics are important to universities internationally because they can determine the amount of funding and support that these educational institutions will receive from the government. Universities with very high attrition rates can suffer in terms of receiving less funding, and then having to reduce staff numbers and make fewer resources available.

The most common definition of retention in the tertiary sector in the United States is related to programme retention, whereas this study relates to course retention. However, Seidman (2004/2005) argues that retention should be looked at and defined from three different perspectives: (a) programme retention, (b) course retention, and (c) student retention rates. Seidman advocates that programme retention looks at the traditional full-time, first-time student and tracks them over a period of time, usually for the full degree,
to discover whether or not the student graduated in the intended major at entry. In contrast, course retention would measure the number of students enrolled in each college course after the course census date and document how many students completed the course at the end of the term (Seidman, 2004/2005). The student retention rate refers to the number of students who are still enrolled in the courses in question and therefore have been retained. Universities aim for high student retention rates in all their programmes as this means that there are less people withdrawing from their courses.

Discussions on retention have also been taking place in the UK, where a definition of retention in the tertiary sector has also been put forward. Ashby (2004) states that student retention is often viewed simply as a measure of the percentage of students who gain course credit or award based on the number who registered for a course or award. However, she believes that this indeed is a narrow definition of the concept, as it is only used by the institution to determine how well it is performing. As a result, Ashby puts forward two other definitions of retention she believes are more in line with the reality of higher education institutions in the UK. The first relates to the student dimension, and the second to the employer dimension. The student dimension refers to assessing course and completion as well as student satisfaction with the course and/or programme. It can provide information to universities not just about completing a course, but also about student success and satisfaction once they have finished their studies. In addition, the employer dimension refers to employability becoming a measure of institutional success. As the English government is assessing the value of its investment in higher education, key skills that will contribute to employability become an important element in courses offered (Ashby 2004). Ashby advocates that an assessment of the overall employability
of a student once they have finished their degree could be an accurate measure of retention.

Overall, the different definitions of retention discussed above show the complex nature of this concept. Furthermore, when dealing with retention, one has to deal also with the concept of attrition. The following section discusses student attrition and what this term means in the context of higher education.

2.2.2 Student Attrition

Student attrition differs from student retention, as it measures the proportion of students in a particular year who neither graduate nor continue studying in semester based course at the same institution the following year. That is, it provides a measure of the proportion of students who “drop out” from one year to another (Department of Education, 2004). Student attrition figures are important as they give universities an accurate picture of the number of students who are not continuing in courses and degrees. However, according to Barrett (2000), the dominant view of attrition focuses on its perceived negative effects. Attrition can be indeed considered as a waste of institutional resources, which have increasing costs in a period of declining student funding. Attrition can damage the reputations of courses and institutions by bringing into question the relevance of their courses, the quality of teaching, and the adequacy of student support services (Barrett, 2000). As a consequence, this can compound problems associated with falling enrolments, leading institutions to experience difficulties with planning and budgeting (Barrett, 2000; Price, Harte and Cole, 1991). A high attrition number, unlike a high retention number, may be a sign that some changes need to be made to a particular course
or degree. Attrition figures complement retention figures in that they show the total number of students who are not continuing, whereas retention figures concentrate on the numbers of students who are continuing.

2.2.3 Definitions Used in This Study

For the purposes of this study, the definitions of retention and attrition to be used are most similar to those suggested by DEST (2004). DEST defines student retention as the students enrolled in one year of a course or degree who are enrolled in the subsequent year. However, as this study is analysing attrition and retention at a course level, and the courses run only for one semester, the definition will be adjusted to encompass the students who enrol in one semester of the course and continue until the end of the course that particular semester.

The definition used for attrition will also be quite similar to the one used by DEST (2004), which describes student attrition as the measure of the proportion of students in a particular year who neither graduate nor continue studying in an award course (official university course) at the same institution the following year. Again, as this particular study concentrates on the attrition of students at a course level, this definition will be adjusted to refer to the proportion of students in a particular course who neither graduate nor continue studying in the course at the same institution until the end of the semester in question.

It is also important to mention the definitions for “programme” and “degree”, in the context of this study. Both the terms were sourced from the terminology library of
The term “programme,” for the purpose of this study, will refer to the degree or diploma in which a student is enrolled. The term “degree”, will refer to the first degree a student undertakes, (or an undergraduate degree) usually a Bachelor's degree, for instance, a Bachelor of Arts (BA).

It is also important to note that more recently, the literature relating to student retention and attrition has been making mention of the terms “student progression” and “student engagement”. Student progression generally defines the academic work that the student in question has to achieve in order to pass a particular course or programme with the aim of being awarded a degree. According to the University of Sydney website (http://www.usyd.edu.au/), in order to progress through a course, students are required to achieve the minimum progression rate specified by the faculty, pass the number of units of study specified by the faculty as the minimum for a defined period, and pass any field or clinical work, practicum, or other unit of study mandated by the faculty. Robinson (2004) believes that along with completion rates and retention rates, student progress ratios are just some of the student outcome performance indicators routinely used by universities and governments, particularly in Australia. Robinson explains that student progress is calculated by universities in much the same way as retention and that both are generally estimations based on either cohort-based statistics or cross-sectional census-like counts. However, the main difference between student progress and student retention is the way each is calculated. According to McKinnon, Walker, and Davis (2000), performance indicators of student progress and completion generally employ information assessed at a single point in a course, whereas indicators of retention generally focus on a
single year-to-year enrolment. Therefore, it can be understood that student progression is strongly connected to student retention.

On the other hand, student engagement describes energy in action—the connection between person and activity—and can most closely be compared to student motivation (Ainley, 2004). Student engagement refers to students who value their relationships with peers and with their school or university teachers, and who see education as an important part of their life (Willms, 2003). According to DEST (2008), three forms of engagement are distinguished: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. A range of indicators of engagement, in this case for school students, has been used in their literature, such as school attendance, enjoyment of school, sense of connectedness, participation in school activities, student, school and classroom learning goals, self-efficacy for learning, expectation of success, attentiveness, and learning practices. These indicators are clear and universal and can also be used for tertiary students.

In the literature, student engagement is often linked to student achievement and motivation and can be related to the factors influencing the attrition and retention of students (DEST, 2008).

Overall, although these terms have come to prominence in the literature more recently, they do not have the same definitions as retention or attrition. Ever since the terms retention and attrition were first used to discuss students in the early 1950s, there has been an apparent evolution of terms that can be witnessed in the literature, and this study wholly acknowledges the new terms that have emerged. However, although in the literature these terms may be used in the same context as student retention and attrition, it
is important to point out that the terms retention and attrition were selected due to their more established definitions and relevance to the data collected for this study.

In order to understand further the issues that relate to the concepts of retention and attrition, the following section reviews the main factors discussed in the international literature that contribute to the withdrawal of tertiary students at universities.

2.3 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT WITHDRAWAL

Student departure poses a long-standing problem for both scholars and practitioners. Since the mid 1990s student retention has seen a drop at a secondary schooling level and this trend has been shown to continue on to the university setting (Luke & Carrington, 2003). Scholars seek explanations to better understand and solve the issue of retention and practitioners seek solutions to manage the enrolments of their universities (Braxton, Milem & Sullivan, 2000). Concerns about retention and attrition rates in higher education have increased over the years and while the statistics continue to move steadily, efforts to identify and treat potential withdrawers have grown considerably, as universities could lose funding due to dwindling student numbers (Brawer, 1996). It is recognised that now, more than ever, universities are becoming more competitive and financially driven, with the issue of student attrition, especially in the first year of study, ultimately affecting the way in which universities continue to run (Harvey et al., 2006). According to Simon Marginson (2006), the global context of higher education is a fast moving fast changing and uneven environment, criss-crossed by shifting relations of collaboration, competition and hierarchy. The reality is that universities are now as competitive as any business and
compete for students, staff, research grants, industry contracts and donations (Schwartz, 2007). As a result of the intense competition felt in the US, Europe, Australia and elsewhere, universities must actively promote themselves in order to succeed. In terms of higher education choices, a university with a high attrition rate is not a desirable university to attend, even according to the universities themselves (Schwartz, 2007). Put simply, federal funding arrangements have started to focus on student completions rather than employment and there is now a trend for universities to investigate the reasons for student withdrawal in Australia (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003).

It has been well documented that students are most likely to withdraw from university during their first year of study, therefore the focus of this dissertation is on not only determining why students are leaving (Darlaston-Jones et. al, 2003), but also how to determine the signs of at-risk students in order to offer them the help and encouragement needed in order to stay in their courses. Maintaining first-year students in their courses could ultimately establish their continuation at university to finish the rest of their degree (Darlaston-Jones et. al, 2003).

In order to better understand the different dimensions of the issue of student attrition and retention it is important to identify which are the most common factors that students give for withdrawing from their first-year tertiary courses. There are 17 factors why students in general seem to withdraw from their studies. These factors are:

1. Student expectations and perceptions of university life and study (of the course, degree or programme, the people and the university itself)
2. Social and academic student integration
3. Teaching and learning styles
4. Assessment strategy used in courses
5. Student mentoring
6. Students’ living arrangements (on campus, with friends, at home, among others)
7. Student age
8. Student gender
9. Work and issues with employment
10. Financial concerns
11. Student lack of preparation for university life and study
12. Family responsibilities and obligations
13. Dissatisfaction with the university
14. Academic difficulties
15. Health and personal reasons
16. Course or Programme unsuitability
17. Learning anxiety (in particular, foreign language learning anxiety).

The 17th factor needs particular mention. Learning anxiety has previously been identified as a problem that students studying mathematics, statistics and science have faced (Ashcraft and Kirk, 2001; Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2006; Ma & Xu, 2003,). Mathematics anxiety, possibly the most documented of the three, refers to the feelings of tension and anxiety that interfere with the manipulation of numbers and the solving of mathematical problems in a wide variety of ordinary life and academic situations (Sherman & Wither, 2003). In the same vein, statistics anxiety is experienced by college students who have a limited background in quantitative research and statistics and who are enrolled in a course that requires that they analyse data utilizing statistical concepts and techniques,
whereas science anxiety is believed to affect science students during science classes and particularly during exams, even if they are calm and productive in non-science classes, including mathematics (Onwuegbuzie, 2006; Mintzes & Leonard, 2006). However, since the late 1980s, literature in the area of second language (L2) learning has discussed what is referred to as “foreign language learning anxiety” and how this problem could affect the retention levels of students studying in language classes (Horwitz et al., 1986). This factor is the only one on the list that is directly related to the retention of students studying in language classes.

Overall then, the literature shows 17 factors that have the potential to affect the retention of foreign language learning students. Each one of these factors is explained individually and in more detail in the following sections.

2.3.1 Student Expectations and Perceptions of University Life and Study

There is a growing body of literature that suggests students are not as well informed about university study and lifestyle as university lecturers and administrators believe (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Lowe & Cook, 2003; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Peel, 2000). Students are often unaware of the demands of higher education in terms of its workload, their independent learning and access to academic and support resources (Peel, 2000; Yorke, 2000). Based on research, student expectations of higher education do seem to be changing (James, 2001).

Overall, there is not a substantial amount of literature about how students envisage university life and how these preconceptions may shape their experience after enrolment.
However, the role that university marketing can play has been discussed recently in the Australian media (Schwartz, 2007). It is unclear whether universities may be misleading students as to what to expect with their enthusiastic marketing, or the students enter university with already perceived notions that could lead them to disappointment (Schwartz, 2007).

Baxter and Hatt (2000) researched the nature of student and institutional decision-making during the “clearing” period, that is, the second offer round practised in the UK. They investigated the impact of late decision-making upon student performance during their first year of study. The study analysed the outcomes of the timing of the publication of the national “A” level results that are published only five weeks before the university term. It found that the short time span given to students to make a decision led to disorientation and as a consequence students often accepted any place on offer in any university. The authors found that due to this speedy process, the casualty was the “compatibility of expectations”, that is, the expectations of students were often not in line with the expectations that the teaching staff had for the course or programme (Baxter & Hatt, 2000). Baxter and Hatt (2000) found that the outcome of this incompatibility was a higher level of non-completion for these students.

Another study conducted in Ireland by Lowe and Cook (2003) investigated student expectations and levels of preparation for university study. The purpose of their study was to elicit expectations of pre-enrolment first-year students, regarding social and academic aspects of university life. Once these expectations were recorded, the aim was to compare these with students’ experiences after their first two months at the University
of Ulster. Although the study found that some of the expectations of new students were met and reinforced by their experience, for most aspects examined, more students scored the university and their courses lower two months later than they did on entry. The findings show that the student expectations of staff were not met in many instances. In regard to staff, 35% of the sample of 691 students believed the university did not have “helpful, friendly teaching staff”, while only 41% saw staff as “sympathetic and reassuring” (Lowe et al., 2003). As a result, the involvement of staff in facilitating academic and social integration of new students was identified as a key factor in the successful management of student transition. Furthermore, it was found that a negative experience with academic staff could be harmful to students’ chances of success (Lowe et al., 2003).

In relation to the academic difficulty experienced by students, it was shown that the gap between student expectations and actual experience was particularly wide, considering the harder work they would experience at the university in contrast with the school work they had previously experienced. Lowe and Cook (2003) argue that the problem associated with inaccurate study perceptions prior to entering university is that it contributes to a disengagement from the educational (and social) aspects of university life. Such disengagement could have a detrimental effect on student academic performance, as well as in the social and personal development of the individual. Lowe and Cook found that as a consequence, this factor could have a direct impact on student retention in Ireland.

In Australia, the controversial gap between students’ expectations and experiences of university life has also been identified as an aspect affecting the first-year experience and
as a factor associated with withdrawal. In 2000, McInnis, James and Hartley published a report dealing with trends in the first year experience. This report was a follow-up to a study conducted in 1994 by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne (McInnis & James, 1995). The report published in 2000 aimed to provide an analysis of the trends and perceptions of first year undergraduate students in seven Australian universities. The universities were not disclosed in this study due to confidentiality reasons, however they were distinguished under the following titles: Established, Suburban, New, International, Regional, Applied, and Consolidated. In total, 2609 first year students participated in the study, and approximately 51% of the beginners were aged 19 and under (McInnis et al., 2000).

Overall, the study found that approximately 58% of the 2609 participating students believed that studying at university was more demanding that studying at school, while 43.1% of school leavers believed the standard of work at university was higher than they had expected. The study also found that only 34% of students interviewed thought that their final year at school was a good preparation for university study. The authors found that statistics such as these, which relate directly to student expectations, are likely to influence the students’ judgement of how much more demanding university work is compared to school work (McInnis et al., 2000).

Donnelly (2007) has noted that various authors have argued that Australian high school students are no longer receiving the academic preparation needed to commence university. According to recent studies reported by Donnelly (2007), all Australian states and territories except Victoria, where the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning has
been introduced, have adopted a “one-size-fits-all” approach to high school preparation for university. Students who are planning to undergo university, develop a trade, or take on vocational education, are made to undertake the one certificate that seeks to be all things to all students, regardless of ability or interest (Donnelly, 2007). Donnelly reports that the purpose of senior school certificates, instead of giving university bound students a rigorous grounding in the established disciplines of knowledge, is defined in a more utilitarian and student-centred way, and that with this lack of preparation, students are less likely to continue in their chosen path, especially in the case of university study (Donnelly, 2007).

Further evidence of changing student expectations is showing up in the consumer orientation of many students. According to James (2001), many university staff believe a consumerist pattern of thinking exists among students, which they believe is a direct result of the expectation that students contribute a greater proportion of the cost of their education and this is now emerging during their day-to-day interaction with students. Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003) believe that students are now more than ever aware of their customer rights and the gaps between their expectations and the service delivery and reality of that service. The idea of a “service gap” has provided a research construct in the business sector to assess customer satisfaction against customer expectations (Long et al., 1999). The assumption underlying the service gap is that student disappointment and perhaps resentment will result if expectations are not met. Likewise, in the higher education setting, students arrive with a set of expectations or assumptions of what they think their university experience will be like (McInnis et al., 2000). If the reality of their experience is different from those expectations, the potential for disappointment, and
perhaps withdrawal, is increased (Darlaston-Jones et al. 2003).

In 1999, the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia undertook a study to explore the relationship between student expectations of the school and their reality, as a means of refining the transition developing (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). The transition was initiated to address attrition among first year students. The reason for this study was to ascertain whether the services and supports the school offered matched what students expected and needed. Should the students’ expectations students be different from the reality then there would be potential for the transition to fail.

By conducting questionnaires with 56 first year psychology students and following them up with interviews with second to fourth year students, the study found that there was a difference between student expectations of university and the School of Psychology and the reality of their experience. However, the authors argued that rather than this result showing that the School of Psychology was failing to meet the needs of students, it appeared as if the students had unrealistic views of university life. Overall, the results illustrated that students expected more assistance once arriving at the university, with many not aware of instrumental factors at the university such as the support services made available to them. The study suggested that many students had a lack of preparation before arriving at the university. Even though the students recognised the need to be self-directed and to take responsibility for their own learning, they needed and expected instrumental support from the university in order to do this (Darlaston-Jones, 2003).

Watson, Johnson and Austin (2004) investigated the issue of student preparedness in Australia. They explored how student relatedness to their field of study may be an indicator of student retention, with special emphasis on Education students. The study
conducted a survey with 598 students from the Bachelor of Education (primary) degree and the Bachelor of Education (secondary) degree during a degree orientation session in 2002 (Watson et al., 2004). In addition to the survey, 30 students also participated in focus groups. The study analysed student expectations of the course, and found these expectations could lack realism. In the sample surveyed, 74% of participants had chosen teaching as their first preference of study at university. The study also found out that of that 74%, only 19% of students studying in the Bachelor of Education (primary) and 6% of Bachelor of Education (secondary) students had “found out lots about the programme” before they commenced their university studies (Watson et al., 2004, p. 60). Unfortunately, the study does not elaborate what the students found out “lots” about, and this could be interpreted in many ways, from academic information to social or lifestyle information. When the participants were asked what inspired them to choose their prospective profession, many students gave responses that could be considered overly idealistic or lacking in any real depth, when thinking about their own professional desires or personal suitability to that profession. As a result, Watson et al. identified that the gap between their expectations of the course and the reality is problematic, and a more realistic approach early in the course would allow for a higher level of academic development.

A study conducted by Willis and Kennedy (2004) with 97 tertiary students in Hong Kong, investigated how student expectations are formed in the higher education context. They identified four key elements that assisted the formation of student expectations. These were (a) university internet sites, (b) exhibitions displaying information about the institution, (c) agents and associations, that is, people or organisations working for the
university in order to recruit students through marketing and advertising, and (d) university brochures. Thus, even though the resources students used to access information regarding universities were very useful, they could also have contributed to their building of unrealistic expectations (Schwartz, 2007; Willis et al., 2004). As previously mentioned, the unfortunate outcome of unrealistic expectations can be attrition.

This was the case of a postgraduate course offered at the Melbourne University Private (previously part of the University of Melbourne) in Australia, where a Masters of English (International) was developed exclusively for fee-paying overseas students (Ellerington et al., 2003). This Masters programme was developed for overseas students with the IELTS\(^1\) entry of 5.5, in the belief that such a course should not, and possibly could not, be developed through a public university. Consequently, the publicity campaign for this programme advertised that the aim of the course was for non-English speaking background (NESB) students to achieve a high level of professional competence in English in a recognised Masters course. The rhetoric was heard and interpreted by potential students, as well as the university overseas agents who in turn passed on information to students. It became obvious that the agents, and subsequently students, primarily understood that the Masters of English was “different”, as it was predominantly a Masters programme that could be entered into with an IELTS score of only 5.5. As a result, the students’ expectations were different from those of the staff (Ellerington et al., 2003). The final result of the unrealistic expectations that students built when they were “sold” the course was that they were unprepared for it: they did not understand what they

\(^1\) IELTS = International English Language Testing System
had to do in order to complete the course successfully. Furthermore, administrative personnel and lecturers soon discovered the proficiency implications of an IELTS score of 5.5, as the students were not the Masters level they had anticipated. Due to the disquiet amongst students, not anticipated by staff, a number of interviews and surveys were conducted with the enrolled students, at the request of and conducted by the administration of Melbourne University Private. The interviews and surveys aimed to discover whether the expectations of the students and the lecturers were somewhat aligned. However, it was found that over half had expected the Masters course to be different, and as a result they had anticipated a course that commenced at “Masters level” with formal lectures, less tuition and more free time. Most students indicated that they considered themselves either advanced or fluent English speakers, and as a result they did not need or want any language instruction. As a result of the conflict between student expectations and reality, administrative staff quickly adjusted their expectations of student independence and proficiency, and made appropriate changes to the way they interacted with students (Ellerington et al., 2003). Marketing staff also received feedback that their information needed to change. They were advised that material advertising the course had been pitched “too high” and that both language and content should be simplified (Ellerington et al., 2003). However, as a result of the incompatibility of expectations, the programme saw a number of students leave as their expectations were not met. This is a good example of the impact that inadequate university programme promotion may have on tertiary student withdrawal.

Another study conducted in Texas Christian University in USA explored how the students’ social experiences matched their expectations of university life and study. In
this study the researchers contacted an unspecified number of students who had not returned to the university in the spring of 2005 (Coghlan, Scott & Odelusi, 2005). The results showed that there were some links between student expectations and student retention. The findings suggested that those who return often have better social integration than those who do not return. The findings also documented that these students felt disappointment with how well their academic experiences matched their expectations. The outcomes of the study showed that although there are some students who will withdraw regardless of what the university can offer them, others withdraw due to reasons that the university could improve. The authors argued that the university could make changes to their recruitment process or first-year experience process that would allow students to find a better match between expectations and experiences, although no mention was made of what these changes could be. By attending to this match, the university will ultimately achieve a better social and academic integration with students, which will in turn improve the attrition rates and their commitment to retention (Coghlan et al., 2005). The researchers also mention that “truth in advertising” is critical to the development of realistic expectations, which are the first step in improving the match between college expectations and experiences (Coghlan et al., 2005).

Another study conducted in the US showed that fulfilling the students’ social expectations had a positive influence on the process of student retention. The research conducted by Helland, Stallings, and Braxton (2001-2002) showed that the fulfilment of students’ social expectation yields a direct and positive influence on two key factors of the students departure process: social integration and subsequent institutional commitment. They also found that students’ social expectations exercise an indirect effect on another crucial dimension of the university student departure process, the
decision students make to withdraw or re-enrol at the particular university.

Miley and Gonsalves (2004) explored the students’ course and grade expectations and their impact on student retention. In this study, 87 students who were in upper level psychology courses volunteered to take a 48-item questionnaire. The study found that many students believed success in a course was measured by good grades rather than by understanding of new material. As a result of this study, the lecturers learned that their teaching styles may have been incompatible with the learning styles of their students if they subscribed to the academic values of learning and understanding as primary goals of education. According to Miley and Gonsalves, students were responding to societal pressures to produce measurable outcomes that others can easily evaluate, especially those not so familiar with the educational values of the particular university. Therefore, grades become a handy blueprint for a student’s academic achievement and worth. Miley and Gonsalves concluded that as a result, students’ expectations for success were measured by grades rather than by new learning. Undeniably, the researchers suggest that student disappointment about a course may ensue when students ignore the logical contradictions in their beliefs. The study also suggested that students did not change in terms of their expectations and goals in a course as they advanced through to higher levels.

2.3.2 Social and Academic Student Integration

The first year of study has often been referred to in studies on retention as the year with the highest attrition rates (DEST, 2004). Students can feel isolated by the university experience and find it hard to integrate. New experiences, new people and a different way
of life can also add to the stress of a first-year student. However, can social and academic integration driven by the university help? Studies carried out on the topic show that many researchers seem to think that social and academic integration play a major part in whether students decide to continue at university or withdraw (Beil, Reisen, Zea, & Caplan 1999; Krause, 2005; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 1997).

Research conducted by Krause (2005) in Australia, discusses that developing a sense of belonging and involvement in the life of the university is a critical feature of the successful first year experience. Students who give serious consideration to leaving university are more likely to say they have little interest in extracurricular activities at the university; whereas their more satisfied peers are more likely to be actively involved in extra-curricular activities (Krause, 2005).

Tinto described academic integration as “the full range of individual experiences which occur in the formal and informal domains of the academic systems of the university” (Tinto, 1993, p. 118). He describes social integration as the formal and informal interactions that students experience at university. According to Tinto (1993) the majority of institutional attrition occurs during the first year and before commencing the second year of studies, which is why studies into the first year of university are so relevant to the issue of attrition and retention. He argued that the academic and social experiences during the first few weeks of university study had a strong effect on the integration of first year students into the social and academic communities of the university. Furthermore, he contended that the students’ level of commitment to the university was influenced by the extent to which students were integrated into its academic and social domains.
In order to test Tinto’s (1993) theory of student retention, Beil et al. (1999) conducted a longitudinal study that examined the factors associated with students’ early commitment to an institution and the retention of these students three years later. The study was based on the model of student integration by Tinto (1993) discussed in section 2.5.4 of this chapter. It consisted of a self-report questionnaire which was distributed during introductory English classes by the instructors of the course. Overall, the participants in the study were 512 first-year, full-time students with a median age of 18. Beil et al. discovered that their results supported the model of student departure proposed by Tinto. This meant that higher levels of student integration into the academic and social communities led to greater institutional commitments, which ultimately led to student retention. On the whole, they found that the commitment to remain at university, as reported by the 512 student participants in their first semester of the study, illustrated the impact of early academic and social integration on retention. Although some previous research on Tinto’s theory, such as by Getzlaf, Sedlacek, Kearney, & Blackwell (1984) and Mutter (1992), indicated that academic and social integration are associated with retention, in Biel’s study academic and social integration influenced students’ level of commitment to the university.

2.3.3 Teaching and Learning Styles

Not all students experience learning in the same way. On the one hand, some people can benefit more from learning through visual images and writing, while others may prefer to listen in order to learn and still others benefit from learning through doing, touching and interacting. In essence there are three basic different types of learning styles: visual
learning, auditory learning and kinaesthetic learning (Conner, 2004; Reid, 1987). A goal of instruction should be to equip students with the skills associated with every learning style category, regardless of the students’ personal preferences, since they will need all of those skills to function effectively as professionals (Felder et al., 2005). On the other hand, teaching styles also differ and there are many different teaching styles. What remains to be seen is how teaching and learning styles may impact on student retention, and if clashes between learning and teaching styles may lead to students withdrawing from a course.

Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan (2000) researched the impact of teaching styles on student departure. He believes that an important factor of active learning was that it enhanced student knowledge and the understanding of course content, therefore allowing students to perceive themselves gaining knowledge and understanding from their course work (Braxton et al., 2000). They argue that when students are engaged in active learning they seem to be more likely to view their university experience as personally rewarding, and as a result invest the psychological energy needed to establish memberships in the social communities of the university. This social interaction can lead to better social and academic integration. As Tinto’s (1975) model of student integration suggests, the higher the degree of student integration the higher the retention rate at a particular university. Tinto focused on the role of cooperative learning in the student departure process, or the use of small groups of student to work together with the goal of maximising their own learning and that of members of their group. Braxton et al. (2000) also investigated active learning and its influence on social integration, subsequent institutional commitment and student departure decisions. This study found that active learning occurs in class and is
the result of class discussions, group work, appropriate examinations and higher order thinking activities. Their study also shows that the lack of active learning could influence student departure decisions, or more specifically, that faculty classroom behaviours play a role in the student departure process (Braxton et al., 2000). Therefore, faculty teaching behaviours such as types of teaching methods, the application of principles and good practice, and adherence to the conventions used in the teaching role, could contribute to student departure decisions.

More recently, it has been found that teachers play a much more important role than first realised in preventing student attrition (ALTC, 2009). The results of data collected from almost 1400 students around Australia found that factors such as relationships with teaching staff, subject interactivity, and work-integrated learning all affected the successful progression of students (ALTC, 2009). The research also found that relationships with teaching staff within the learning environment have been proven to enhance progression for successful students because they make help-seeking less daunting and encourage academic achievement (ALTC, 2009).

2.3.4 Assessment Strategy Used in Courses

Formative assessment is highly important to student learning and should go hand-in-hand with summative assessment as a tool to help students learn and ultimately judge their achievement in any particular course (Yorke, 2001). Yorke advocated the importance of formative assessment and how it might better contribute to student development and retention, particularly in the first year of higher education. According to Yorke, consistent findings in the psychology literature demonstrate that knowledge of
assessment results influences subsequent action. This means that positive and constructive feedback tends to encourage learning performance, while in contrast negative feedback tends to discourage learning. Yorke explains that in educational settings, positive feedback is not mere praise, but includes an acknowledgement of the student’s strengths together with indications of how s/he can develop further. Yorke believes that no feedback at all, or belated feedback (as can be the case with summative, end-of-unit assessment) cannot be expected to advance student learning. Formative assessment then is of critical importance to student learning and retention.

Yorke (2001) refers to Tinto’s model of institutional departure as showing academic and social experiences as crucial intermediates between students’ intentions, goals and commitments at entry to university and the decision whether or not to leave an institution. He believes that formative assessment can contribute to this academic integration modelled by Tinto (1975), particularly as students come to terms with their transition into higher education. He found that, without meaningful formative assessment, academic integration – and hence retention – is put at risk (Yorke, 2001).

2.3.5 Student Mentoring
This section reports on some studies where student mentoring was implemented at different universities to help students, and the impact that they had on student outcomes are discussed.

In 1997, Campbell and Campbell aimed to determine whether university mentoring programmes succeeded in enhancing the academic performance and retention of
undergraduate students in the US. In terms of how mentoring could have a positive effect on student retention, they made two hypotheses before beginning their study. Their first hypothesis was that student participation in a mentoring programme would result in more units completed per semester and higher grades for them. In addition, their second hypothesis was that the students mentored would have a higher retention rate at the university and would graduate at a higher rate (Campbell et al., 1997). A total of 339 students participated by being mentored and the mentors comprised of 126 faculty or administrative members of the university. In order for comparisons to be made, and to determine whether the mentoring was indeed helping to retain the students, the 339 mentored students were matched with 339 students who were not taking part in the mentoring (Campbell et al., 1997).

Their study discovered that both hypotheses were supported by the research findings. Overall, in comparison to the students who did not participate in the mentoring programme, the mentored students completed slightly less than one additional unit per semester and attained a higher grade point average. The students had a lower withdrawal rate overall; this showed that the mentoring programme could have been responsible for the retention of 40 targeted minority students who otherwise could have withdrawn (Campbell et al., 1997).

Another study that shows insights into the positive influence that student mentoring programmes could have on student retention was conducted by Sidle and McReynolds (1999). Their longitudinal study explored the relationship between student participation in the institution’s freshman year (that is, first year) experience course and student
retention leading to success at an American university. The freshman year experience course was similar to previous induction programmes offered by American universities. However, the freshman year experience in this study lasted one full term. In total, 431 first-year students who agreed to participate in the freshman-year experience course and 431 students who did not want to participate in that course were the participants in the study. Both groups were chosen so that comparisons could be made between their second-year persistence and first-year completion rates and overall academic success in the first year of study. Overall, Sidle and McReynolds’ study found that the freshman-year experience course had a positive influence on the persistence of some first-year students. They found that the 431 students who enrolled in the course persisted to their second year of study at the university at a higher rate than those students who chose not to enrol in the course. However, the cost benefit implications for offering freshman year experience courses to increase student retention need to be taken into consideration. Using the findings from the study as an example, the difference between retaining 63% of the students, who would otherwise only persist at a rate of 56%, meant that for every 100 students 7 more would return to the institution, continue their enrolment and continue to pay tuition and fees (Sidle et al., 1999).

Thus, these studies (Campbell et al., 1997; Sidle et al., 1999) show that student mentoring programmes could in fact contribute to the retention of students in university courses. It is believed that mentoring works for many students due to its direct assistance to students and also its social-emotional support, that it could offer acceptance and counselling (Campbell et al., 1997). According to Hine (2000), mentoring also stimulates individuals to self-assess and reflect, thus becoming more conscious learners. She goes on to say that
the benefits of mentoring to the educational system are extensive as mentoring is cost-effective, available to all, increases talent identification and nurturing, enhances the development of learning strategies and study skills, fosters intrinsic motivation and open communication, and promotes autonomous learning.

2.3.6 Student Living Arrangements

Living out of home has often been seen as a rite of passage in many western societies, usually one that goes hand-in-hand with the beginning of tertiary study (Beekhoven, et al., 2004). For some students it is an automatic decision to move out of home; for others it is purely out of convenience that the move closer to the university has to occur. What remains to be seen however is how the move from home into shared or campus accommodation ultimately affects the results of tertiary students, and if the move or the living arrangements could lead to student withdrawal.

Beekhoven, De Jong, and Van Hout (2004) investigated students’ living arrangements and the impact that living out of home had on their university integration and their study progress in the Netherlands. His research found that students living independently in their first year of study were predominantly studying courses from the social sciences and humanities. Overall, the study showed that students living independently in rooms devoted less time to study. It also showed that living independently did not have a positive effect on the integration of first-year students. On the contrary, it had a definite negative effect on the situation of students attending a university of professional education, or what we in Australia would call professional or technical colleges. The main reasons found for the negative effect living arrangements had on first-year students
were the challenges these students faced dealing with fitting in with other students, as they were all there independently. According to the study, students who remained living at home not only spent more time studying, but they also felt more integrated with others at their place of study.

The importance of student integration has been a topic widely researched in relation to student retention, as a result of Tinto’s (1987) student departure model. Tinto advocates that if the gap between life before and life after entering university is not bridged, and the interactions that first-year students have with the new world of university are inadequate, then the integration process is not successful and consequently the student will withdraw (Tinto, 1987).

The study by Beekhoven et al. (2004) followed Grayson’s study of a large Canadian commuter university that showed that place of residence affected student involvement and first-year marks negatively (Grayson, 1997). That study examined the effects of living on or off-campus on the grades of first-year students at York University in Ontario. A total of 1,848 first-year students were surveyed by mail in 1995. The study found that 74% of respondents lived with their parents, 15% lived in campus dormitories, 3% lived with a spouse, 2% lived off-campus alone, 3% lived off-campus with a friend, and 1% lived in temporary housing arrangements (Grayson, 1997). The results indicated that students who lived with their spouses scored far higher results, and students who lived with their parents scored slightly higher grade point averages than those who lived on-campus. As well as higher results, students who lived with their parents reported higher levels of classroom involvement than any other group of students (Grayson, 1997).
The research by Beekhoven et al. (2004) and Grayson (1997) can both be directly correlated to the work by Tinto (1987). Therefore, if the living situation of the student does not allow proper social integration, its outcome could lead to student withdrawal (Beekhoven et al., 2004). The benefits of living on campus or independently have been reported as being positive, such as involvement in extracurricular activities, interaction with faculty, social life and satisfaction with the undergraduate experience (Astin, 1973). These factors may lead to higher levels of student integration, however, the main issue for the students in these studies was that they were faced with more problems when living on campus or independently.

2.3.7 Student Age

Adult students or mature aged students are often juggling competing demands on their time from study, family, work and other commitments (Wonacott, 2002). Adults are often affected by situational factors out of their control, and likewise dispositional factors such as expectations, self-esteem, level of family support, and past educational experience can be barriers to participation (Wonacott, 2002). Research shows that adult learners who withdraw are often “stopping out”, that is, interrupting their studies but planning to return.

In 1998 at a conference in England, a paper presented an explanatory model of undergraduate non-completion based on the findings of a qualitative case study (Ozga et al., 1998). It showed how the process of withdrawal and the reasons for withdrawal for conventional students (those who entered university through the traditional academic
route directly after finishing secondary school, and between the ages of 17 and 20) is markedly different from that of mature aged students, those aged 20 and above (Ozga et al., 1998).

For domestic, first-year students, the factors that seem to be of central importance to retention are student preparedness, compatibility of course choice to their career outcomes, and time of exit from the university in question (that is, before it is too late to get a second chance). In contrast, this same study found that mature aged students are often forced into non-completion due to external circumstances, such as work and family commitments (Ozga et al., 1998). As a result, mature aged students were a lot more likely, through external factors, to withdraw from university than younger students.

2.3.8 Student Gender

Gender has often been mentioned as a factor that could contribute to the withdrawal of tertiary students in the US (Bonham et al., 1993; Tinto, 1975). Most of the initial research into the area of student retention showed that being female was the factor that more often contributed to withdrawal (Astin, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Nowadays, there is more and more evidence that the tables have been turned. Being a female is no longer a factor that contributes to withdrawal, as recent research has begun to show male attrition rates are much higher than those for females (Henry, 2007). In fact, recent research found that women are better at staying in their courses of study than men and international female students had the lowest attrition rates of any university students, including undergraduates, postgraduates, and domestic students (Olsen, 2008).
In some cases, the dominance of female tertiary students has even begun to be seen as a problem, as male students simply do not continue their studies to the same extent females do. There are four studies in particular, conducted at tertiary institutions in the US, the UK and New Zealand, that look into gender as a factor contributing to the withdrawal of students. Research by Bonham and Luckie (1993), Scott (2005), Gabb and Cao (2006) and Bidgood, Saebi, and May (2006) shows that gender, although not such a prevailing factor, is still an important one when considering student attrition. Although initially gender was viewed as a negative factor towards women’s retention, the trend in tertiary education has now made it a factor most influencing men.

In the same way, in Australia, according to research conducted by the Department of Education, Science and Training (2004), female student enrolments are surpassing those of male students. Recent trends in the news are showing that universities are even starting to worry about very high female numbers at universities. It is believed that this gap at university level originates in the underachievement of boys at school (Henry, 2007).

A recent study conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council and published in the Sunday Telegraph in London, showed that university tutors and lecturers were becoming concerned about the dominance of female students at university (Henry, 2007). According to the article, more than 70% of tutors interviewed for the research, which covered half of the 114 institutions in the UK, believed the trend was negatively affecting the quality of university education. The article proposed that girls were leaving boys behind at nursery level and making better progress up to the GCSE, where they outperformed them in almost every subject, including the traditional “male” areas. Prof
David Eastwood, the chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council, said, “The wider worry is that if we are not careful, we are going to arrive at a position where young lads are alienated, under-skilled and disadvantaged in the labour market” (Henry, 2007).

Although the research to date does not firmly suggest that male students are more at risk of withdrawing from university than female students, it does suggest that male students are less likely to enrol and participate in university altogether, and that female students are more likely to complete than males as they show higher graduation rates (Carpenter et al., 1998; Marks, 2007).

2.3.9 Work and Issues with Employment

Currently more and more students in Australia and overseas are in paid employment in addition to their tertiary studies. Although some students work to gain some little extra money, others do it out of necessity (Curtis & Shani, 2002). In their research, Curtis and Shani found after conducting a survey of 359 students at Manchester Metropolitan University that more students were working compared to survey results from one year earlier, and the results indicated that there were adverse effects on study in the form of missed lectures. The study also showed that the students were aware that their grades were lower than they would have been had they not been working (Curtis et al., 2002).

Employment has often come to the surface as an issue which influences the retention of students at university. It is well known that students who have long working hours cannot dedicate as much time to their studies as those who do not work as many hours or at all
(Barrett, 2000). Many researchers mention work and issues related to employment as a factor affecting student retention (Blanchard & Mascetti., 2000; Bonham et al., 1993; Bradburn, 2002; Johnston, 1997; Lee, 1996; Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006; Scoggin & Styron, 2006). Their research studies, carried out in the US, the UK and Australia, show that students who withdrew from university felt that work contributed to their withdrawal. Full-time employment seems to influence students more than part-time employment. In addition, studies pointed out that the predicament of combining work and study seems more prevalent to older students with families for whom work is not optional (Long et al., 2006). These students often report that their employment is a main source of income; understandably they cannot stop work in order to study and therefore may require some form of government support to continue studying (Long et al., 2006).

Broadbridge and Swanson (2005) researched the impact of part-time work on students’ adjustment to university life in the UK. They found that currently, increasing numbers of students are likely to combine study with term-time employment (that is, employment during the academic semester). This is the result of the introduction of more flexible delivery of further education and continued government financial restraints on funding made available to students. They believe that an understanding of students’ work patterns, in relation to characteristics of individual students, may help reduce attrition rates. This understanding could be beneficial to students, higher education establishments and employers in the long-term (Broadbrige et al., 2005), because this information could aid higher education policy makers in improving course organisation, and as an outcome, help students to continue studying in these courses due to the flexibility made available. This could enable students to more successfully combine any paid employment (not
necessarily their profession) and academic study, maximising academic performance and social integration, two of the main factors mentioned by Tinto (1987) as crucial to student retention (Tinto, 1987).

In the same way as in Australia, Curtis and Klapper (2005) in the UK highlighted the severe problems students are facing with their financial status, as well as the increased likelihood of students withdrawing from university due to financial problems. According to their research, the financial burden of higher education appears to be placed a lot on the students in England. The consequence of this seems to be that more students remain living at home and more students work low-level, low paid jobs during the semester. As a result of the higher education system in the UK, many students graduate with high levels of debt. Curtis and Klapper (2005, p. 130) cited the work conducted by Goddard (2003), which showed that a high percentage (40% of 1500 students interviewed) were working in excess of 15 hours a week. Goddard’s study also found that term-time employment interfered with students’ acquisition of academic knowledge and skills. The working students regularly missed lectures, seminars and tutorials, and one third of them had difficulties accessing library or computer facilities due to work.

Studies in this area then show that the high work hours could adversely affect the social and academic integration of these students. Moreover, following Tinto’s Student Integration Model (please refer to Figure 1), this could lead to students’ withdrawal (Curtis et al., 2005; Tinto, 1975).
2.3.10 Financial Concerns

Financial concerns have for a long time been a worrying factor for university students and there is no denying that many students do suffer from serious financial hardship while attending university. Generally, non-traditional students have greater financial obligations than younger students, although all students can potentially be affected by financial issues (Jeffreys, 2004). The term non-traditional students, or mature aged students as is more often used in Australia, refers to students between the ages of 25 and 60, working in a part- or full-time capacity, and attending a university facility to undertake a part-time or full-time study program (Wylie, 2005).

In Australia, gender, socio-economic status, Aboriginality, and ethnicity/culture are common grouping categories for disadvantage (Leder & Forgasz, 2004). It is important to point out that mature age, however, is not a recognised category of disadvantage, even though the lives and responsibilities of these students are often more complex than those of their younger peers (Leder et al., 2004).

Since 1993, many studies on student retention have identified that financial issues and concerns are a major influence on the retention of tertiary students (Bidgood et al., 2006; Blanchard et al., 2000; Bonham et al., 1993; Bradburn, 2002; Elliott, 1997; Glogowska, Young & Lockyer, 2007; Glossop, 2002; Hoyt, 1999; Johnston, 1997; Lee, 1996; Long et al., 2006; Scoggin et al., 2006; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Yorke, 2000). These studies pointed out that financial issues are detrimental to students’ progress at university and that the outcome of financial problems for students is often university withdrawal. Therefore, this is one of the major factors contributing to attrition.
2.3.11 Student Lack of Preparation for University Life and Study

Studies show that a lack of preparation for, and knowledge of, differences between school and university academic standards, study expectations and subject content can be a significant hurdle for first year university students, and one which can lead to student withdrawal.

The relationship between preparedness and student withdrawal has been previously documented by Yorke (2000), who describes six elements contributing most to the inability of students in the UK to cope with the demands of the university they enrolled in, due to their lack of preparation for university life and study. These elements are stress-related issues, difficulties in integrating, too heavy workload, lack of study skills, lack of personal support from fellow students, and insufficient academic progress. As a result, the lack of student preparation for university life means that these factors can all directly contribute to student withdrawal (Yorke & Longden, 2006; Yorke, 2000).

In England, a study by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) at Keele University pointed out that there are good reasons to see some degree of early exit as positive. The evidence from their study suggested that those students whose preparation for university life was low and whose ability to choose was poor, and yet persisted, ended up failing at a later stage when a second chance was no longer possible (Ozga et al., 1998). They argued that early withdrawal was advisable if preparation for university life and study was low. Although many students do not admit to having academic difficulties, many more do not admit being prepared for university life and study. General academic preparation,
covering changes in lifestyle, living arrangements, study regimes and teaching styles, is something that some prospective students do not think about until it is too late. Often a lack of student preparation, which can sometimes be connected to expectations, can lead to a lack of commitment to university studies. The outcome can be a student having a low level of academic and social integration, which can subsequently lead them to withdrawal (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Several studies conducted in Australia, the UK and the US (Elliott, 1997; Hoyt, 1999; Long et al., 2006; Wilcox et al., 2005) have shown that students do withdraw from university due to a lack of preparation.

According to Latham and Green (1997), from RMIT in Melbourne, the university culture is less than familiar to the majority of first year students, which could lead to a lack of integration and commitment problems. Latham and Green’s (1997) research showed that in the two years of their research, at least half of the first year intake at RMIT was the first in their family to attend university. Many students were clearly setting a new tradition in their extended family structure and therefore were not able to gather any prior knowledge of what they were going to face at university from their family unit. As a result, in some cases this left those students feeling less prepared than those students whose family had a university background.

Research in the US has shown however, that the initial lack of preparation can be avoided if students are offered first-year seminars (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Goodman and Pascarella’s evidence suggests that first-year seminars provide positive benefits to all categories of students and that such seminars are a good all-purpose intervention to increase persistence from first to second year. Academically, students who participate in
first-year seminars have more positive perceptions of themselves as learners (Goodman et al., 2006). Therefore, induction programmes to universities can help student retention.

Interestingly, in the UK, Yorke and Longden (2006) have recently found that the more students know about their institutions and courses before enrolling, the less likely they will withdraw: 40% of those with little to no prior knowledge of their program considered withdrawing, to be compared with only 25% of better informed peers.

2.3.12 Family Responsibilities and Obligations
Family obligations have often been the reason why some students decide to withdraw from their studies. Mature age students, in particular, seem to have an array of family responsibilities when commencing university. Many of these responsibilities could impact on their ability to dedicate the appropriate amount of time to their studies. Overall, research on retention factors affecting students found that family obligations were a serious issue. Several researchers (Blanchard & Mascetti, 2000; Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Bradburn, 2000; Glossop, 2002; Hoyt, 1999; Long et al., 2006) mentioned family obligations as important factors contributing to the withdrawal of students in the US and the UK. Family responsibilities and obligations can vary. However, they generally involve taking care of children and/or elderly parents (Bonham et al., 1993).

2.3.13 Dissatisfaction with University
Several studies from the US and the UK have pointed out “university dissatisfaction” as a factor that led students to withdraw (Bidgood et al., 2006; Bradburn, 2002; Lee, 1996; Long et al., 2006; Yorke, 2000). Dissatisfaction with the university in question has
recently become a serious issue for tertiary institutions. The correlation between student dissatisfaction and student expectations is becoming more visible and both are extremely important and relevant to student retention (Lowe et al., 2003). Dissatisfaction with the university or tertiary institution can cover many spectrums and it is often a difficult factor to explain. Students can be dissatisfied with a variety of different aspects of university, ranging from the teaching to which they are exposed to the university facilities they use. Unfortunately, most of the research into the factors concerning student attrition has not investigated in depth the individual reasons that result in student dissatisfaction. As a consequence, this often transmits the message that the students are dissatisfied with the university as a whole, which may not be the case. Therefore, more research is needed into this area.

2.3.14 Academic Difficulties

Academic difficulties have long been a concern for university scholars and administrators, as research has shown that a lack of academic integration can lead to student attrition (Bean, 1983; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 1997). Academic difficulties are also a difficult factor to investigate for universities, as research shows students do not always like to admit to having difficulties with their studies (Scoggin et al., 2006). Often, the label “academic difficulties” is perceived as carrying negative connotations and students simply may not want to suggest that they are academically incapable of remaining at university (Scoggin et al., 2006). According to a study by Gifford, Perriot-Briceño, and Mianzo (2006), the overall Grade Point Average (GPA) of a student is an important predictor of retention. In their study, they found that students who obtained higher GPAs were a lot more likely to continue at university than those who obtained a
lower score. Academic difficulties are an especially important topic because it is believed that universities could help to overcome them. In this way, recent research has shown that academic aid improves the university completion rates of students, especially females (Glenn, 2007). In fact, Glenn reports in the context of a Canadian University that when combined with financial aid, academic aid and tuition not only improves the retention rates of the students, but it also improves their overall success at university. Other studies, from the US, UK and Australia (Bradburn, 2002; Elliott, 1997; Gifford, Perriot-Briceño, & Mianzo, 2006; Glogowska et al., 2007; Glossop, 2002; Hoyt, 1999; Johnston, 1997; Long et al., 2006; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke, 2000), also show that academic difficulties are an important factor contributing to student retention.

2.3.15 Health and Personal Reasons

Health issues are a big concern for students because health problems often contribute to the withdrawal of students from university. Although they can take on many different variables, health problems can sometimes lead to a lack of academic integration, leading in turn to academic difficulties. Research in this area (Glogowska et al., 2007; Glossop, 2002; Johnston, 1997; Long et al., 2006; Scoggin et al., 2006) shows that students who are suffering from health problems normally withdraw from university due to this factor.

Personal problems are also at the forefront of reasons that most affect students’ decisions to withdraw. Like health problems, personal problems can take on a variety of forms and can also lead to academic problems. Students may find that their personal problems are so overwhelming that their only option is to withdraw from the course or the university as a whole (Scoggin et al., 2006). Many researchers (Bradburn, 2002; Elliott, 1997;
Gлоговска et al., 2007; Johnston, 1997; Wilcox et al., 2005) have found that personal reasons often affect student retention. Therefore, by recognising that students have identified personal and health problems as leading reasons for their withdrawal, both the counselling and health services at the university could play an important role in assisting students to manage these problems, and maybe to avoid their withdrawal from the course, programme or university. In order to do this however, there is a need to find out about the student and any relevant events affecting them.

2.3.16 Course or Programme Unsuitability

Several researchers (Bidgood et al., 2006; Elliott, 1997; Johnston, 1997; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke, 2001; Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2006) found that students believed that the course not “suiting” them led to their withdrawal. Students may often start degrees and courses thinking that they are prepared and willing to take on the challenges and requirements of each. However, this can often be discarded when students begin the courses and discover that they are far removed from what they expected, or that they do not like the content or other aspects of the course, or they simply change their mind. Although there are many reasons a course may not have suited a student, in all the research found in this area, the reasons why the students thought that the course did not suit them were not documented. This makes it difficult to determine the exact causes for lack of compatibility between a student and the course they are studying.

2.3.17 Foreign Language Learning Student Anxiety

Although the issue of student retention has been studied extensively, much of the literature is helpful in understanding the problem in general but provides little benefit to
institutions in improving retention within particular discipline areas (Bailey, Bauman, & Lata, 1998). However, that is not to say that the area is completely new. To date, a small number of studies have concentrated on attrition and retention in foreign language courses, and most have been in direct relation to causes that researchers believe affect the particular students undertaking these courses (Bailey et al., 2003; Horwitz et al., 1986; Onwuegbuzie, 1999). Concerns such as foreign language anxiety, student expectations and teaching styles can have a direct relation to the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Anxiety is “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 125). Second language anxiety is defined here as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviours related to using a foreign/second language for communication beyond the language classroom (Horwitz et al., 1986). Consequently, different research studies have shown that these factors can also lead to students withdrawing from courses (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre et al., 1994). Foreign language anxiety and the role of class teaching may have bigger roles to play in the attrition of students than previously thought.

According to Onwuegbuzie (1999), a growing body of research has demonstrated that language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that is most closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language. Foreign language anxiety is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon and it can be defined as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening and learning” (1999, p. 222). It has been found that foreign language anxiety produces negative experiences. Although students generally appear motivated to learn
how to develop their ability to communicate in the target language, many students report the debilitating effects of foreign language anxiety at all stages of language learning (Onwuegbuzie, 1999).

Foreign language anxiety seems to be specifically linked to performance in oral examinations, to the production of vocabulary and to teachers’ ratings of achievement (Onwuegbuzie, 1999). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) found that highly anxious students take more time to learn vocabulary items and experience more difficulty in recalling them. Although anxious language students study more than their less anxious counterparts do, their level of achievement often does not reflect that effort. These students often report that the pace of the class was too rapid and they felt left behind. Indeed, the study found that speaking is the most anxiety-provoking of second language activities and that the frustration experienced by a student unable to communicate a message can lead to apprehension about future attempts to communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1994).

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2003) also investigated foreign language anxiety and its relevance to the issue of attrition in foreign language learners. Their study examined the role of anxiety in predicting student attrition in foreign language courses at university level. The sample in their study consisted of 259 students enrolled in Spanish, French, German, or Japanese introductory, intermediate, and advanced courses at university (Bailey et al., 2003). Their findings show that the students who withdrew from their foreign language classes tended to report statistically significant higher levels of foreign language anxiety. This seems to suggest that anxiety is an important predictor of student attrition in foreign language courses. Moreover, Bailey et al. (2003) found that to the extent that the
relationship between foreign language anxiety and attrition is causal, the current findings further implicate anxiety as playing an even more important role in the foreign language-learning context than previously documented.

In summary, then, the international literature review conducted seems to indicate that there are 17 factors that may contribute to student withdrawal. Furthermore, as it is documented next, the literature also discusses how different universities have developed different strategies to improve student retention and to improve tertiary student retention in different parts of the world.

2.4 STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT RETENTION AND ATTRITION PERFORMANCE

Several universities around the world have attempted to improve retention levels through improving the experience of their first year students. In this way, La Trobe University in Australia developed the First Year Experience Project, grounded in institutional research and informed by the international literature in the area of transition and withdrawal. By reviewing the literature on withdrawal, they concluded that each university must understand the experience of its own students if it is to address the issue of attrition (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). La Trobe University’s student withdrawal form has been designed to include space for the withdrawing student to write their reason for withdrawal. The data thus collected were analysed for this study and showed that there were two major reasons for early student withdrawal. These were transfers to courses in
other institutions, and transfers to different courses at La Trobe. Although the first factor affected the overall retention of the university, the second factor only affected the course and programme retention. By the beginning of the second semester, taking up of employment was the major reason offered. Personal reasons, which were undefined, also figured prominently (Pitkethly et al., 2001). A drawback of the data collected from the student withdrawal forms is its lack of calculated percentages for each factor that contributed to withdrawal. This means that, while the factor is valid in terms of contributing to withdrawal, the percentage of students mentioning the reason is unknown.

As student attrition and retention become a problem for many tertiary institutions, in Australia some universities have conducted student satisfaction studies. In these studies student data is collected about whether the students are satisfied with the teaching, resources and facilities (among other university specific characteristics) that the university in question has to offer. This has been done to learn more about the factors influencing students to withdraw from their universities.

In this way, the University of Tasmania in Australia brought together a project called “First year at UTAS” in 2002. This project aimed to better coordinate the efforts of the university to improve the first-year student experience and establish an on-going university-wide consultative mechanism for monitoring and evaluating these activities (Waters, 2003). The data obtained from 68 students during the first (pilot) year of the “First year at UTAS” study showed that the majority of respondents to this survey (about 54%) stated that they had withdrawn for non university-related reasons. For the 30 respondents (46%) who said that university-related factors had contributed to their
decisions to withdraw, “not knowing what was expected of them” was the most often cited contributing factor. This university-related factor was closely followed by “information overload at start of course”, meaning that the students were unhappy with the large quantity of information they were receiving about their courses at the very beginning of their degrees (Waters, 2003). Lastly, “insufficient pre-enrolment information about their course” also affected the retention of students and this meant that students believed that they had received insufficient information about the course before enrolling and as a result felt unprepared for the course and were subjected to an overload of information in the first week of classes (Waters, 2003).

Responses to the attrition survey completed by the University of Tasmania study by Waters (2003) suggest that employment, financial, family, personal and health issues – things generally beyond the university’s control – are the most common reasons for first-year student withdrawal. The findings from the project also suggested that mature-age students are more likely to experience family, financial, and employment difficulties. They also showed that female students are more likely than male students to withdraw for family/personal reasons, and male students are more likely than females to withdraw for financial reasons (Waters, 2003).

Different efforts have also been made by universities in the US to improve their language student retention rates. The University of Colorado at Boulder developed a programme they refer to as the “Modified Foreign Language Programme”. This aimed at helping students who fall behind in their foreign language classes, allowing them to continue learning the foreign language. In order to achieve this aim, the programme offers weaker
learners a better chance for success, as they join a group of about 15 students who are all similar in their learning problems. Students feel comfortable in this modified class that they attend instead of the standard language class offered at the university, and can ask questions that in the standard class they might have considered “dumb” (Castro & Hill, 1999). It is important to point out that these classes are not considered remedial, where a remedial class is intended to correct or improve deficient skills in a specific subject. These classes are modified, in that the same material is being taught in this class as in the standard class offered to other students; however, the teaching is done differently, with more emphasis on students’ learning problems and in an environment that is more helpful to these particular students.

However, before the students are allowed to participate in any of the modified classes, they are asked to sign an agreement specifying that they must attend all classes, be on time, participate positively in the class activities, take quizzes and tests on time and use the tutor provided for them free-of-charge. They must also let their teacher know when they encounter learning problems or when personal problems occur. Students know they have to abide by the agreement or else they have to return to a standard class setting (Castro et al., 1999).

While the literature on student retention shows that there are 17 prevailing factors that can cause students to leave university as a whole, little has been written about why students leave foreign language courses, especially first-year language courses. Studies in this area are needed as the assumption that the factors affecting language students are identical to those that affect students studying in other areas may not be correct. As
Retention indicators are becoming more relevant in the assessment of university teaching and learning performance, low retention levels can directly affect the government funding assigned to each Australian university.

Once the different factors contributing to student withdrawal have been explained, it is important to identify the different conceptual models or frames that have been put forward to integrate some of these factors to explain and address student retention issues in different parts of the world.

2.5 CONCEPTUAL MODELS OF STUDENT RETENTION AND ATTRITION

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the first-year experience and retention have been a topic of research for over 40 years (Harvey et al., 2006). During this time, not only has some research been undertaken about the topic, but some researchers have also developed models of student retention and attrition. This section aims to explain the nature of these models and to comment on how successful each model has been at determining student retention and attrition. A total of eight models have been studied, and they are discussed in more detail in the section following, in chronological order.

2.5.1 Astin’s Student Retention Model
Astin (1971), who developed a model to help explain student success, may have been the first to point out and integrate some of the factors that contribute to student attrition in the
US. He aimed to consider both sides of the coin, that is, the personal factors and the university factors, when discussing student withdrawal from university. He came to the conclusion that, when looking at personal characteristics, students had a much higher chance of withdrawing from university if they did not achieve high results during their high school studies. He also investigated student Grade Point Average (GPA) and a number of merit and aptitude tests (including the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, and the American College Test) undertaken by students before entering university. He explored how the student scored in each test, concluding that the tests could not predict student success effectively.

When considering the university factors, Astin (1971) summarised that the institution’s selectivity, or the average ability of those entering, was found to have the most pronounced effects on academic performance and survival. He believed that highly selective institutions tended to have relatively high standards of grading and that as a result any student would do better academically in a less selective university. Astin, (1971) developed an instrument called Predicting Academic Success and Survival in Specific Colleges that would help in determining student success and survival at university. The instrument was divided into three parts.

The first group of tables in the instrument allowed students to convert their scores on any one of the abovementioned three major university admissions tests used in the US into comparable scores on other tests. The second group of tables in the instrument listed most of the universities in America and showed certain administrative characteristics of each institution as well as the average test scores of its freshmen, that is, first-year university
students. The final group of tables in the instrument was used to make predictions of the student’s chances of academic success and survival in specific institutions. Astin (1971) himself believed as a result of his research that the model would be very useful to students wanting to find out their equivalent score on one of the three admissions test they did not complete, and also for university admissions officers. This is because as some colleges in the US required a specific test to be taken for admission, the admission officer could easily convert the score from the test the student took, into the one the university requires, whilst saving time and money for the student. Ultimately use of the assessment instrument could help to predict student success and survival at university, which was beginning to be an issue at the time. Due to the size of the instrument containing more than 50 pages, Astin’s model of retention has not been included for perusal in this thesis; however, it can be found in its full form in Astin’s (1971) book Predicting Academic Performance in College.

2.5.2 Spady’s Undergraduate Dropout Model

Spady (1971) also developed a theoretical model to explain the undergraduate withdrawal process. He explained the model as “representing a synthesis and extension of concepts pertinent to balance Durkheim’s theory of suicide and recent work on college dropouts” (Spady, 1971, p. 38). He regards the decision to leave a particular social system as the result of a complex social process that includes family and previous educational background, academic potential, normative congruence, friendship support, intellectual development, grade performance, social integration, satisfaction, and institutional commitment. Spady believed that Durkheim’s (1951) concept of social integration could be used to synthesize the broad range of findings on student retention that were available
at the time. His model looked at the successful assimilation of entering college students into the full life of their institution as problematic rather than as a given. Spady argued that there were two main factors that contributed to students’ decisions to withdraw: normative congruence (a term developed by Spady to explain patterns of interaction that result from the assimilation of students to life at their institution), and friendship support. These were the two paralleled elements that Durkheim used to account for high degrees of social integration in the common life of society, moral consciousness and collective affiliations. In Spady’s view, full integration into the common life of the college depends on successfully meeting the demands of both its social and academic systems. These points were reflected in his theoretically based model of what he calls the undergraduate dropout process, a model that was used as a backdrop to Tinto’s Student Integration Model in 1975.

2.5.3 Rootman’s Theoretical Voluntary Withdrawal Model

In 1972, Rootman developed a model in America to explain and predict voluntary student withdrawal from a total adult socialising organisation. In doing this, he attempted to present a theoretical model, something he believed all other studies (Astin, 1971; Spady, 1971) at the time lacked. In addition, Rootman denounced the shortcomings of other studies at the time, which in his opinion failed to distinguish between voluntary and non-voluntary withdrawal, and only attempted to deal with one type of adult socialising organisation, the college.

Several methods of data collection and analysis were employed by Rootman (1972) to develop his model. These included a consideration of relevant literature from the US, a
study of published material about the Coast Guard Academy (the institution where the model was used) and similar organizations. It also included formal and informal interviews with faculty administration members, the use of records, interviews with students departing from the organization as well as with some remaining in it, the administration of standardised tests to the students, and the administration of questionnaires to the immediate superiors of the cadets in the sample. This shows that an attempt was made to base his model on as much empirical findings as possible about both the withdrawing and non-withdrawing students, as well as about the organisation in which his study was based.

Rootman (1972) obtained his data through using 14 instruments from 343 students. Nine of these instruments were developed by Rootman himself. These included the three questionnaires administered to the chosen class and an exit interview schedule for all cadets who decided to leave during the first week of training at the Coast Guard Academy. The term “cadet” referred to a future officer in the military and the term is often used by uniformed services. A questionnaire was administered to Platoon Commanders at the Coast Guard Academy and a questionnaire was mailed to the six newly graduated Coast Guard officers who supervised the Platoon Commanders. There was also a follow-up questionnaire administered directly to all cadets still at the Academy at the end of the first year (unfortunately an exact number of cadets was not given). The Academy also provided other instruments that were used in the study to obtain background information from the participants. These included “The Edwards Personal Preference Schedule”, “The California Psychological Inventory”, “The Study of Values” and the “Survey of Interpersonal Values” (Rootman, 1972).
Rootman’s (1972) model was implemented at the United States Coast Guard Academy, and he focused on the voluntary withdrawal of students. By using the instruments mentioned and the model he developed, Rootman came to the conclusion that “voluntary” student withdrawal was caused directly by the degree of “actual interpersonal fit” of the individual and directly and indirectly by the degree of “person-role fit” of the individual (1972). In other words, whether or not an individual will survive in a military academy for a year appears to be largely a function of the degree to which his own properties “fit” the role of cadet at entry and the degree to which he “fits” the group with which he is socialised. This fit can be social, academic, or personal, among others.

2.5.4 Tinto’s Student Integration Model

Tinto is perhaps the author most well known for his development of the Student Integration Model, first introduced in the article published in the Review of Educational Research in 1975. Tinto decided to develop the model as he believed, after a thorough review of the literature available at the time, that despite the extensive literature on withdrawal from higher education, much remained unknown about the nature of the process. Tinto believed that,

Research on dropout from higher education has also been marked by inadequate conceptualisation of the dropout process. This is particularly noticeable in the lack of attention given to the development of those types of longitudinal models that would lead to an understanding of the processes of interaction, which bring, over time, differing individuals within the institution to varying levels of persistence and/or varying forms of dropout behaviour. (Tinto, 1975, p. 90)
Tinto argued that with the exception of a few studies (Rootman, 1972; Spady, 1971), most studies about tertiary withdrawal were limited to descriptive statements of how various individual and/or institutional characteristics relate to this attrition (Tinto, 1975). In order to overcome this apparent lack in the literature, Tinto proposed his own theoretical model that explained the processes of interaction between individual and the institution. His model aimed to illustrate what led differing individuals to withdraw from institutions of higher education, and also what distinguished between those processes that resulted in definably different forms of withdrawal behaviour. The central idea in Tinto’s theoretical model is that of “integration”. His model (see Figure 1 below) claims that both student persistence and withdrawal can be predicted by the student’s degree of academic and social integration. He strongly advocated that both forms of integration, that is, social and academic integration, evolved over time.

Figure 1. The Student Integration Model: Tinto’s (1975) conceptual schema for dropout
from college.

According to Tinto, the theoretical model Conceptual Schema for Dropout from College argues that the process of withdrawing from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college, during which a person’s experiences in those systems continually modify his/her goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of withdrawal (Tinto, 1975).

In the same way as Spady’s Undergraduate Dropout Model (1971), the theoretical model developed by Tinto in 1975 was also based in Durkheim’s theory of suicide. Durkheim’s *Suicide* was written in 1897. The book was initially written in French and later translated into English in 1951. According to Davies and Neal (2000), who analysed the book almost a century after it was written, the book is believed to convey a comparative and historical knowledge about suicide rates, but also to instil in researchers an appreciation of important analytical issues in social research. One of the major achievements of Durkheim’s work was the fact that he emphasised that suicide rates are social facts and should be explained in terms of other social factors (Davies et al., 2000). For instance, he described farmers in many countries as having high suicide rates due to being socially and geographically isolated. According to Tinto (1975), Durkheim theorised that suicide was more likely to occur when individuals were not sufficiently integrated into the fabric of society. Tinto modified Durkheim’s theory and applied it to student retention by viewing university as a social system, with its own value and social structures. He believed that one could reasonably expect that social conditions affecting withdrawal from the social system of the university would resemble those resulting in suicide in the
wider community. He also explained that the *Student Integration Model* was influenced by economic and educational philosophies concerning the cost benefit analysis of individual decisions regarding investment in alternative educational activities. As he explains,

> In each instance, these different conceptual frameworks are applied to a model of dropout that seeks to explain dropout from institutions of higher education, not one that seeks to explain dropout(s) in the system of higher educational institutions. It is, then, an institutional rather than a systems model of dropout. (Tinto, 1975, p. 91)

However, in his work he did not explain in detail what economic and educational philosophies influenced his model of retention (Tinto, 1975). Overall, his model showed that a lack of student integration into the social system of the university would lead to lower commitment to that social system. This lack of student commitment to the educational institution would increase the probability that individuals would decide to leave university and pursue other activities. This theory has been influential in the literature in higher education on student retention and attrition until recently. Since the Student Integration Model was first published in 1975, it has been under the scrutiny of researchers in the area of student retention and attrition (Brunsden, Davies, Shevlin & Bracken, 2000; Draper, 2005; Torres & Solberg, 2001), and has been tested for validity and evaluated by these researchers. Three main criticisms of the model have been reported (Brunsden et al., 2000; Draper, 2005; McCubbin, 2003; Torres et al., 2001). The first is that Tinto’s model was not an adequate model of student attrition, for several reasons, including that the model failed to explain the majority of attrition behaviour. Research by Brunsden et al. at a Scottish university in 2000 with 264 first-year students
was conducted in order to assess the key factors in Tinto’s model (Brunsden et al., 2000). They found that their conceptualism of Tinto’s model did not adequately explain the data they obtained and furthermore, none of the criteria for fit supported the model, making the assessment of individual components impossible.

The second criticism implied that this student retention model did not generalise beyond traditional students. According to Rovai (2002), Tinto’s model is of limited applicability in the study of non-traditional students as it is based around the analysis of how traditional undergraduate student fit into the university they attend. It appears from the results of research conducted by Duquette (2000), with retention and disabled students, and Torres et al. (2001), with retention and Latino students, that the social integration part of the model may not be a significant predictor of attrition behaviour (McCubbin, 2003). However, it is important to take into consideration that it is unlikely that any one model could account for every conceivable reason that every single departing student had for leaving higher education (Rovai, 2002).

Finally, the last criticism made was that academic integration was not an important predictor of student attrition (McCubbin, 2003). This criticism, however, is not highly regarded as there is a shortfall in the amount of research conducted into assessing its validity. Although research was conducted into this particular point with over 200 students by the Office of Institutional Retention at Bowling Green State University in the US in 2001, the outcomes were considered inconclusive by Draper (2002), due to what he believed was a lack of scientific credibility demonstrated by those who carried out the study (Draper, 2002).
As a response to criticisms, Tinto released a revised version of his 1975 model in the *Journal of Higher Education* (Tinto, 1997). Although Tinto still stands by the core elements of his original model and how they relate to each other, his updated model also includes other elements that he now recognizes as important. In the revision, Tinto (1997) has focused more on the classroom as an important factor in education and attrition. He advocates that it is from the classes that the process of social and academic integration occurs. Moreover, he explains that this could be because the classroom is the common denominator in the university experience of any student. Due to this, he stresses that it is largely through the classroom that a reduction in attrition rates could take place. He acknowledges that his previous model was not adequate in its modelling of relationships between student learning (in the classroom or outside), student persistence (in a course or at university as a whole), student involvement (for instance, students taking part in university events) and quality of effort (how much effort the student is putting into his/her academic and social integration at university). Tinto explains that this is because whereas before his Student Integration Model was based in the concepts of social and academic integration happening simultaneously, he now realises that these are important at different points throughout a student’s academic development. He says that social integration is more important to students at the beginning stages of their degree, whereas academic integration plays a much more important role in the latter stages of the student’s degree. Consequently, students are more likely to withdraw from university in their first year of study if they fail to integrate themselves socially. However, at the latter stages of the degree it is unlikely that a student will withdraw due to a lower level of social integration, but more likely if the levels of academic integration are not high.
As can be seen in his second version of the model, shown in Figure 2, Tinto included pre-entry attributes, goal commitments, institutional experiences, personal/normative recognition, student effort and educational outcomes as factors not previously mentioned in the original Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1997). A factor that is seen in both versions of Tinto’s model is that the decision to withdraw from university is always dependent on student factors, such as student goals and effort, and that there is no mention of institutional factors as contributors to the student’s decision to withdraw.

*Figure 2.* Tinto’s suggested model linking classrooms, learning and persistence (1997).
Overall, Tinto’s Student Integration Models have played an important role in the development and assessment of models of student retention internationally (Braxton et al., 2000). Although there were faults found in the initial model developed, many researchers still chose to use this particular model when conducting research into student withdrawal, as its focal characteristics were considered not only important, but also crucial to the study of retention (McCubbin, 2003; Rovai, 2002). Tinto’s models inspired other scholars to develop their own models to contribute to student retention; this was the case of Pascarella’s (1980) retention model, which is explained next.

2.5.5 Pascarella’s Conceptual Model for Research on Student-Faculty Informal Contact

After Tinto introduced his model in 1975, Pascarella developed a student retention model that took into consideration student persistence and withdrawal decisions. He named his model The conceptual model of research on student-faculty informal contact (Pascarella, 1980). The model was influenced by existing studies that showed positive associations between the amount of student informal and non-class contact with faculty and educational outcomes and satisfaction at university. He believed that educational aspiration, intellectual and personal development, academic achievement, and persistence at university also affected student withdrawal. This was found to be the case especially from first to second year. Upon reviewing all the available literature, Pascarella came to several conclusions related to its quality and validity.

Firstly, he found that existing research studies did little to assess and control the quality of students’ formal classroom experiences. He explained that without the quality of
students’ classroom experiences being reported, it was difficult to determine whether the significant associations between student-faculty informal contact and educational outcomes were merely a result of the co-variation of each with students’ experience in class. In addition, he expressed that the second problem with the research studies he reviewed was related to the causal direction in the data. He found that the analysis procedures employed in most studies assumed a recursive or unidirectional model of causal relationships. Moreover, he pointed out a third weakness in those studies, which was the general lack of knowledge with regard to why students happened to engage in more or less informal contact with professors, as this element remained mostly unexplained. The fourth weakness that Pascarella (1980) identified was in direct relation to the use of possibly over-simplified operational definitions of the independent variable. Lastly, (Pascarella, 1980) believed that few studies had attempted to fit student-faculty informal contact into a larger conceptual model of college impact on students. Thus, he described the body of existing studies as somewhat dispersed, with each study building on the results of previous investigations.

As a result of his dissatisfaction with most of the contemporary research into student retention, Pascarella (1980) decided to develop his own model. The basic features drew heavily on the research studies of Astin (1970), Feldman (1971), Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975). The model developed was longitudinal and non-recursive, meaning it required multiple measures on the same cohort over time. It suggested that to understand the individual influence of student-faculty non-classroom contact on educational outcomes and institutional persistence, it was necessary to take into account more than just the background characteristics that students brought to university. It was also necessary to
take into account the actual experiences of university students in other areas, such as socially, as well as institutional factors. The model was divided into five interconnected groups of factors that could influence students in their decision to withdraw: (a) student background characteristics, (b) institutional factors, reasons that could be controlled by the university, (c) informal contact with the faculty, (d) educational outcomes, such as the student’s academic success, and (e) other university experiences with peers and/or staff. According to Pascarella, all these groups of factors could lead to the persistence or withdrawal decisions made by the students. He also explained that all these groups of factors were interconnected.

2.5.6  Bean’s Industrial Model of Student Attrition

In 1983, Bean developed another model to interconnect the factors affecting student retention. His model tried to explain student attrition, and it was based on a causal model of staff turnover developed by Price and Mueller in 1981. Bean (1983) believed that a good place to search for models that may generalize on the attrition process would be the literature on turnover in work organisations. He found a major review of related literature, revised by Price and Mueller (1981). This review formed the basis for what he described as an “industrial” model of student attrition. According to Bean, the industrial model of student attrition (a term used interchangeably with “dropout”) closely parallels the Price and Mueller model of turnover. The criterion variable, the withdrawal, is defined as the cessation of individual student enrolment in a particular institution. The unit of analysis is that of a single institution and therefore is consistent with the empirical studies of Rootman (1972), mentioned previously, who used the person-role fit theory. This model is also very closely linked to another model developed by Bean in 1980. Bean
(1983) explains that the structure of this model is taken directly from the Price and Mueller model. However, several important substitutions of variables were made in order to make the model more appropriate for students, rather than the employees for whom it was developed. Satisfaction with being a student was substituted for job satisfaction, and intent to leave was used in place of intent to stay.

Bean (1983) advocated that the industrial model of attrition shares much in common with other models of student attrition, such as those by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) and his own earlier model. In each of those models a group of variables based on the background of the student, and the student’s interaction with the institution, was expected to influence satisfaction. The model itself is divided into 12 variables that could lead to student attrition. Five of the variables are identical to those used in the Price and Mueller model.

In Bean’s model, 10 of the variables proposed lead directly to student satisfaction (or lack of), which in turn could lead to intent to leave and ultimately to withdrawal. The 10 variables proposed by Bean are: (1) student grades, as indicators of academic success, (2) practical value, (3) student development, (4) routinization, or having a common, specific routine, (5) instrumental communication, with peers and staff, (6) participation in class and with peers, (7) integration into the course/s or university in general, (8) the courses chosen by the student and whether the student enjoys taking them, (9) distributive justice, or the fair allocation of resources among diverse members of the university community, and (10) campus organizations that could help support or better integrate the student. In addition, there are two other variables that do not lead to satisfaction, but directly to intent to leave the university. These variables were opportunity (for employment or travel, for instance) and marriage.
According to Bean (1983), the main difference between his model and the other retention models used in educational settings was the exclusion of background variables, since they did not appear in the Price and Mueller (1981) model. The specification of intent to withdraw as the immediate precursor of attrition, and a clearly specified one-way causal ordering of the variables, were also big differences. Bean believed that these aspects were somewhat unclear in the Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975) models.

Data for the study by Bean (1983) were collected using a two-step longitudinal process. In the first step, a survey was mailed to all first-year students registered at a major university. The sample collected for the study consisted only of women, a total of 876, because the sample used in the Price and Mueller (1981) study consisted entirely of women. The women were selected for this study following strict criteria in order to ensure the elimination of the possible influence of confounding variables. The second step in the data collection used by Bean aimed to discover who had withdrawn from university at the time of the research. The findings of Bean’s study show that seven factors had a statistically significant influence on the intent to leave for students. These were: practical value, opportunity, marriage, campus organisations, grades, satisfaction and distributive justice. It was also discovered that although satisfaction was significantly related to student attrition, it had only about one fourth as much influence on attrition as did practical value. Bean (1983) came to the overall conclusion that much could be learned about student behaviour from the study of employee behaviour. As a result, he claimed that the structure of the model of turnover by Price and Mueller and the variables in the model were useful in organising the student attrition data collected and provided
some insights into the longitudinal process of student attrition.

2.5.7 Bean and Metzner’s Conceptual Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition

In 1985, Bean and Metzner also developed a model of student retention, mainly for non-traditional students, or students who are usually mature aged, with family commitments and working either full-time or part-time as well as studying. Bean and Metzner (1985) discovered that at the time, older, part-time and commuter students were part of an increasingly larger proportion of undergraduate collegiate student bodies and that this trend was predicted to continue as the number of traditional age college students decreased. These two researchers found that while the numbers of non-traditional students were increasing, they were also showing a higher rate of attrition from university that their non-traditional counterparts. Bean and Metzner aimed to develop a conceptual model of the attrition process for the non-traditional undergraduate student. The format of their model was influenced by models of traditional student attrition and behavioural theories. However, its content came from an extensive review of the literature on non-traditional students. Overall, their model of student retention, for non-traditional students, indicated that the withdrawal decisions of these students would be based primarily on four sets of variables. The first factor was that overall, students with poor academic performance were expected to withdraw at higher rates than those students who performed well. The second major factor contributing to the intent to leave was influenced by psychological outcomes in addition to academic variables determined by GPA academic success. The third factor was the student background and other defining variables, such as their high school performance and educational goals whilst in high school and into university. Finally, environmental variables were also expected to have
substantial direct effects on student withdrawal decisions, such as their surroundings and how they affected them. Bean and Metzner (1985) mention in their model that although it shared similarities with the previous models developed by Spady (1970), Tinto (1975) and Pascarella (1980), its content differed markedly. They claimed that unlike the previous models, which emphasised the importance of students’ social interaction with other members of the campus community, the social integration variables of their model only had minimal effects on retention. This was due to the way the non-traditional students were defined in their model, being older than 24, not living on campus, and studying part-time, or some combination of these three factors. Bean and Metzner also stated that their model was different from other models available at the time because social variables from the outside environment, such as already forged friendships, were expected to be of greater importance than social integration variables at university, such as making new friends or working with course peers.

Between 1985 and 1997 no significant contributions were found in the literature on models of student attrition. However, in 1997 a new model was developed, as explained in the next section.

2.5.8 Voorhees’ Model for Assessing Community College Student Learning and Cognitive Development

In 1997 a new model of student attrition was developed by Voorhees in the US (Voorhees, 1997). He aimed at presenting a general causal model of the antecedents of the student learning and cognitive development that could be worthy of estimating in a community university environment. The model draws upon the work of Pascarella
(1985), who suggested structural modelling as a technique for disentangling the complex relationships that could influence student learning and cognitive development. Furthermore, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model of student persistence was also used by Voorhees. This was because their model suggested that non-traditional student background characteristics, such as being a mature age student, exert direct effects on outcomes independent of the university environment (Bean et al., 1985). Voorhees’ model incorporated some factors from a model of adult participation in education, as presented by Cross in 1981. The major contribution from Cross to the present model was his acknowledgement that older students perceive the learning environment as one possibility among competing and perhaps equally compelling opportunities. Voorhees’ model also depicts student learning and cognitive development in the community university as a function of the direct and indirect influences of six major groups of variables. Voorhees claimed that ultimately the learning and cognitive development of students was directly influenced by five factors or variables: (1) academic preparedness, or how prepared for university the student was, (2) student demographics, or the breakdown of student gender, age, residence, and nationality, (3) the quality of student effort, or how hard the students were trying to achieve success academically, (4) competing demands, or the other aspects of life that got in the way of study, such as work and family, (5) peer interactions, the relationships students developed with other students, and (6) faculty interactions, or how well the students communicated with faculty members and if they had sound working relationships. Voorhees (1997) explained that the causal model represented a departure from previous models of student learning and cognitive development: “Its differences intended to be responsive to the community university through postulating that factors external to the institution can be as important
in mediating student learning as those factors occurring inside the community university” (Voorhees, 1997, p. 363).

2.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter includes a literature review of student attrition and retention studies conducted between 1970 and 2007 in Australia, the UK, the US, Europe and Asia. The first section explores the concepts of retention and attrition and their definitions. Overall, it was found that the definitions for both terms can be significantly different, depending on the variables influencing the retention statistics in each institution. The term retention is described in Australia as the students enrolled in one year of a course or degree who enrolled in the subsequent year. These students are retained by the university and have subsequently remained enrolled as part of a course or degree, according to DEST (2004). Attrition however, is better described as measuring the proportion of students in a particular year who neither graduate nor continue studying in an award course at the same institution the following year. That is, it provides a measure of the proportion of students who withdraw from one year to another. However, the definitions of the terms can be confusing at times, as different institutions often have different ideas of how retention and attrition should be measured and no universal definition, to be used in universities around the world, exists for both terms. This has been considered a challenge for many studies in this area, including this study, as it makes it harder to determine when a student can be regarded as withdrawing from a particular course or degree, since it depends on the definition offered by the institution they attend. In the study reported in this thesis, student retention is understood as the students who enrol in one semester of the course
and continue until the end of the course during that particular semester. Student attrition is understood as the measure of the proportion of students in a particular course who neither graduate nor continue studying in the course at the same institution until the end of the semester in question.

This chapter explains the factors that could influence students’ decisions to withdraw internationally. By identifying the main factors contributing to withdrawal, the study offers an insight into what other researchers have discovered in this area and makes a clear distinction between the factors that are particular to students and those factors that the university can help improve. Overall, this literature review found that there are 17 main reasons that contribute to student withdrawal.

According to the studies reviewed, the main cluster of reasons why students were withdrawing from the courses were personal or institutional. Personal factors are those factors that are specific to the students and often are out of the university’s control, whereas institutional reasons are those that could be avoided through institutional support or change. However, there were some withdrawal factors, both personal and institutional, that were overwhelmingly more significant and those are mentioned above.

Moreover, this literature review includes a section discussing the retention strategies suggested and implemented by a number of institutions in Australia and overseas. This described how these particular tertiary institutions were trying to identify and overcome student retention. A number of different strategies were described, as well as their impact in retaining students.
Finally, the last two sections of this chapter described the models of student attrition and retention described in the literature and their aims. A total of eight models were found, all of which were developed between 1975 and 1997 in the US and the UK. Special attention was given to one of the most influential models developed so far, the Student Integration Model developed by Vincent Tinto in 1975 and redesigned in 1997. Further on, other models of student retention were also explained. Overall, the main similarity between all the models found is that they all explore student retention from the final end, that is, the models identify what contributes to student withdrawal once the students have withdrawn. Little emphasis is put on identifying students at risk before they commence a course or degree. Therefore, there seems to be an absence of a prognostic approach to help determine at-risk students before they begin to study and monitor their development, whilst offering help before they decide to withdraw.

Overall, the chapter identifies a current deficiency in the literature on studies related to student attrition issues relevant to the foreign language class and second and foreign language learning studies. Therefore, exploring this area has become one of the main aims of this thesis.

The following chapter will discuss the empirical aims of the study reported here, as well as the research methodology used to gather data to answer the relevant questions.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research methodology used in this study and for clarity it has been divided into eight sections. The first section describes the aims of the study. It is followed by Section 3.3, which discusses and justifies the research methodology chosen, with particular emphasis on the case study and longitudinal study methods applied. Section 3.4 discusses the ethical clearance required, Section 3.5 examines the educational context of the courses being studied in this thesis, Section 3.6 discusses the participants in the study, and Section 3.7 gives an overview of the research design and instruments, with sub-sections describing each research instrument. Finally, Section 3.8 discusses the data analysis procedures used, and the end of the chapter includes a summary illustrating the major points of the chapter.

3.2 THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

The two main aims of the research conducted for this PhD thesis were (a) to document language students’ views on the issue of student retention and attrition in the Elementary Spanish courses offered at an Australian university, and (b) to determine if anything
could be done in order to decrease the attrition of students in foreign language courses at the university in question. The study took place between 2004 and 2008 and a total of 85 students participated. Unlike other studies on student attrition, the aim of this study was to investigate in-course attrition, which differs greatly from the attrition that occurs between academic semesters. In-course attrition refers to the attrition that occurs when students withdraw from the course/s during the 13-week semester.

To accomplish the first aim, data were collected and analysed from two groups of language students—those who had withdrawn and those who were continuing their first-year language studies in the participating Australian university. While it was crucial to collect data from the students who withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course examined, it became clear during the implementation of the study that it was also important to gather information on why students remained in the Spanish language learning program. Therefore, students who did not leave the first year Spanish courses were also invited to participate. This initial stage of the study documented the students’ reasons for either discontinuing or continuing their Spanish language learning studies. This aim was accomplished between the first semester of 2004 and the second semester of 2006. Whether the retention and attrition factors mentioned by the literature were affecting the students participating in this study was also examined.

In addition, the thesis explored if it was possible to develop a prognostic approach to student retention that could be used to help identify students at risk of withdrawing. As a result, a prognostic approach instrument was developed and piloted with a small sample
of Spanish language students. The feedback collected from the pilot trial then helped to improve the instrument for its next application.

3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: THE CASE STUDY

Case studies can prove invaluable in adding to understanding, extending experience, and increasing conviction about a subject (Stake, 2000). It can be argued that case study is a research design, rather than an approach to the collection or analysis of data (Schrank, 2006). According to Yin (1994, 2003), a case study is a well-established research strategy where the focus is on a case in its own right, and taking its context into account. Case studies must involve the utilisation of a wide array of different data sources and a number of different analytic strategies. However, these must all be focused in some way for the researcher to benefit from the data collected (Gray, 2004; Schrank, 2006). In fact, according to Kane and O’Reilly de Brun (2001), case studies use almost all the research techniques in the social scientist’s tool-kit. While case studies have almost invariably been associated with qualitative data (Robson, 2002), at times quantitative indicators and inferential statistical methods are employed (Schrank, 2006). In this research, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed.

Case studies have become one of the most common methods of qualitative enquiry (Stake, 2000). A case may be simple or complex and can be described as a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry. The most particular aspect of the case study in the social sciences is the selection of cases to study (Stake, 1995). Hancock and Algozzine (2006) describe research, such as the one conducted in this study, as
intrinsic. They used this term to describe a case study research that aims to find out more about a particular individual, group, event or organization. Intrinsic casework often begins with cases already identified—cases that are already of prominent interest before formal study begins. Case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed and when the investigator has little control over the events (Yin, 1994, 2003). As this research aims to analyse the opinions and outcomes of events not controllable by the researcher it was considered appropriate to use the case study.

A characteristic of a case study is that it investigates an individual, group or others to answer specific research questions and seeks a range of different kinds of evidence, which is there in the case setting (Freebody, 2003; Gillham, 2000; Hancock et al., 2006; Hatch, 2002; Johnson et al., 2004). Case studies need not be studies of individual people or circumstances, but can be done on a group or in other circumstances where whole communities of people are involved (Freebody, 2003; Robson, 2002). The evidence has to be abstracted and collated to get the best possible answers for the research questions. The use of only one kind of source of evidence is likely to be insufficient and the use of multiple sources of evidence, each with their strengths and weaknesses, is a key characteristic of case study research (Gillham, 2000). In this study student questionnaires and interviews were used as research tools to gather data, as well as quantitative analysis based on Faculty-generated student withdrawal data from the university Spanish courses, in order to increase the validity of the study.

Berg (2007) explains that there are several designs for cases that can be used in case study research: exploratory, explanatory and descriptive case studies. Exploratory case
studies are those where fieldwork and data collection may be undertaken before designing a research question (Berg, 2007; Johnson et al., 2004; Neuman, 2006). This type of case study can be seen as a prelude to a large social scientific study. Explanatory case studies on the other hand are useful when conducting causal studies, and are mostly used in complex studies of organizations and communities when the employment of multivariate cases to examine the plurality of influences could be useful (Berg, 2007; Johnson et al., 2004; Neuman, 2006). Lastly, descriptive case studies require that the investigator presents a descriptive theory, which will establish the overall framework to be followed throughout the study. Usually this means that the investigator must also determine what the unit of analysis in the study will be, before beginning the research (Berg, 2007; Hancock et al., 2006). Therefore, taking into consideration the case designs available, the designs used for this longitudinal case study can be described as a combination of descriptive and exploratory. Each of the five semesters of data collected for this study is an individual descriptive case study, as the units of analysis were determined before the study started and the framework was developed before the data collection began, in order for the researcher to have a clear idea of how the investigation would unfold. The final semester of data collection contains an exploratory case study, which included a framework that was developed prior to beginning the research. This case study functioned as a pilot study for an innovative prognostic instrument developed as an outcome of the data collected from the five prior descriptive case studies.

The case studies described for this study are of multiple cases that focus on collecting data about student retention in first year Elementary Spanish courses. The data were collected from students studying in different semesters between 2004 and 2006, from
data gathered for class assessment reports from 2001 to 2006, and from the pilot study that was developed as a result.

3.4 ETHICAL CLEARANCE

In order to invite students to participate in the study it was necessary to seek ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the university where this PhD study was conducted. Ethical clearance is intended to assist with the protection of the welfare and rights of research participants, whilst facilitating the conduct of excellent research. Therefore, submitting research for ethical review potentially improves the design of the project, by embedding ethical considerations as an integral component of the research.

The prospective participants were students who had withdrawn and students who had continued studying in an elementary Spanish program. To gain human ethics approval through the University in question, it was necessary to submit an application to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Subsequently, this had to be reviewed and then approved for the research to commence. Approval was given for the research to commence on the seventh of May, 2004.

3.5 THE FIRST YEAR ELEMENTARY SPANISH COURSES

The Elementary Spanish program is a tertiary language program that has been running at the University in question since 1993. The first year courses investigated for this study
had a large number of students enrolled for the first semester of the academic year, generally averaging 150 students. However, often during the first semester students withdrew from the course.

There were two first year language courses offered to undergraduate and miscellaneous students alike. These courses were Elementary Spanish 1, offered in the first semester of an academic year, and Elementary Spanish 2, offered in the second semester. Elementary Spanish 1 begins by giving students a basic knowledge of the language. This course is restricted to students who have no prior knowledge of the Spanish language, which means that no Spanish-speaking natives or heritage students, with some knowledge of Spanish language, can study in these courses. The main aims and objectives of Elementary Spanish 1 are: to offer students a basic linguistic grounding in Spanish on which to build in the future; to motivate students to continue to learn and use Spanish, in both the classroom and the broader community; to develop students’ awareness of language-learning strategies, thus better preparing them for independent learning; to acquaint students with Hispanic cultures as they are encountered throughout the Hispanic world; to provide students with an appreciation of cultural differences and similarities; and to enhance students’ sensitivity to other cultural practices.

During the second semester of classes the prerequisite for entry into Elementary Spanish 2 is that students have undertaken the first semester course Elementary Spanish 1 or have the equivalent level of competence. Students who have not completed Elementary Spanish 1 in the participating university have their Spanish language competence assessed by the program coordinator and/or convenor of the first year courses.
Using a communicative approach based on Terrell’s Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Swan, 1985; Terrell, 2002, 2006), the course itself concentrates on teaching students the language at a basic level. The teachers use the textbook Dos Mundos (Terrell, 2002, 2006) in both courses. Students are expected to own a copy of the textbook or to have access to the text in order to read it and complete exercises in and out of class. The classes are delivered in Spanish, with only minor instructions and/or explanations spoken in English. In the 13-week semester, students must participate in two workshops per week. Each workshop lasts two hours. The classes introduce all language learning skills—speaking, listening, reading and writing—through in-class activities that promote the use of those skills. Listening exercises, crosswords, reading activities with comprehension and group/pair games, among others, are all used in class. Grammar learning is done in-class through teacher explanations in the target language and at times in English (if the new concept is considered quite difficult to grasp). Any new grammar concepts introduced are practised almost immediately by the students through the in-class activities. As the teacher follows the curriculum dictated by the textbook, new grammatical concepts and lexical terms are introduced every week. As the students’ knowledge increases during the semester more complex grammar concepts and vocabulary are introduced. The textbook also exposes the learner to some cultural knowledge from the Hispanic world.

The teaching semester runs for 13 weeks, two of which are dedicated to oral and written assessment. The two Elementary courses have an 80% compulsory class attendance policy; any student who has 20% absences is not allowed to sit for their final exams. The
assessment strategy used in the Elementary Spanish courses changed in the early stages of this study. Therefore, two different types of assessment were used in the courses during the length of this study. According to the teachers from these courses, the first assessment type ran from when the course was first introduced in 1994 to the first semester of 2004. During these 10 years the assessment consisted of three assessment items. The first comprised fortnightly short grammar and vocabulary exams that the students completed in class, covering the chapters introduced in class; in the second assessment item, the student had to complete listening and writing activities from their workbook (once the chapter had been covered in class). The final assessment item included two oral exams or “interviews” with the teacher, the first taking place half way through the semester and the second at the end of the semester during Week 13. Overall, the assessment strategy used in the first 10 years of the program was more formative, as it included more opportunities for students to receive constant teacher feedback on their progress in different skills; during this time, there was a form of student assessment that took place every two weeks.

In the second semester of 2004 changes were introduced to the assessment strategy used in Elementary Spanish 1 and 2. The fortnightly grammar and vocabulary short tests conducted in class were replaced with two written exams, which took place during the same weeks as the oral exams, in the middle and at the end of the semester. The new assessment items were more summative in nature, as students only received feedback on some aspects of their basic written Spanish performance twice during the semester rather than on a fortnightly basis. According to the teachers, with this new assessment strategy the students were encouraged to be more independent learners, but at the same time they
were encourage to actively seek feedback to determine their progress. In order to receive any feedback between exams, students had to undertake their own independent study outside of the class hours and show it to their teacher.

3.6 THE PARTICIPANTS

As one of the aims of the study was to determine the factors that led to foreign language student withdrawal, it was of crucial importance to include the opinions of students about their withdrawal in addition to analysing numerical data from Elementary Spanish class assessment reports. Both the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students helped the researcher to identify the factors that were affecting withdrawal from the Elementary Spanish course. As illustrated in Table 1, three specific groups of student participants were invited to take part in this study: (a) the withdrawn students, those who withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course during the semester; (b) the non-withdrawn students, those who had continued in the course until the end of the semester; and (c) the prognostic approach students. These latter students were enrolled in three specific Elementary Spanish classes; 18 participated in the piloting of the prognostic approach in Semester I, 2007, while 31 participated in the implementation of the prognostic approach in Semester I, 2008.
A total of 85 students participated in the study. Twelve were students who withdrew from the program between the first semester of 2004 and 2006, 36 were students who participated as non-withdrawn students between 2005 and 2006, and 49 were students who took part in the “First Year Student Survey – FYSS” prognostic approach instrument in 2007 and 2008.

3.6.1 The Withdrawn Students

There were a total of 12 student participants in this study who had withdrawn from the course in their first semester of study. The overall number of withdrawn participants was not very high and this was mostly due to the fact that once students had withdrawn from the course they became a lot harder to contact. Some students, once contacted, also decided that they no longer wanted to be involved in the study, a problem noted by Lee.
and Glossop (1996, 2002). The withdrawn participants consisted of 4 males and 8 females all between the ages of 17 and 35.

The withdrawn students who were interviewed and completed questionnaires had withdrawn from the Elementary Spanish course during the semester, thus they had contributed to the in-course attrition. As mentioned previously, the process of in-course attrition differs greatly from the attrition that occurs between semesters. While acknowledging that there was (and continues to be) a rate of attrition that occurs between the first and second semesters of the Elementary Spanish courses, this was not the focus of this research.

No international students participated in the study as withdrawn students and it was hypothesised that this could be due to the importance of attendance to overseas students. However, according to the International Office at the participating university, there is only one rule that applies to international students, and that is the requirement that they must study no less than 30 credit points per semester (or partake in a full-time study load). The International Office also confirmed that international students are allowed to drop courses and swap courses if they choose, within the normal university rules that apply to all domestic students. However, it has been reported that on average, international students have a much lower attrition rate than domestic students at university (DEST, 2004).

In order to recruit the withdrawn students as participants in the study, between 2004 and 2006 all students studying the Elementary Spanish courses (approximately 600 students)
were given consent forms. These were distributed by their teachers, and the potential participants filed them out and signed them. Each student also received an information package with information about the study, its aims and its objectives (see Appendix 1). The information package included a consent form (see Appendix 2) that the potential participants had to sign after reading the information provided about the study.

The Elementary Spanish teachers were invited, during the first team meeting of the Elementary Spanish course, to help with some aspects of data collection. During that meeting the researcher briefed them about the study and the information package given to students. They were asked to provide information to their students about the study if required, and all teachers were advised that their participation was voluntary. Their main role was to distribute the consent forms to their students. The teachers were an important element in the selection of participants, as they kept an attendance roll in each class and therefore knew if students had been absent for many classes or had advised that they had withdrawn. At the end of the semester, the teachers gave the researcher their class lists showing the students who had withdrawn. This information was corroborated using the official class list compiled by the university. Once these data were collected, the withdrawn students were contacted and invited to complete a questionnaire and participate in an interview.

3.6.2 The Non-Withdrawn Students

From 2005 to 2006 a total of 24 non-withdrawn students, between the ages of 17 and 54, participated in the study. Recruitment of the non-withdrawn students was similar to that of the withdrawn students. Each student was given an information package and asked to
complete a consent form. In Week 13 of the semester (the last week) the students were reminded of the study and again were invited to participate. Those who agreed to participate were given a questionnaire and later interviewed for the study.

3.6.3 The Prognostic Approach Students

Finally, a total of 49 students used the prognostic approach instrument, the First Year Student Survey. These students comprised a combination of males and females between the ages of 17 and 35. The students who participated in the piloting of the prognostic instrument were approached to participate much earlier than the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students: they were told about the study and given information during the first week of the semester and then invited to complete the prognostic instrument survey straight away. These students were then also given a separate, more detailed information sheet, which will be discussed in Chapter Five. More details about the pilot study, the prognostic approach and the participants can be found in that chapter.

3.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND INSTRUMENTS

As stated in Chapter One, the main research questions in this study are:

1) Why are students leaving the Elementary Spanish courses during the semester?

2) How can potential in-course attrition be identified?

The data gathered for this study can be categorised as secondary and primary data (Burns, 1996). According to Kumar (1999), secondary data sources can range from hospital and government records to the collection of data from articles, journals, magazines, books and periodicals. Primary data sources are those where data can be collected first-hand, for
example when interviewing workers about their views on job satisfaction (Henn Weinstein & Foard, 2006). A number of different research methods or instruments can be used to collect primary data (Henn et al., 2006). The choice of methods used depends on many factors, such as the purpose of the study or the research available (Burns, 1996).

The data sources used in each semester of this study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Research Instrument used</th>
<th>Semester One</th>
<th>Semester Two</th>
<th>Type of data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Secondary Data (Documentary Data)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Secondary Data (Documentary Data)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Secondary Data (Documentary Data)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Secondary Data (Documentary Data)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Questionnaire – Withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Student Questionnaire – Withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Primary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Interview – Withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Student Interview – Withdrawn Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Secondary Data/Documentary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Questionnaire – Withdrawn and Non-withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Student Questionnaire – Withdrawn and Non-withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Primary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Interview – Withdrawn and Non-withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Student Interview – Withdrawn and Non-withdrawn Students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Course Assessment Report</td>
<td>Development of Prognostic Approach</td>
<td>Secondary Data/Documentary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Questionnaire – Withdrawn and Non-withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Development of Prognostic Approach</td>
<td>Primary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Interview – Withdrawn and Non-withdrawn Students</td>
<td>Development of Prognostic Approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Pilot Study – Prognostic Approach</td>
<td>Modification of Prognostic Approach</td>
<td>Primary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Implementation and Evaluation of Prognostic Approach</td>
<td></td>
<td>Primary Data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each discrete part of the study used different research instruments. These will be discussed according to the stage of the study, including an explanation of why the research instruments were chosen and how they were used.
3.7.1 The First Stage: Examination of Documentary Data

Secondary and primary data were gathered in this study through the use of different research instruments. Secondary data were collected by analysing the content of class assessment reports and course outlines. The class assessment reports are reports set by the university in question which outline the student numbers, the average student results, the assessment taken, and the numbers of student withdrawers in any given academic semester. The course outline is a document that describes the elements a course should contain, presents them in a progressive and logical order and helps to present to students a succinct course curriculum design.

These documents were analysed to better illustrate the numbers of students who had previously enrolled and withdrawn from the Elementary Spanish courses, as well as to identify the type of assessment that they completed. A total of 12 class assessment reports were gathered, dating from Semester I, 2001, to Semester I, 2006.

It is pertinent at this point to discuss content analysis as a research strategy. The process of content analysis can be defined as systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. Content analysis as a research method is consistent with the goals and standards of survey research, that is, in content analysis an attempt is made to measure all variables as they naturally or normally occur (Neuendorf, 2002).

There are three main aims of using content analysis in this study: firstly, to analyse the secondary data collected from class assessment reports, by coding into appropriate categories relevant to the topic of the study; secondly, to help make sense of the data collected from the class assessment reports and distinguish the relationship to the topic of the study; and finally, to help in analysing the categories developed and interpret them in
relation to the study. One of the main advantages of using content analysis was its unobtrusiveness and ability to identify trends and patterns over time (Sproule, 2006). According to Sproule, the focus of content analysis is to identify any occurrences of the relevant concepts in the selected texts, which in this study were attrition and retention figures. Following this description, the content analysis was completed by coding the content in the university reports into smaller, more manageable categories. Once this was established, the presence of the concept in the text was tallied and quantified. The results of this content analysis are discussed in Chapter Four.

3.7.2 The Second Stage: Analysis of the Questionnaires and Interviews
Primary data for this study were collected from students using student questionnaires and interviews. Both research instruments were used with the withdrawn and non-withdrawn participants in the study from 2004 to 2006. The following section will discuss the justification for using both research instruments and provide a full description of each instrument as well as a description of their administration and their advantages and limitations with regard to this study.

3.7.2.1 The Student Questionnaires
Questionnaires can vary greatly in terms of purpose, size and appearance (Frazer & Lawley, 2000; Kumar, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Questionnaires are mainly designed to collect information which can ultimately be used as data for analysis, therefore, they should consist of a clear written list of questions, identical for every participant, and should gather information by asking questions in direct relation to the research topic (Miles et al., 1994). It is crucial that questions included in a questionnaire
are clear and easy to understand, as there will be nobody to explain their meaning at the time the participants are responding (Bell, 1999). All questionnaires should be developed in an easy to comprehend style, so that respondents feel as if someone is talking them through it (Kumar, 1999). Therefore, when developing the student questionnaire used in this study, all the elements that help to design an effective questionnaire were taking into consideration.

The order in which questions are presented in questionnaires is very important (Frazer et al., 2000). According to Kumar (1999), the likelihood of a participant starting a questionnaire on a sensitive question and then finishing the questionnaire is unlikely; therefore great care was taken when developing the question order. Easy and general questions were put at the beginning of the questionnaire to gather all the general information first and encourage participants to continue through to the end. The language used was simple and unambiguous, so as not to confuse participants, and care was also taken to ensure vague questions were not asked and any words or phrases that could cause offence were omitted.

It has been argued that the use of the questionnaire as a data collection tool works best when used with respondents in different geographical locations (Frazer et al., 2000) and this seemed as one of the possible advantages of using a student questionnaire. As mentioned before, the participants were recruited with the assistance of their classroom teachers who kept records of student classroom attendance. However, even though the researcher was informed about the students who were no longer attending classes, it was hard to determine whether these students were still attending the university at all and whereabouts they were living. This aspect played a very important role in the choice of
the questionnaire in this research, for the questionnaire allowed the researcher the opportunity to reach students through their permanent mailing address.

Questionnaires have also been found to work well when what is required is fairly straightforward information from participants (Sarantakos, 2005). In this study, the use of questionnaires allowed for the inclusion of general questions concerning the participants’ withdrawal from the course. The majority of information collected in this study was gathered through the use of questionnaires but an in-depth interview was conducted later to gain more information from some of the participants. It was found that even though some participants declined to take part in the interviews, through completing the questionnaire they had already provided a significant amount of information for analysis.

Frazer and Lawley (2000) argue that questionnaires are very useful when implications of age, disability or intellect do not affect the respondents. As the participants in this study were university students, with no history of disabilities or intellectual problems, the researcher found it appropriate to use questionnaires. However in order to guarantee the effectiveness of the questionnaire to collect the data needed from the participants, this was piloted. It was expected that all participants would have the ability to understand the questions and read them appropriately; in the event that a participant with a disability required help with the questionnaire, then appropriate measures would be taken. In order to determine whether this was the case with any of the participants, the researcher spoke to the teachers of each course.
It has been argued that when looking at the use of questionnaires as data collection tools, it is important also to make sure that the type of data that can be collected through a questionnaire is suited to the research being conducted (Frazer et al., 2000). The data collected through questionnaires is distinct from that collected in interviews and observations or through secondary means. As Kumar (1999) explains, the information gathered from questionnaires tends to be grouped into “factual information” or “opinions”. The use of the questionnaire was found a suitable research instrument in this study because it required the collection of factual information to determine whether different variables, such as participants’ age, gender, university enrolment status and degree, contributed in any way to their withdrawal from the Elementary Spanish courses. This study also intended to collect information on what other personal and university experience factors may have contributed to students’ withdrawal, as well as what aspects related to the content or teaching of the courses may have accounted for their decision to withdraw. As a result, and as explained in the next section, the structure and content of the questionnaire was designed in an informed way and piloted before being delivered.

Developing a questionnaire can be a time-consuming and challenging effort. Many aspects related to the structure of the questionnaire, such as question types and length, must be established even before the questions are developed. Also, simple tasks such as determining the questionnaire return date must be planned effectively so that the questionnaire will work (Sarantakos, 2005). The questionnaire developed for this study included an information letter that gave participants an overview of the research and what was required of them (see Appendix 3). This letter included the name of the university and the faculty conducting the research study, the main aims of the research and its
relevance, instructions for filling out the questionnaire, and relevant contact details of the researcher and supervisor. There was also a statement outlining that participation in the study was voluntary and that their responses would be kept anonymous and confidential.

As there are no rules to specify how many questions should be included in a questionnaire, it can be hard for researchers to determine what will suit their needs. However, it is important to consider the participants’ time and their ability to maintain attention, as an unduly long questionnaire will cause them to lose track and interest in providing information (Frazer et al., 2000). In this study it was very important to gain as much information as possible from the participants through the questionnaire because the follow-up interview was not compulsory. Several steps were taken to ensure the questionnaire was easy to follow and user friendly. Only questions absolutely essential to the research were included, and the researcher aimed to make the questionnaire as easy to read and understand as possible. The pilot of the questionnaire therefore assessed its straightforwardness, ease of understanding and speed of answering, as suggested by Frazer and Lawley (2000). Although the final version of the questionnaire contained five pages, the questionnaire took participants only around 10 minutes to complete, because many of the questions were multiple choice and closed-ended. The final questionnaire had a neat presentation with clear bold headings and clearly presented lists and tables that could be easily interpreted by the participant (see Appendices 4 and 5).

When developing the items for the questionnaire it was important to determine the key issues involved in the research. As one of the main aims of this study was to find out the factors why students withdraw from the Elementary Spanish courses, a combination of
open-ended and closed-ended questions was used. The close-ended questions intended to find out if these participants’ reasons were the same as those identified by the literature and also to gather information on other factors not mentioned in the literature. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to provide any possible answer as a response (Sarantakos, 2005), and were used to determine participants’ opinions about issues related to their personal course and university experience.

Burns (1996) explains that open-ended questions may have many possible answers, whereas closed-ended questions often include a list or box next to the question which allows the respondent to choose from a number of fixed alternatives. The closed-ended method facilitated the process of completing the questionnaire as the participants could choose one or many answers depending on their circumstances, for example in responding to a closed-ended question such as, “what did you like the most about the Elementary Spanish class?”, participants could choose from options including elements such as the teacher, the book and their peers, among others. This type of closed-ended question is also referred to in the research methodologies literature as checklist response. Checklist response sets work well when it is expected that the participant may have more than one response; it also works well as a reminder of any other factors they may have forgotten (Burns, 1996; Sarantakos, 2005).

The questionnaire designed in this study for the withdrawn students had five pages incorporating three sections (see Appendix 5). The first section presented a general information section that aimed to gather demographic information about the participant’s profile, through questions related to students’ gender, age, and whether they had enrolled
as a mature age student. The questionnaire then asked the participant to specify if English was their first language, their enrolment status at the university, if their degree was their “preferred” degree, if they had to learn a foreign language as a compulsory measure, and if they were an international student. The final part of this section asked the students to choose, from a number of statements, the one that best described what they were doing since leaving the Elementary Spanish course. This information helped the researcher to build a picture of the students’ personal and academic profile and to identify if they were at risk of withdrawing, according to factors mentioned in the literature. Questions A to H of this demographic section were also included in the questionaries designed for the non-withdrawers (see Appendix 4).

The second section of the questionnaire initially comprised two parts titled “The Elementary Spanish Course” and “Language Learning Background”. Due to more findings in the literature and the data analysis, a third part called “Foreign Language Anxiety and Elementary Spanish” was added from 2005 onwards. In part one of the second section (The Elementary Spanish Course), participants were asked to explain why they had decided to study Elementary Spanish at the university. A checklist response gave the students many possible options; however, it also allowed the students to provide their own answers if their reasons did not match any from the checklist. This question was important because it gave the researcher a good idea of why the students decided to learn a language, including whether their reasons were more personal, academic or social. This also provided some insights into their initial expectations of learning Spanish. According to Campbell et al., (1997), students who have mentors are more likely to continue studying a particular course. Therefore, the data collected from this part of the
second section intended to validate whether any students who had Spanish-speaking friends or family were less likely to withdraw from the courses. This section was also included in the questionnaires developed for the students who had not withdrawn from the courses, in order to provide some comparative data.

Part two of the second section of the questionnaire collected information about the students’ language learning background: if they had previously studied a foreign language and if so, the language studied as well as the place where it was studied. It also gathered data on the students’ expectations of the courses and the teachers. According to the literature, there is a collision between the expectations of students and the reality they experience when they go to university, especially at a first-year level, with the discrepancy between student expectations and reality sometimes leading to student attrition (Baxter et al., 2000; Lowe et al., 2003). The final two questions in this part asked the students what they liked the most and the least about their Elementary Spanish course, by choosing from a checklist response and also by having the option of writing the factors themselves. This part was very useful as it allowed the researcher to discover if the students had previously learnt foreign languages, and therefore, if they had an awareness of what to expect of the foreign language learning process. This second section was also included in the questionnaires developed for the non-withdrawers to determine whether there were any prominent differences between these groups.

The third section of the questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part one was called “Factors influencing your withdrawal from your Elementary Spanish studies” and it aimed to discover the factors that led to the students’ withdrawal. The students were asked to choose from a variety of factors that could have potentially led to their
withdrawal, as well being given the opportunity to write their own. Other questions included in this part asked the students if they had spoken to anyone about their decision to withdraw from the Elementary Spanish course. The students were also asked how their experience in the course could have been improved, by asking questions relating to the teacher and teaching, class size, assessment method/s, attendance modes and timetabling and so on.

The second part of the third section, called “Foreign language anxiety and elementary Spanish”, was included in 2005 and aimed to discover if the participants had ever experienced any type of anxiety while attending Elementary Spanish classes. Students were asked to reply to short-answer questions and checklist responses to describe their feelings of anxiety in class, since some researchers (Horwitz et al., 1986) believe foreign language anxiety could lead to student attrition. Although the term was first used by Elaine Horwitz in 1986, it was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that it was researched in detail again, by Onwuegbuzie and MacIntyre (1994; 1999). In light of this, this section was included in the questionnaire to collect data to explore if this factor could be contributing to student withdrawal. This section was also included in the questionnaires given to non-withdrawers to gather comparative data that would allow insights into the levels and types of anxiety that may be present in both groups. Finally, the questionnaire also included in this section a part that asked students to express the in-class activities that made them feel the most anxious.

The questionnaire was chosen as a data collection tool for this study due to its many advantages. Overall, questionnaires are a very economical option and they can also save
time; they also have the advantage of supplying more standardised answers, making it a lot easier to make contrasts and comparisons between the results gathered from all participants (Sarantakos, 2005). As mail questionnaires were used in this research they made the process of collecting data easier to organise. However, some limitations were found when using the questionnaires in this study. The most important factor was the low response rate, a negative aspect which is quite well known (Kane et al., 2001). To try to counteract this problem, participants were contacted by email one week before the questionnaire was due and then again (by phone or email) the day after it was due. If the participants had still not returned the questionnaire, then another reminder was sent. It has to be mentioned that in this research study, any non-response was more due to the nature of the study dealing with students withdrawing from the course, and this will be discussed in more detail later on.

The other main limitation that has been mentioned about the use of mail questionnaires has been their inability to clarify any issues or misunderstanding that the participants may have (Bryman, 2004; Kumar, 1999). In this study, even though the cover letter clearly stated all the contacts for the researcher and supervisors, nobody called with any queries.

3.7.2.2 The Student Interviews

The interview is a method commonly used in social research for collecting information. It is important to determine if interviews are really necessary for the research being undertaken (May, 2001). The decision to use interviews in this research was made by considering the type of data needed to answer the research questions—data that documented the course and university life experiences of the participants. In some cases,
data of this nature will include the discussion of sensitive issues for student withdrawal, such as a personal illness (Robson, 2002). It was clear that this study required the collection of detailed information gathered through interviews to gain a more in-depth, thorough view of why students were withdrawing from Elementary Spanish. The interview was also considered a useful instrument to complement the data obtained previously from the questionnaires.

There are three main types of interview structure: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Kumar, 1999), all of which work well for different reasons. Structured interviews involve asking the same set of questions, in the same way, to a number of interview respondents, and are often employed in projects where a team of researchers conducts a large number of interviews (Travers, 2006). In contrast, the unstructured interview does not set order or particular wording to questions but allows the researcher to answer questions, make clarifications and add or delete questions between interviews (Berg, 2007). Unstructured interviews are most often used in the course of field research in order to augment field observations, as they allow the researcher to gain additional information about various phenomena they might observe (Berg, 2007). The semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to use a set of questions, also referred to as an interview schedule (Travers, 2006). This provides for greater flexibility with question order or a topic raised and also allows the interviewee to discuss their opinions and ideas more freely. The questions are more open-ended questions to elicit the opinion of the participants and to encourage significant discussion (Sarantakos, 2005). The semi-structured interview is less intrusive to those being interviewed and it encourages two-way communication as those being interviewed can ask questions of the interviewer. This
interview type was the chosen as the most appropriate for this study as it was important to provide the participants with a degree of freedom during the interview for them to be able to elaborate freely their opinions on the factors that led to their withdrawal (May, 2001).

In the same fashion that was used with the questionnaires, the order of the questions included in the interview presented easy, more general, non-sensitive questions first and then introduced the more personal questions. This approach also ensured that the participants’ interest was sustained, while a certain level of comfort was being built between the interviewer and interviewee. It has been reported that this building up of a good level of trust or rapport can gradually stimulate the participant to be more open with their answers (May, 2001).

As the interviews in this research were used as a follow-up for the questionnaires, the questions used were very similar but were more detailed; unlike the questionnaires, no closed-ended questions were used in the interviews. The aim was to allow the participants to think about their experience and offer their opinions. Initially, in 2004, the interview started with nine questions. However, from 2005 onwards, additional questions were added to the interview related to foreign language anxiety and the possible influences that could have on student withdrawal. The same interview questions and structure were used with the non-withdrawn students (with the exception of a few questions specific to the circumstances of withdrawn students). The interview questions for the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students are displayed in Appendices 4 and 5.
The interviews moved straight into asking students about their Elementary Spanish experience—why they decided to study the language and why at the particular university. These questions were repeated from the questionnaires, both to ensure participants had not made a hasty selection from the checklist response and to allow them to elaborate on the issue. The interviews also asked about expectations of the course and teachers, and why students withdrew from the course, to complement and extend the information already gathered from the questionnaires.

The interviews asked the participants for more details concerning anything that could have been modified in the language course to encourage them to stay. It also asked them to comment on what they would have personally changed about the course to make it better for them. The responses to these questions were important as some of the suggestions made by the students here could perhaps contribute to the retention of future students. Like the questionnaires, the interviews also asked the participants to discuss what they liked and disliked about the course, this time in their own words and without space constraints. However, the interview also sought to discover how the Elementary Spanish courses differed from other courses (if any) the participants studied at the university. This was to find out if the students felt that some aspects of the course may have been quite different from other courses, in ways such as assessment or teaching approaches, and to explore if those differences may have been the trigger for their withdrawal.

From 2005 onwards four new questions were added to the interviews, dealing specifically with the issue of foreign language anxiety and how the participants felt in the Spanish
class. Although it was not assumed that any of the participants suffered from foreign language anxiety, it was important to identify whether this variable could have contributed to their withdrawal. An initial question explored if the students suffered from any form of anxiety whilst in class; if the participant answered positively, the interviewer would explore further with the participant the other three questions related to language learning anxiety. These questions aimed to collect data on how the participants overcame their anxiety, if they discussed their feelings of anxiety with anyone, and the activities that may have triggered their anxiety. These questions also explored whether they believed that their anxiety could have contributed to their withdrawal from the course. Once again, these themes had been explored in the questionnaire, but not in as much detail. Finally the questionnaire asked what the students were doing since leaving Elementary Spanish and if they had any further comments.

Interviews are an effective method of data collection, especially for more in-depth data (Shuy, 2003), however it is essential to structure them in a manner that is easy to understand and not confusing for participants. The participants were contacted by telephone to advise the time and day for the interviews. Before the interview began, permission to be recorded was requested. All interviews were taped to facilitate their interpretation after being transcribed. Whilst the interviews were being conducted the interviewer also took some written notes to record the main points made by the students.

To make the best use of the interview time, care was taken to ensure that the questions being asked were not vague or ambiguous. Simple, everyday language was used to avoid confusing the participants and to ensure their responses. The interviews were conducted
one-to-one (the most common form of conducting semi-structured interviews) and over the telephone. The telephone format was chosen due to its relative ease of arranging (Seidman, 1998); (Shuy, 2003), cost effectiveness, and time efficiency. Telephone interviews also offers fast results, and for this reason they are often favoured over face-to-face interviews (Shuy, 2003).

The participants in the research were made aware of their potential participation in an interview in the information letter that they were given when they completed their questionnaires. All participants were invited twice to take part in the interviews: first when they read the cover letters included in their information packs, and then at the end of the questionnaires. A table was included in the final page of the questionnaire (see Appendix 5) that enabled the participants to nominate the most appropriate for them to have an interview, and their contact number. They were at that point made aware of the themes and questions to be discussed in the interviews. They were also made aware that, as with the questionnaire, their participation in the interview was voluntary and their responses would be kept confidential.

The interview was chosen as a data collection tool for this research due to its many advantages, in particular the opportunity to probe for more detailed information. This aspect was especially important for this study as the interviews were used as a follow up to the questionnaires. Interviews have been found to be an effective way of gathering data about people’s opinions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). On some occasions, the participants of this study discussed factors that they had not mentioned in the questionnaires as it was easier to express their views in a spoken mode—one of the advantages of using the interview as a research tool. Another advantage was the higher
degree of flexibility, which allowed the participants to go into more detail when responding to questions. In addition, the interview format allowed the interviewer to explore different questions in a different order, depending on the course that the interviews were taking with each participant, and how much information was needed to gain a clear picture about the particular topic being discussed (Sarantakos, 2005).

Nonetheless, the use of interviews also posed some limitations, mainly related to their reliability and the consumption of time. Reliability can be taken into consideration as a limitation with most data collection tools, as it is hard to determine if and when participants are telling the truth (Seidman, 1998) or if it is rather what they think the interviewer wants to hear. Factors known to influence the reliability of a subject’s responses involve personality, interaction during the interview, gender, and age (Burns, 1996). When analysing data collected through the use of interviews, researchers may need to consider if the participant is stretching a story to make a point or withholding information so that a particular situation is viewed in a better light.

In addition, the fact that the interview process can be a time-consuming operation was also considered a limitation to this study. The use of open-ended questions in the interview provided vast amounts of data from the participants, so the transcription of the interviews and the data coding, collation and analysis can be complex and extremely labour intensive for just one data source (Seidman, 1998).

The third disadvantage of using interviews as a research tool in this study was related to the low number of non-withdrawing participants who agreed to take part in the interviews. It was found that although the majority of students were happy to fill out a
questionnaire in class, not so many were as eager to take part in a phone interview outside of class hours. It is thought that this could have been due to two reasons. Firstly, the questionnaires were given to students during the last class of the semester and many were happy to fill them out in class or directly afterwards. However, with exams and assignment due dates looming, it was felt that many students did not want to take their participation any further, as this could have possibly cut into their free time. This was an unfortunate disadvantage, since the questionnaires could not have been given to students any earlier as they aimed to identify why students did not withdraw from the course. A second reason why many students may not have participated in the interviews is because at the end of the semester, students are “over surveyed”, having to complete multiple course, teaching, and assessment evaluations for different courses. Therefore, during the last week of classes students may feel that they are tired of being asked to evaluate issues related to learning and may feel less inclined to participate in an interview to be conducted in their free time as part of a PhD study.

3.7.3 The Third Stage: Piloting and Implementation of a Prognostic Approach

The prognostic retention instrument, officially named the First Year Student Survey or FYSS, was developed in early 2007 as an outcome of the data collected and analysed from the student retention models found in the literature and from the withdrawn and non-withdrawn student questionnaires and interviews. The instrument was developed to identify students at risk of withdrawing and to explore the possibility of introducing a prognostic approach to student retention and attrition, based on the literature and on empirical data gathered. This crucial step in the study—the development and
implementation of the prognostic approach instrument, its justification, application, advantages and limitations—is described in full detail in Chapter Five.

Overall, the research tools discussed in this chapter helped to collect enough data to inform this study of the factors that affect student retention from the first year Spanish student point of view. The next section deals with the data analysis procedures used.

3.8 DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

3.8.1 The Process of Data Analysis

Qualitative data, in its varied forms, represents meanings expressed through language and visual signs and the qualitative researcher is often busy developing theories out of the data (Bryman, 2004; Henn et al., 2006; Sarantakos, 2005). On the other hand, quantitative data analyses numeric data and its aim is to classify features, count them, and construct statistical models in an attempt to explain what is observed (Johnson et al., 2004; Peshkin & Glesne, 1992; Sarantakos, 2005). It has been suggested that studies that incorporate the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches are capable of reaching a more enhanced understanding of the topic researched than those which use only one approach (Denzin, 1998; Kelle, 2006). As a result of collecting primary data from questionnaires and interviews as well as secondary data from university reports, both approaches have been implemented in this study, although the qualitative approach was the dominant approach used.
Qualitative data deriving from interviews or participant observation typically takes the form of a large body of unstructured textual material. Analysing these data is often not straightforward (Bryman, 2004): due to the vast quantities of data that the qualitative approach can often uncover, it is first necessary to find a way to organize meaningfully the mass of data collected. The researcher needs to reduce or reconfigured the data in order to be able to make interpretations and draw conclusions based on analysis. An effective approach used to analyse qualitative data is that of data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Robson, 2002). According to Miles and Huberman, “data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data that appear in written up field notes or transcriptions” (1994, p. 10). Not only do the data need to be condensed for the sake of manageability, but they also have to be transformed so they can be made logical in terms of the issues being treated.

In this study the process of data reduction was achieved by dividing and coding the data collected into the popular themes (or common responses) that emerged according to the responses to each question asked in the questionnaires and interviews. Different researchers (Gillham, 2000; Miles & Huberman, 1994) describe how to organise data into tables and matrices, in this way facilitating the process of analysis and making it easier to understand. Following their advice, the responses gathered from the questionnaires and interviews in this study were sorted by themes (or common responses), so that the most common responses were easily distinguishable. Every question was considered individually, according to the participant and semester being analysed; the most common themes were then more easily determined by the coding. The coding system used was developed through a combination of factors: firstly, the semester and year in which the
student took part in the study was recorded, for example, Semester I, 2004, then a number was allocated to the student according to the order of receipt of his/her questionnaire.

In the case of this study, the data were displayed by using tables and figures to support the presentation of findings and conclusions reached in the study. By displaying the most common and unusual responses, and reducing the data to ensure the most relevant responses were shown, it was much easier to discuss the relevance of the data to the main topics being analysed. Tables, matrices, graphs and charts used in each study should be designed to assemble organised information into an immediately accessible, compact form so that the analyst can see what is happening and draw justified conclusions (Berg, 2007). The researcher found in this study that the coding used, in conjunction with the tables and figures developed, helped to display the data in a manner that was easier to understand by making it easier to draw conclusions.

Conclusion drawing and verification was the last step used in the data analysis (Miles et al., 1994; Willis, 2006). Conclusion drawing involved reflection to consider what the analysed data meant and to assess the implications for the research questions. In this study the researcher was involved, from the very outset, in noting irregularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows, and propositions.

3.8.2 A Note on Subjectivity

Qualitative research recognizes that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved. Subjectivity guides everything from the choice of topic that one studies, to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methodologies and interpreting data (Ratner, 2002).
Inexorably, the incidents and aspects of the views and experiences focused upon in any study will be determined by what the researcher considers to be significant and worthy of study (Henn et al., 2006). To a great extent many elements of a qualitative research study are the products of the researcher’s preconceptions and previous knowledge. According to Henn et al., the researcher should be prepared to justify carefully the decisions taken with respect to all the features of a qualitative research project. Failure to do so will inevitably leave the researcher open to criticism from readers in relation to the research design and the importance of the results.

In this study all possible care was taken to acknowledge and be conscious of the researcher’s own subjectivity in relation to the settings selected, the people studied, what has been recorded and filtered out, and any interpretation given to the data. Peshkin and Glesne (1992, p. 100) argue that, “it is crucial that a researcher is aware of their own subjectivity, so that they can be free from the falsehood or misconception that a disembodied passive voice conveys, watching, listening, and reading without a known human agent”. They stress that it is a conscious being who does the watching and listening. As a former student and a teacher of the Spanish course being researched for this study, it was crucial to acknowledge my own subjectivity and the quality of my self-awareness in order to manage the impact of self on my research. I believed that in doing so the study will be released from misconceptions and biases and that as a result I produced a study that is fair and transparent with its findings.
3.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter began by discussing the aims of this study, which were to document language students’ views on the issue of student retention and attrition in the Elementary Spanish courses offered at an Australian university. The study took place between 2004 and 2008 and a total of 85 students participated. The first stage aimed to examine the class assessment reports for the Elementary Spanish courses. The second stage aimed to gather data from withdrawn and non-withdrawn students from the selected courses through questionnaires and interviews. The third stage aimed to develop a prognostic approach to help identify students who were potentially at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses.

The chapter then discussed the case study research methodology used. In this research, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed, although qualitative data were collected predominantly. The designs used for this case study were described as a combination of descriptive and exploratory, with the first five semesters of data collection divided into five different descriptive studies while the final semester of data collection contained an exploratory case study. This case study functioned as a pilot study for an innovative prognostic instrument developed as an outcome of the data collected from the five prior descriptive case studies.

Section 3.4 discussed the ethical clearance gained for the study, while Section 3.5 described the Elementary Spanish courses participating in the study, including the course layout, its objectives, the assessment offered and the teaching approach used. Section 3.6 discussed the participants: 12 withdrawn participants, 24 non-withdrawn participants, and
49 students who participated in the pilot and implementation of the prognostic approach. Section 3.7 provided an overview of the study as well as a detailed description of the research instruments used, and finally, Section 3.8 discussed the way in which the qualitative data in this study were analysed.

The following chapter discusses the collection and analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data gathered for this study, as well as discussing the conclusions arrived at as a result of the data collection.
CHAPTER FOUR

INVESTIGATING ATTRITION DATA IN
ELEMENTARY SPANISH COURSES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the introduction and methodology chapters, there are two main research questions being asked in this study. The second question deals with the development of a prognostic approach to identify potential students at risk of withdrawing from university courses, and it will be discussed in Chapter Five. This chapter will concentrate on the analysis of the data collected to answer the first question, which is: Why are students leaving the Elementary Spanish courses during the semester?

In answering this question, the following issues were also explored:

a) The students’ previous language learning experience,

b) The reasons why the students enrolled in the Elementary Spanish courses,

c) The students’ initial expectations of the Elementary Spanish courses,

d) The reasons students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish courses, and

e) The students’ experiences with language learning anxiety.
This chapter presents the analysis of the data collected over the first five semesters of this study. It begins by giving a brief description of how the data were collected and analysed. Following this, the chapter introduces the data analysis procedures used and the findings. Then, the themes and sub-themes identified in the data are discussed.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Two main types of data were gathered from the interviews and questionnaires—quantitative data and qualitative data.

4.2.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The student questionnaires contain countable (quantitative) data as well as qualitative data. The use of univariate analysis proposed by Bryman (2004) was found useful for analysing the quantitative data, because it proposes the analysis of one variable at a time. It was important to display the findings in an easy to understand manner, so frequency tables, which can show clearly the number of people belonging to each category identified in the data, were used where necessary. This helped to interpret similarities and differences in the students’ experiences that led to identifying patterns and emerging themes. When grouping this way, it is crucial to ensure that the categories developed do not overlap (Bryman, 2004).
4.2.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed according to the procedures mentioned by Kumar (1999) and Miles and Huberman (1994). The data were then classified into themes or patterns. When working with text or less well-organised displays, one will often note recurring patterns or themes which pull together many separate pieces of data. Miles and Huberman claim that something can often “jump out” at the researcher, suddenly making sense. Pattern finding can be very productive as an analysis strategy when the number of sites and/or data overload is severe, as the human mind finds patterns quickly and easily. The most important point to note, however, is to be able to see real added evidence to the same pattern and remain open to disconfirming evidence if and when it appears (Kumar, 1999; Miles et al., 1994; Neuman, 2006). These researchers agree that patterns need to be subjected to scepticism and to conceptual and empirical testing before representing useful knowledge.

The student interviews used in this study gathered only qualitative data to find emerging themes and patterns and for the purpose of analysing student opinions and beliefs the data were analysed using the same procedures as the qualititative data collected from the questionnaires.
4.3 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF CLASS ASSESSMENT REPORTS (2001-2006)

This section documents the statistics from the Elementary Spanish courses (which were offered on two campuses, referred to in this thesis as Campus A and Campus B). It outlines the student numbers, their average results, the assessment taken, and the numbers of student withdrawers between 2001 and 2006. This aims at constructing a clear picture of the retention levels of the courses investigated. The data presented here were not collected in this study, but were included in class assessment reports made available from the university. The class assessment reports were written by and obtained from the school of Languages and Linguistics and were compiled as part of the statistical data the school collected for every course offered.

Semester I, 2001

The first semester of 2001 commenced with 252 students enrolled, a total of 151 at Campus A and 101 at Campus B. This semester saw a large number of students fail the course: a total of 45 students, 29 at Campus A and 16 at Campus B. A total of 11 students failed through non-submission (7 at Campus A and 4 at Campus B), which means that the students did not complete any of the assessed work. It is usually understood that the majority of students who failed through non-submission dropped the course too late and could not change to another course, making their outcome in the course a fail. The records show that there were 12 students who withdrew from the course, all from Campus A.
The assessment for this semester consisted of two oral interviews worth 30% each, language laboratory work worth 20%, and in-class grammar tests worth 20%. The grade median over both campuses was 70.5%, with Campus B achieving a slightly higher median of 72.5% to Campus A’s 69%.

**Semester II, 2001**

Semester II, 2001 saw the Elementary Spanish course begin with a total of 128 students, 80 at Campus A and 48 at Campus B, a significant reduction from the 252 students enrolled in the first semester; this trend was consistently seen in the figures for every academic year in the Elementary Spanish course. Over both campuses a total of 15 students failed the course (10 at Campus A and 5 at Campus B), and 13 failed through non-submission. According to the reports, no students withdrew. It has to be pointed out however, that students who withdraw from the course after the census date are usually counted with the students who fail through non-submission.

During this semester, changes were incorporated in to the assessment used in previous semesters. The assessment now consisted of two oral interviews worth 20% each, language laboratory work worth 20%, in-class vocabulary tests worth 20%, and in-class grammar tests worth 20%. The median result over both campuses this semester was 69.5%, with Campus B achieving a 71% median, while Campus A held 68%.

**Semester I, 2002**

A total of 256 students enrolled in Elementary Spanish in Semester I, 2002—144 at Campus A and 112 at Campus B. Overall, 40 students failed the course. The class
assessment reports showed that over both campuses a total of 16 students officially withdrew. The students had a median result of 71%, with Campus B again achieving a higher median of 73.5%, to Campus A’s 68.5%. The assessment conducted in this semester consisted of an oral interview worth 10% and another worth 30%, language laboratory work worth 30%, and in-class grammar and vocabulary tests worth 30% altogether. Although the assessment items remained the same, their weighting differed considerably from those offered in the previous semester. It is unclear why the weightings were changed and the class assessment reports did not offer that type of information.

**Semester II, 2002**

Semester II, 2002 saw a total of 84 students enrolled in Campus A and 59 students enrolled in Campus B. The class assessment reports showed that 4 students officially withdrew from the course from Campus A and 1 student withdrew from Campus B. From both campuses a total of 18 students failed the course and an additional 12 students failed through non-submission, which could also include non-official withdrawers.

The assessment weightings for this semester differed from the previous semester: there were still five assessment items (the two oral interviews, the vocabulary and grammar tests and the laboratory work), however, this semester each piece had an equal weight of 20%. The median results were better for those students on Campus B, with 70%, whereas Campus A had a median of 66%.
**Semester I, 2003**

Semester I, 2003 saw the enrolment of 277 students, 175 at Campus A and 102 at Campus B. Overall, 25 students failed the subject this semester, and 10 failed through non-submission. According to the school records, 7 students officially withdrew at some stage during the semester, not including any who left the course without going through the withdrawal process. The semester saw a grade median slightly higher than previous semesters, sitting at 75.5%, Campus B once again attaining the higher median of 77%, while Campus A was only behind by a small amount at 74%.

Once again the assessment weightings differed from the previous semester. This time there was an oral interview worth 10% and one worth 30%, language laboratory work worth 20%, in-class grammar tests worth 20% and in-class vocabulary tests worth 20%.

**Semester II, 2003**

The second semester of 2003 began with a total of 144 students, including 96 at Campus A and 48 at Campus B. There were 8 reported fails for this semester, with 4 fails due to non-submission. There were only 2 reported withdrawals for the semester overall.

There was also a new development in the Elementary Spanish course this semester. A new rule was introduced that prohibited students from sitting the final exam/s if they were absent without certification for more than 20% of the course (or a total of four classes). According to the course convenors, the new rule was put into effect to deter students who had previous knowledge of the language from enrolling in the course: pretending they had no knowledge of the language, many had enrolled in the course,
attending classes only rarely and still successfully passing the exams. The impact of this new rule on learning and retention cannot be seen in the class assessment report compiled for this semester as the medians were unchanged from one semester to another (overall 75.5%, Campus B, 77% and Campus A, 74%).

The assessment weighting changed again during this semester. As a result, students were assessed using two oral interviews worth 20% each, language laboratory work worth 20%, in-class grammar tests worth 20% and in-class vocabulary tests worth 20%. The attrition rate for the School of Languages and Linguistics was at its highest ever since the reporting of attrition rates had commenced, sitting at 34.2% in semester II, 2003. Although only a small number of students officially withdrew from Elementary Spanish this semester, the real number may have been much higher, as alluded to previously.

**Semester I, 2004**

During Semester I, 2004, Campus A had a total of 159 students enrolled, whereas Campus B had 91 students enrolled. In total there were 23 reported fails during the semester from both campus cohorts, 9 through non-submission. Surprisingly, there were no official withdrawers during the semester from either campus according to the assessment reports. The median results showed that Campus A had a slightly higher average, with 76%, while Campus B’s average was 74. The assessment weightings changed again this semester and were divided as follows: the first oral interview worth 10%, the second oral interview worth 30%, grammar tests worth 20%, vocabulary tests worth 20% and laboratory work worth 20%.
**Semester II, 2004**

Semester II, 2004 saw 101 students enrolled in Campus A and 31 students enrolled in Campus B. During this semester a total of 6 students officially withdrew from the course, 3 from Campus A and 3 from Campus B. There were also 2 students who failed the course (from Campus A) and 1 student who failed through non-submission (from Campus B).

Commencing from this semester onwards, the assessment was modified significantly. Instead of five assessment pieces, there were only four—two oral exams and two written exams—each was worth 25%. The changes to assessment occurred on both campuses. The median results were similar to other semesters: on Campus A, 74%; however, they were slightly higher for Campus B, 83%.

**Semester I, 2005**

During the first semester of 2005, 164 students were enrolled in Campus A and 103 enrolled in Campus B. On the records, 18 students officially withdrew from the course, 16 from Campus A, but only 2 from Campus B. This was the highest official withdrawal number between 2001 and 2006. In addition, 23 students officially failed the course, 16 from Campus A and 7 from Campus B. Ten students from both campuses also failed through non-submission, 6 from Campus A and 4 from Campus B. The assessment pieces were the same as the previous semester: two oral exams worth 25% each and two written exams each worth 25%. The median results were 65% at Campus A and 71% at Campus B.
It is significant to point out the possible correlation between the number of withdrawn students from the course being the highest, and the Overall Position (OP) scores of students accepted into the course being lowered as of this semester. The OP is an overall rank given to students at the end of Year 12 as an official numerical outcome of their overall results. The OP ranks range from 1-25, with 1 being the highest and 25 the lowest. Generally, the OP cut-off to enter degrees varies from year to year; however, the cut-off for the Linguistics degree has generally been between 11 and 13. For 2005, the university decided to lower it to 16. The lowering of the OP was not unique to the School of Languages and Linguistics, as other schools at the university decided to follow the same path. Lowering the cut-off was seen as the solution to fewer student enrolments; the lower cut-off also meant that a more diverse selection of students enrolled at university.

**Semester II, 2005**

Semester II, 2005 saw a total of 131 students enrolled in the course, 82 at Campus A and 49 at Campus B. A total of 7 students failed the course this semester, 6 from Campus A and 1 from Campus B; 2 from Campus A also failed through non-submission. Officially 6 students withdrew from the course, 4 from Campus A and 2 from Campus B. During this semester the assessment items remained the same as the previous two semesters. The median result for Campus A was 72%, while on Campus B the median was 78%.

**Semester I, 2006**

During the first semester of 2006 a total of 297 students enrolled in the Elementary Spanish course, 182 on Campus A and 115 on Campus B. Interestingly, there were no official withdrawers from either campus during this semester. This had not occurred
during any other semester from 2001 to this date. The assessment reports did show, however, that 3 students from Campus A and 10 from Campus B had failed the course. A higher than usual number of students from Campus A failed the course through non-submission, 22 in total, whereas Campus B had only 3. It is possible that a significant number of the students who failed through non-submission were students who unofficially withdrew from the course, and this can be seen in previous semesters also. The assessment items did not differ during this semester: four items (two written exams and two oral interviews) worth 25% each. The median result for Campus A was 72%, and for Campus B it was 74%.

**Semester II, 2006**

Semester II, 2006 saw a total of 148 students enrolled in the Elementary Spanish course, 94 at Campus A and 54 at Campus B. Again there were no students who officially withdrew from the course at Campus A, and at Campus B there was only 1 official withdrawal. Overall, 6 students failed the course at Campus A (1 through non-submission) and there were no failures at Campus B. The assessment this semester was unchanged from the previous semester. The median result for the students on Campus A was 75% and on Campus B it was 82%.

Overall, it can be seen from the data collected from the university class assessment reports between 2001 and 2006 that the retention of students in the Spanish course did not improve, even though changes were introduced to the assessment strategies and the class attendance requirements. The data showed that the total number of student enrolments did not significantly change for the first semester of each year at either
campus, meaning that student interest for the course was still at a high level at the beginning of each academic year. The data in the class assessment reports illustrate a significant level of in-course course attrition. This meant that many students were withdrawing from the course early during the semesters and it is possible that some students may not have had intentions of completing one semester of the course or of attempting more than one semester.

4.4 DATA COLLECTED FROM STUDENTS

It is noted at the outset that pseudonyms have been given to the students who participated in this study, in order to protect their identities and also to assist with the narrative of the data analysis.

4.4.1 Semester I, 2004

4.4.1.1 Questionnaire Results

Twenty-six students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course during the first semester of 2004. Of these, 19 had signed consent forms and were contacted, and 6 (Mariana, Kelly, Michael, Megan, Patricia and Mario) agreed to take part in the research. It is likely that many students were no longer willing to participate in the study because they were no longer a part of the university. Another reason for the low participation numbers was the difficulty in contacting many students once they had withdrawn. Even though 19 were contacted, a number of them no longer had the same email address or
phone number as when they signed the consent form, making it harder to find them. This is a common issue in retention studies, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Of the 6 participants, 5 were female and all were in the 17-24 year old bracket. One of these students (the only male) was enrolled as a mature age student. English was the first language for all of them. Only one student (a female) was enrolled part-time and the majority were enrolled in the degree of their first preference. Half the students responded that learning a foreign language was a compulsory part of their degree. The degrees undertaken by the students were varied: 3 were enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts, 2 in a Bachelor of International Business and 1 in a Bachelor of Languages and Applied Linguistics. None of the withdrawers was an international student.

The questionnaires collected data on what the students were doing currently, that is, since leaving the Elementary Spanish course. For this purpose, a section containing 12 parts was included in the questionnaire, with both closed and open-ended questions. Overall, the participants’ responses showed that 4 of them had continued studying at university without taking Elementary Spanish, and 2 were now working part-time or casually. The data showed that none of the students from this cohort left university altogether, began working full-time, changed degrees, deferred their studies, decided to study another language or continued their Spanish studies at another institution.

The second part of the questionnaire was designed to find out the reasons why students wanted to study Elementary Spanish. It collected data on their language learning background and expectations. This part was divided into two sections (see Appendices 4
Question A gave students a variety of responses to choose from as well as the option of writing their own answer; the responses were varied. The most common answers showed that 5 of the students had chosen to learn Spanish because they wanted to learn another language and 4 had plans to travel to a Spanish-speaking country. The results also showed that half the students believed that having knowledge of another language is important, that the course would be an enjoyable course to take, and that Spanish would be a fun language to learn. The responses also showed that none of the students believed it was important to learn Spanish, nor did any of them believe that knowledge of Spanish would give them more work opportunities.

The next section of the questionnaire collected data about the students’ language learning background and expectations. It was found that 5 students had previously learnt a language, either in a classroom situation or by living in the country where the language is spoken. The languages previously learned by the students were Japanese, Indonesian and French.

Questions B-G of this section gathered information about students’ expectations of the Elementary Spanish course and what they liked and disliked about the course. On the whole, the questionnaire results show that the course expectations of the students were varied. Three students admitted that their only expectation was to learn the language. Others expected intensive language instruction and some said that they expected to grasp basic conversation, to communicate fluently in Spanish, and to have a well-rounded easy-to-learn course. In terms of what the students expected from the teacher, it was found that 2 expressed their preference for native speakers as teachers. Another 2 students
mentioned that they expected a teacher who could teach well. Three students liked the teaching approach used in Elementary Spanish, which was the Natural Approach combined with Total Physical Response (Terrell, 2006). Two students said that they liked the teacher of Elementary Spanish. Other students expressed that they liked working with their peers, as well as the materials used in class. The questionnaire data show that what the students disliked about the course was the textbook, one student disliked peers in the course, and one student disliked the teaching approach used. Two students also did not like the teacher of Elementary Spanish course or the materials used by the teacher.

The questionnaire then collected information on the factors the students believed influenced their decision to withdraw from the course. The literature on the topic of student attrition mentions that in most cases there is more than one reason for withdrawal (Bidgood et al., 2006; Glossop, 2002; Harvey et al., 2006), and the findings of this study support this view: Over half of the students gave more than one reason for their departure. Overall, the results showed once again the importance of the social dimension.

Half the students believed they did not connect with the people in the Elementary Spanish class. In addition, 2 students felt that there were aspects of the Elementary Spanish course that they did not like. Other reasons mentioned by students were their intention to defer Spanish studies until another time, and to defer university studies until another time. One student stated that university study was not for her, while another felt that there was no connection with the people at the university. This again shows the impact that social integration may have on the student’s decision to withdraw from the course and even from the university. No students from this cohort believed that financial problems or
health problems contributed to their withdrawal decisions. Events such as joining the workforce or learning Spanish somewhere else did not influence the decisions of these students to withdraw, nor did aspects about the university that they did not like or a lack of support from the university.

Also in this part of the questionnaire, questions collected data on whether the students had consulted anyone before making their decision to leave the course. The responses show that only half of the students decided to speak to anyone before deciding to withdraw. Overall, no students discussed their decision to withdraw with any professional staff available at the university, such as a course convenor or a personal counsellor, before withdrawing. It is possible that this was because the students were not aware that these services existed at the university and were available to them at no cost. In any case, the students did not mention the reasons why they did not consult anyone from the university.

The last question of the questionnaire collected data about how the Elementary Spanish learning experience could have been improved for students. This question also aimed to find out whether the students could have been encouraged to stay in the course had any of these factors been incorporated. This was a multiple choice question that also gave the students the option of writing their own response. Overall, students mentioned seven ways in which the Elementary Spanish course could have been improved: (a) if they had more opportunities to speak Spanish outside of class, (b) if the workload was not so large, (c) if the teaching approaches were modified, (d) if the classes were smaller, (e) if they
had a different group of peers, (f) if they had a different teacher, and (g) if more options were available on the Elementary Spanish course timetables.

4.4.1.2 Interview Results

Twenty-six students withdrew from the Spanish program in Semester I, 2004; however, only 6 were interviewed as a follow-up to their questionnaires. The interviews aimed to explore in more depth the questions asked in the questionnaires. The interviews allowed the students to elaborate on the specific reasons and factors behind their withdrawal.

The interviews began by asking students why they had decided to learn Elementary Spanish. Overall, half the students answered that their main reason for studying Spanish was their desire to travel or their like of travel. Other students mentioned that they enrolled in Elementary Spanish because of their background, one coming from a South American nation and another from the Philippines. One student also said that she enrolled because they wanted to learn another language.

Responses to the question concerning reasons for withdrawing from Elementary Spanish showed that most students did not have only one reason. The majority of students, five in all, believed that the main contributing factor for their withdrawal was the large workload of the course. As Kelly remarked, “The course was a lot more work than what I was prepared for” (Kelly, Semester I (SI), 2004). Other students withdrew due to timetable clashes and due to learning better on their own. One student also expressed that learning in a classroom was different from living in the target country while learning the language, and this factor contributed to their withdrawal.
Responses to the question concerning expectations of the Elementary Spanish course and the teacher were varied. Three students responded that they did not expect Elementary Spanish to be as much work as it was, with one saying that she “...wasn’t expecting such a large workload” (Mariana, SI, 2004). Two students expected that the teacher would be a native speaker, while another two mentioned that they did not have any particular expectations of the teacher or the course in general. One student, Kelly, said she did not know what to expect from university or the courses overall as this was her first year at university.

The students were questioned about whether changing aspects of the course would have encouraged them to stay. Responses showed that five students were quite overwhelmed by the workload of the course; these students commented that they did not think there would be so much work to do. One student mentioned the price of the textbook as a factor that would have to be changed and another mentioned her preference for another timetable. The teacher was also a factor according to one student. Two students remarked that what they would have changed were their peers, as they did not feel comfortable in the class with them. As one said, “I didn’t like my peers. I thought they were all too young having just left high school. Because I come from the country I felt that they all had ‘big smoke’ mentalities and they all thought they were better than everyone else. They didn’t give me a lot of confidence in class and I wasn’t comfortable around them” (Michael, SI, 2004).
Students in this semester liked and disliked different aspects of the course. Kelly and Megan were happy with the style of teaching and three of the students really enjoyed the interaction in class. As one said, “I liked the interaction the teacher had with the class and how everyone was involved in the class activities. You couldn’t get away with just sitting in a corner and not saying anything” (Megan, SI, 2004). However, the large workload was the main dislike of five of the students. As one said, “... the workload, the expense and also the beginning stages of learning a language when you aren’t in a foreign country learning it. I didn’t like the whole beginning of the course, it was so boring learning ‘Hello, my name is’, for so long” (Kelly, SI, 2004).

Two students believed that the Elementary Spanish course was a lot more interactive than other courses they studied, and this was seen as a positive factor. One of the students said: “I thought the Spanish course was more interactive [than other courses] and I learnt quite quickly” (Michael, SI, 2004). Two students also mentioned that a big difference was the lack of lectures in the Elementary Spanish course, as there were only tutorials. The high assessment load was mentioned by one student as a difference, as was the fact that, “it was very black or white – you either understood or you did not” (Patricia, SI, 2004).

Since withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course, four of the six students had continued with their other university courses. Two students had been working and two had left university altogether; one student decided to study through correspondence.
Overall, as recent studies have shown (Bidgood et al., 2006; Glossop, 2002; Harvey et al., 2006), it was found that in the first semester of 2004 most students who withdrew had varied reasons for doing so. However, what the results of this study also indicate is that none of the students withdrew due to financial or health reasons, often the two most common reasons given for student attrition in the literature (Bidgood et al., 2006; Blanchard et al., 2000; Bonham et al., 1993; Bradburn, 2002; Elliott, 1997; Glogowska et al., 2007; Glossop, 2002; Hoyt, 1999; Johnston, 1997; Lee, 1996; Long et al., 2006; Yorke, 2000). The students also indicated that their peers were a factor contributing to their withdrawal, as well as the workload of the course. These two reasons are not directly mentioned in the literature, but are indirectly related to reasons for withdrawal mentioned in Tinto’s Student Integration Model. Tinto (1975) believed that at the crux of student withdrawal was social and academic integration. The main factors that contributed to student withdrawal during the semester analysed—the lack of integration with class peers and the course workload—may be considered as aspects that could lead to the lack of social and academic integration in the course and as a result could lead to student withdrawal.

It is interesting to note that the data collected in the first semester of 2004 showed that none of the students believed that it is important to learn Spanish, or that knowledge of Spanish would give them more job options. This may be a sign that they did not consider their Spanish learning to be as important as other courses for their future employment prospects.
4.4.2 Semester II, 2004

4.4.2.1 Questionnaire Results

Semester II, 2004 saw the introduction of a change to the assessment used in the course, and this had quite a major impact on the course itself. According to the course convenors, the change in assessment was brought about due to cuts to funding and resources occurring during the semester. It was decided that a cut to the teacher workload was needed and therefore a written exam was introduced. Two larger summative exams were to be introduced twice a semester instead of the continuous formative assessment used in previous semesters (small vocabulary and grammar exams held every fortnight). The two written exams were to be held on the same weeks as the oral assessments that were still being used. According to the student responses, this change of assessment definitely had some impact on their decisions to leave the course.

Eight students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course throughout the second semester of 2004. Five of the students who withdrew had signed consent forms; two of these agreed to take part in the research this semester—Luisa and Maria. Both students were females, one aged 17 – 24 and the other aged 25 – 34. The older student was enrolled as a mature aged student at the time of her participation in the Elementary Spanish course. Both students were from English-speaking backgrounds and were enrolled as full-time students. Luisa had to study a language as a compulsory part of her languages and linguistics degree, whereas Maria was enrolled in a double degree in psychology and education. Neither was an international student.
In response to the first question, the students mentioned the activities in which they had been involved since withdrawing from the course. Luisa was now working full-time and continuing other studies at the same university, while Maria had left the university and was working full-time.

Both students nominated their aim to travel to a Spanish-speaking country and their desire to learn more about Hispanic cultures as the reasons why they decided to study Elementary Spanish. Both thought the Elementary Spanish course would be an enjoyable course to take and believed Spanish would be a fun language to learn. However, Maria also said that she believed having knowledge of another language was important, and that she would like to work where Spanish is spoken. In addition she claimed that it was important to communicate with friends who speak Spanish. Luisa had to learn a language as a part of her degree; however, Maria was studying the course as an elective.

Both students had previously learned a foreign language: one had learned Chinese, and the other had learned both Italian and Japanese. Both stated that the languages had been learnt mostly through high school. As these students had previously learnt a language, they believed they knew what language learning entailed. As a result, both mentioned that what they expected from the course was to get the basics of the language. Luisa stated she did not have any expectations of the teacher, while Maria expected the teacher to be good at teaching and to make it fun. Both students responded that they liked the teacher, their peers, working with their peers and also the teaching approach used. One also agreed that the way the assessment was conducted, the textbook used and the
resources used by the teacher in class were good. Neither of the students mentioned anything they disliked.

Much like the responses from the questionnaires collected from Semester I, 2004, these two participants also mentioned more than one factor as contributing to their withdrawal from the course. Neither student had reasons that overlapped. Maria decided to defer from university until another time, and also indicated that she did not feel a connection with the people at the university. Luisa decided to withdraw due to a family member who had problems with their health. She also deferred Spanish until another time and meanwhile decided to join the workforce. The data collected this semester show that only one of the two students spoke to someone before withdrawing; they discussed their withdrawal from the Elementary Spanish course with a friend. Maria believed that if the course had been offered as an elective for more degrees she would have considered staying; however, she decided to defer from university indefinitely.

4.4.2.2 Interview Results

The two students who were interviewed this semester, Luisa and Maria, were the same two students who filled out the questionnaires; therefore their general information is identical. Luisa decided to learn Elementary Spanish because she had a fascination with the Spanish language, whereas Maria had a friend who spoke the language. Luisa’s subsequent decision to withdraw was more for personal reasons, whereas Maria decided that university just was not the path she wanted to pursue at the time and as an outcome left the university altogether. Luisa said, “I withdrew because there were too many other things happening in my life at the time” (Luisa, SII, 2004).
Both students mentioned the fact that they had absolutely no expectations of the course. Even after discussing this particular question at length with both students, they both insisted that their expectations had not existed before or during the course. According to Luisa, “I didn’t have any expectations. I find it better to go into things without any expectations. I imagined Spanish like you see in the movies, a teacher at the front of the class explaining things with the white board; however, it was a lot more enjoyable than that” (Luisa, SII, 2004).

Luisa believed that there could have been native speakers visiting the class to speak to the students about cultural aspects of their life or native country, and this might have encouraged her to stay. She was very interested in the cultural side of the language and found this lacking from the course. As she said, “It would be good if we found out more about the Spanish community in Brisbane and could get involved in activities outside the classroom so we could use Spanish” (Luisa, SII, 2004). However, the other student, Maria, insisted there was nothing about the course that could be modified, as the course was good.

Both students indicated that what they disliked about the Elementary Spanish course were the assessment items that particular semester. As Luisa explained, “This semester I didn’t like the fact that we only had a little bit of assessment and homework, as it was really easy to fall behind and forget things we had learnt a few weeks before. I know it is our responsibility to keep on top of things, but it really is a huge amount to remember (Luisa, SII, 2004). Both students agreed that they liked the teachers of the course, as well as the
assessment style from previous semesters, which was a formative type with smaller assessment items occurring more often.

Maria believed that the method of class delivery used in the Elementary Spanish Course was very different from her other courses, that the classes were smaller, and that there was more teacher attention: “The method of delivery was different. The smaller classes were more personal and the teachers paid more attention individually. It was a fun class that I didn’t really want to miss. It was very interactive and social, unlike other classes” (Maria, SII, 2004).

Luisa mentioned that the assessment was very different from other courses; however, she preferred the formative assessment style from the previous semester as it did not allow the students to forget anything as quickly. Both students found the classes more interactive than their other classes and this was an aspect of the class they enjoyed.

The data collected showed that since withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course, Luisa had withdrawn from university studies completely and had started working full-time, while Maria had continued other courses at university without Elementary Spanish. Both students expressed that they had really enjoyed the Spanish class and felt sad to leave; however, they articulated that it just was not the right time for them to learn Spanish. Maria stated, “I have continued with my other courses and found myself some part-time work” (Maria, SII, 2004).
The two students interviewed in this semester mentioned several reasons for their withdrawal. Luisa said that the health problems of a family member was a factor for her withdrawal, which is one of the more common reasons for withdrawing from a university course, according to research by Glossop (2002), Long et al. (2006), Glogowska et al. (2007), Johnston (2007) and Scoggin et al. (2006). Personal reasons are also a common factor contributing to low student retention and may often be related to health or financial reasons. Research by Bradburn (2002), Elliot (1997), Glogowska et al. (2007), Wilcox et al. (2005), Johnston (1997) and Scoggin et al. (2006) shows that personal reasons will often lead students to withdraw. However, some of this research also saw that the assessment played an important part in the students’ decisions to withdraw. While assessment items can be a contributing factor to withdrawal, according to Yorke (2001) and Braxton et al. (2000), it is not mentioned as a common factor.

Overall, the two students interviewed from this semester enjoyed the course. However many of the factors mentioned, such as personal problems and not fitting in, could have been alleviated and helped with support from the university. Had the students decided to seek support from the university, which both agreed they had not, they may have decided to stay. This illustrates how important the support mechanisms are for students and that students should be made aware of them as soon as possible.

4.4.3 Semester I, 2005

From Semester I, 2005 onwards, there were two groups of students invited to participate in the study: the students who had withdrawn from the course and those students who had continued in the course, or non-withdrawers. Collecting data from both groups allowed...
contrasts and comparisons to be drawn in respect to why students were enrolling in the Elementary Spanish courses, illustrated the reasons that led to their withdrawing or continuing in the course, and also aimed to confirm if there were any personal indicators that could be attributed to either the withdrawn or non-withdrawn students.

4.4.3.1 Questionnaire Results – Withdrawn Students

During Semester I, 2005 the assessment items used in Elementary Spanish the previous semester were used again, these being two oral exams and two written exams. This semester also saw students with a lower OP cut-off being accepted into the Language and Linguistics degree, among other degrees, as discussed earlier in the section dealing with class assessment reports.

This semester questionnaires were also given to students who had not withdrawn from the Elementary Spanish course. A questionnaire was developed for the non-withdrawers to identify what encouraged these particular students to continue in the course.

As a result of the comprehensive literature search for this study, an important issue affecting students in foreign language classes was identified: the issue of “foreign language anxiety”\(^2\), which is believed to influence how students learn a foreign language. It was noted that a result of the anxiety could be course withdrawal. Due to this discovery, the questionnaires were modified to include some questions developed from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)\(^3\). The FLCAS aimed to

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\(^2\) It is believed this term was first used by Horwitz in an article in the Modern Language Journal, 1986.

\(^3\) This scale was also developed by Horwitz and used with her students in the mid-eighties. The scale was published in the Modern Language Journal in 1986.
discover how anxiety could be an issue for those learning a foreign or second language. It was piloted in 1986 with Horwitz’s students and confirmed that students who had higher levels of language anxiety had more issues with language learning. The scale gave an idea of whether the students were feeling any anxiety and if so, how they were overcoming it.

There were 17 students who officially dropped the Elementary Spanish course during the semester and only 2 of these agreed to participate in this study in the first semester of 2005. Once more, this reluctance of students documents the difficulties involved in conducting empirical studies in this area. The two participants were a female and a male, Kathrin and Brian, both aged 17 – 24. Neither had enrolled as a mature aged student; the enrolment status for both was full-time. Their first language was English. Neither was an international student. Both were studying their preferred degree. Only one had to learn a language as a compulsory part of their degree in International Business; the other was studying for a degree in Arts. Since withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course both students were engaged in either part-time or casual work and one student also decided to study another language, Japanese, at the university.

Both the students had initially decided to enrol in Elementary Spanish because they wanted to learn another language and because they thought it would be a fun language to learn. One acknowledged that having knowledge of another language was important, that the Spanish course would be an enjoyable course and that she had friends also studying Spanish. The second student had plans to travel to a Hispanic country.
The data collected showed that both students had studied a foreign language during high school, one learned Japanese and the other Chinese. Their expectations of the course were varied. One expected to become fluent in the first year, whereas the other expected to have a good time while learning another language. Their expectations of the teacher were also different, with one expecting the teacher to teach Spanish at a basic level of understanding whereas the other just expected someone helpful and patient. Both the students liked working with their peers in class, and one also liked the peers in class, whereas the other liked the teacher and the teaching approach used in class. However, both students disliked the way the assessment was conducted in the course.

Overall, one student decided to withdraw from the course due to a combination of factors—health problems, joining the workforce, and deciding university really was not for her. The second student decided to learn another language at the university and felt that there were aspects of the Elementary Spanish class that she did not like. Both students believed that modification of the assessment and more opportunities to speak Spanish out of class could have improved their chances of staying in the course.

The next part of the questionnaire was dedicated to the issue of foreign language anxiety. In this section, questions E-G gathered data about the students’ feelings of anxiety while attending the course. Question H comprised a small list of statements, based on those used in the scale for FLCAS by Horwitz (1986). These statements gathered data about the situations that made students felt anxious and/or nervous in class. The participant responses found that both students did suffer from some anxiety in class although neither believed they withdrew due to their anxiety alone. Specifically, both were worried when
they could not understand all that the teacher said in class, and when they were asked to speak in class, without preparation. They also felt that sometimes they got so nervous that they forgot things they knew. One student also felt that her peers spoke Spanish a lot better than she did. The same student also believed that it was worrying when the teacher spoke and she couldn’t understand what was being corrected, that she felt uncomfortable when having to speak in front of peers, and that she felt more anxiety in her Spanish course than in any other class. Both agreed that their feelings of anxiety added to the combination of factors that led them to withdraw.

4.4.3.2 Interview Results – Withdrawn Students

During this semester the two students who completed the questionnaires for the study this semester also participated in the interviews. This semester brought some changes to the interview questions, in order to collect more information concerning the foreign language anxiety data that had been collected in the questionnaires. This change made the interviews slightly longer; however, the questions relating to foreign language anxiety saw the students open up in more detail about their anxiety and nervousness in class.

Both Kathrin and Brian agreed that they wanted to learn Spanish because they thought it would be a fun language to learn. Brian was looking towards the future when learning Spanish, as he believed Elementary Spanish could have helped him with a career. Kathrin however, did not initially want to study Elementary Spanish. “I couldn’t get into Japanese as the classes were too full, and I thought Spanish would be fun” (Kathrin, SI, 2005).

Both students had previously learnt Asian languages: Brian had learnt Japanese and
Kathrin had learnt Chinese. Both learnt the languages in a classroom setting while studying at high school.

The interview revealed that Kathrin had decided to withdraw from university altogether. Brian however, decided to withdraw from the Spanish course as he did not think the language was on par with his expectations: “The language just wasn’t what I thought it would be. Unfortunately, it wasn’t as engaging or as entertaining as I would have liked” (Brian, SI, 2005).

Expectations for the teacher had been similar for both students: this was for the teacher to help them to learn. Brian admitted that in regards to his expectations of the teacher and the course he was initially mistaken. As he explained, “My expectations of the course were a lot lower than the reality. I thought it would simply be a class where we learn, the teacher helps and we leave, but the reality was that the teacher taught the course really well and it was enjoyable” (Brian, SI, 2005). Kathrin however expected to be able to speak Spanish reasonably well by the end of the semester and also expected that the teacher should help her to acquire the language in class.

In question five, both students agreed that had the assessment been modified and made fairer for the students, they could have reconsidered their withdrawal. Kathrin would have liked the classes to run for longer and more encouragement from the teacher to speak in class. Brian would have liked to see the assessment spread out more evenly over the semester. “The classes moved very fast and I was not the only one having problems, there was a group of us that could not keep up. I hated how the assessment was not
spread out, it was just two blocks. All the other subjects have essays and exams spread out. I would have spread out the assessment more” (Brian, SI, 2005).

According to both students, what they liked about the Elementary Spanish course was the classroom environment. Both made a point to mention how supportive they found it and how they liked the class dynamics. Both agreed that their main dislike was the assessment. Kathrin in particular did not like the fast pace of the class. She explained, “I didn’t really dislike anything, apart from the exams. They could have been done differently. I thought that giving a first-year language student a large exam after eight weeks of language learning was harsh and very anxiety producing. Having assessment every week or fortnight would have not been as stressful and we could have known everything better” (Kathrin, SI, 2005).

When looking at how the Elementary Spanish course differed from all other courses Brian responded that the significant difference was the way it was assessed: “The assessment was different. I didn’t like the block assessment in the classes” (Brian, SI, 2005).

The questions dealing with student foreign language anxiety begin with question nine in the interviews. The first question gathered data on whether the students ever felt nervous or anxious in class, to describe what made them feel that way, and how the students overcame these feelings of anxiety. Brian responded that he sometimes felt anxious in class and that he overcame these feelings by speaking to other students and getting their support. Kathrin mentioned that the group dynamic in the class helped, as she never felt
ridiculed due to the environment being supportive. Brian said that anxiety was never an issue during his time in the course.

Question 10 gathered data on the type of activities or events in the Elementary Spanish class that could lead to anxiety in the students. Both students agreed that the assessment made them feel anxious, particularly the spoken interviews. Kathrin explained that before the oral interviews “you had to be more active and if you didn’t know... well you didn’t know, there were no more options” (Kathrin, SI, 2005). Question 11 collected data on whether the students spoke to anyone about the anxiety they felt in the classroom, and neither had. In question 12, data were gathered to determine whether the students believed that their anxiety or nervousness in class could have contributed to their reasons for withdrawing from the course. Kathrin’s response was, “A little bit. I felt as if I wasn’t up-to-speed in class and I thought I should know more, as if they other students were more ahead. This was really irritating as I knew I wasn’t really lagging behind” (Kathrin, SI, 2005). Brian did not believe that anxiety had anything to do with his decision to withdraw as he had already decided to leave university altogether.

Since withdrawing from Elementary Spanish, Brian was working full-time, as he left university altogether. Kathrin continued studying at the university, but started to learn Japanese instead as she had previously learnt Chinese and felt she knew the basic fundamentals for an Asian language.

Overall, the results from the withdrawn students in Semester I, 2005, showed that the students withdrew for a variety of reasons, with one student withdrawing from university
altogether. The data showed that the students did not like the way the course was assessed, and believed that the assessment was an activity that could make them anxious in class. According to Horwitz (1986), student foreign language anxiety is a serious issue that can make students feel helpless and lack confidence in a language class. Therefore it could be constantly monitored in language classes, so that at-risk students risk could be helped before they decided to withdraw.

The students decided to learn Spanish as they believed it would be a fun language to learn; however, neither believed that Spanish was an important language to learn, that it could help career options or that they would like to work in a country where Spanish is spoken. The students were quite happy with the dynamic in class and agreed that working with their peers was enjoyable.

4.4.3.3 Questionnaire Results – Non-Withdrawn Students

In Semester I, 2005, the students from one Elementary Spanish class were approached to take part in the questionnaire and interview for non-withdrawing students. It was decided not to include all students in the study because students are over surveyed at the end of the semester with course and teacher evaluations during class time.

Five students – 2 male and 3 female – completed non-withdrawer questionnaires. Four were between the ages of 17 and 24, and one female student was aged 25 – 34. All the students said that English was their first language and that they were enrolled as full-time students. None of the students were international students. Four of the students agreed
that they were studying their preferred degree, while the two male students mentioned that they had to study a language as a compulsory part of their degree.

Part Two of the non-withdrawers questionnaire, much like the questionnaire for withdrawals, was divided into two sections. All the participants agreed that having knowledge of a foreign language is important, that they would like to learn another language, and that they would like to travel to a Hispanic country. Two students mentioned that knowledge of Spanish could possibly give them more job options and 4 stated that they would like to work in a country where Spanish is spoken. Four students also answered that they thought Elementary Spanish would be an enjoyable course to take and a fun language to learn. However, none of the students said that they thought Spanish was an important language to learn or that they wanted to learn more about Hispanic cultures.

Questions B-E of the questionnaire gathered data on the students’ language learning background and expectations. It asked the students if they had learnt a foreign language before Elementary Spanish. It also asked them about their expectations of the Elementary Spanish course and the teacher and if their expectations changed at all during the semester. Three of the participants had learnt a foreign language (German or Japanese) during their high school education. When asked about their expectations of the course, 4 students answered that they most expected to learn the basics of the language. One student believed that the class would move pretty quickly and it would be fun.
The students’ expectations of the teacher were varied. Two students answered that they thought the teacher would be helpful. One student responded that she thought the teacher would talk too fast, while another expected that the teacher would have been strict. Another student responded that she thought the teacher would teach basic Spanish. All the female students responded that they thought their expectations had changed during the semester. One responded that she felt more confident as the semester progressed and believed she could keep up, another student answered that she learnt more than she thought she would and another answered that although the teacher was not a native Spanish speaker, as she expected, in the end it did not make any difference as the teacher was very knowledgeable about the language.

When gathering data about what the students liked and disliked about the course, it was evident from the responses that all liked the teacher, the teaching approach used and the teaching materials used. The most common dislike was the textbook, with two students answering that that they did not like it. One also responded that she did not like working with peers in class.

The next section of the questionnaire for non-withdrawers explored issues related to the impact that foreign language anxiety may have on students. Question H asked the students if they did consider leaving the course at any stage during the semester and what could have led to that decision. Only one student acknowledged having wanted to withdraw, but explained that it was right at the beginning of the course, when she believed the course was moving quite rapidly. Question I collected data about whether the students ever felt nervous or anxious during class, and if so, how they managed to
overcome those feelings. Three students answered that they never felt nervous. One student responded that around the time of the oral interviews in class she would get a bit nervous and just work through it, while another student declared that when she started the course there were feelings of anxiety, but she felt better when she realised that a lot of peers felt the same way. Finally, question J asked the students to explain what type/s of activities and/or events made them feel nervous in the Elementary Spanish course. Two students answered that nothing made them feel nervous, but three expressed that the oral interviews made them feel nervous.

The last question included in the questionnaire gathered data on how the students felt during the course. It asked them to choose, from a group of 12 statements, the ones that better described their feelings of anxiety and nervousness in class. The survey used elements of the surveys developed by Horwitz (1986) and also maintained the style of surveys already used in the questionnaires and this was executed in order to maintain the style of questionnaire consistent. The data collected found that three students felt anxious when they could not understand what the teacher said in class; two said that they always thought their peers were better at Spanish than they were; one felt that it made her feel nervous to speak without preparation and also that she felt so nervous that she forgot things she knew; another believed that she got nervous when she did not understand every word the teacher said. In contrast, two students responded that none of the statements related to them.
4.4.3.4 Interview Results – Non-Withdrawn Students

Although five students completed the questionnaires and agreed to be interviewed, only two non-withdrawing students were interviewed, Carlie (female) and Dominic (male), both aged 17-24. Neither was an international student. Neither student they had ever considered leaving the Elementary Spanish course. Their responses were able to give some more insight into the reasons why some students decided to continue in the Elementary Spanish course.

Carlie believed that learning languages was important and said that she really enjoyed learning new languages. Dominic responded that he thought the course would be enjoyable to take and could possibly be good for a future career. Dominic had started learning German at high school and was still doing so now; Carlie had not previously learned a foreign language. Both students expected to learn the basics of the language in the course. Carlie expected the teacher to be helpful and did not believe these expectations changed during the course. Dominic’s expectations however did change, as his extract shows: “My expectations were to learn all the basics of the Spanish language and start to learn basic bits and pieces when watching movies or the Spanish news. I thought the teacher would move too fast, but that wasn’t the case” (Dominic, SI, 2005).

The aspect Dominic really liked about the course was the speaking activities in class, as he believed that aspect differed from the German classes he attended. Carlie answered that she liked pretty much everything. “I liked everything really. I thought it was fun to speak in Spanish to my classmates” (Carlie, SI, 2005). Both students said that what they liked least about the course was the textbook used. Dominic commented about the
textbook, “I found it a bit patronising and very American based” (Dominic, SI, 2005). Carlie also observed that it was too focused on American students, and that it was a bit boring as well.

The Elementary Spanish course differed from other courses, according to Dominic, in that it was based on weekly workshops (no lectures), and because it was more interactive than his German class. Carlie believed the difference was because it was a more relaxed course, where students felt a bit more at ease, but still had to use their brain.

When questioned about foreign language learning anxiety, Dominic responded that he never felt nervous or anxious in class. Carlie answered that she felt very nervous when the oral interviews came, but knowing that other people in the class also felt the same way was very reassuring. “I did feel nervous when the oral interviews were on because they put a lot of pressure on us. But I felt the same way with the presentations for all my other courses too. I did feel better when I realised that most of my classmates felt the same way” (Carlie, SI, 2005). When asked about the type/s of activities that made them feel nervous in class, both students nominated the oral interviews. Carlie added that sometimes, when she couldn’t understand everything the teacher said, she also felt nervous. Carlie also mentioned that their nerves were quite minor and they were never anything serious that impeded studies and neither student had spoken to anyone about their nerves.

Overall, the data collected from non-withdrawn students in Semester I, 2005 showed that they felt anxiety during the classes, a lot like the students who withdrew from the course.
The oral interviews used for assessment were found to be the most anxiety producing aspect of the course. The students mostly disliked the textbook used in the course, however they all liked the teacher and the teaching materials used. Both non-withdrawn students agreed that having knowledge of a foreign language was important, which was a direct contrast to the students who withdrew up to this stage, as none of these had chosen that factor as a reason why they would learn Spanish. The non-withdrawn students also believed that they would like to learn another language and that they would like to travel to a Hispanic country.

4.4.4 Semester II, 2005

The Elementary Spanish course in Semester II, 2005 did not change in structure from the previous semester: assessment, course structure and teaching style were identical. The questionnaires used with participants were also the same during this semester, but no interviews were held.

According to official data collected from the school of Languages and Linguistics, a total of seven students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course during this semester. Consent forms were once again distributed at the beginning of the semester by the teachers to all the students attending each class. Twenty-six students signed the consent forms, a number significantly lower than previous semesters. When students withdrew from the course attempts were made to contact them by phone and email to participate in the study. Despite various invitations, no withdrawn students agreed to take part in the study. Some students gave excuses, such as, “I am too busy” and “I don’t want to take part anymore”. Many students could not be contacted at all. This semester of data
collection was disappointing, as it interrupted the flow of the study to date. However, this lack of interest and participation from students also illustrated how students could have felt “over-surveyed” and due to this, were not interested in participating in any more studies. This again underlines the difficulties faced by researchers of student retention.

The second semester of every year sees tutors and lecturers evaluate their courses and teaching, mostly by means of in-class surveys. When looking at a full-time student, who studies a typical 40 credit point load, it has to be taken into consideration that this student is possibly completing one or two surveys per course, or perhaps eight university surveys during the semester. It is therefore understandable that students who have withdrawn from the course are quite disinterested in completing more surveys. The analysis of the data collected from previous semesters shows that it is obvious that students generally do not discuss their intention to withdraw from the course with anyone before making the decision to leave.

4.4.4.1 Questionnaire Results – Non-Withdrawn Students

Three students who did not withdraw from the course were willing to complete a questionnaire, although they did not agree to take part in an interview afterwards. Two students were female and one male, all in the 17-24 year age bracket. None had enrolled as mature aged students and they were not international students. English was the first language for two of the students; one student’s first language was Polish. All were enrolled as full-time students and all were studying their preferred course. None had to learn a language as a compulsory part of their degree.
All three students responded that they wanted to learn Elementary Spanish because they thought it would be a fun language to learn. Two students thought that having knowledge of a foreign language was important. They also thought Spanish would be an enjoyable course to take and that they would like to travel to a Spanish-speaking country. The questionnaire revealed that only one student had never previously learnt a language. Two had learned languages previously: one had learnt English at school and the other had learnt Filipino at home. In terms of expectations, all expected to learn the basics of the language and expected the teacher to teach Spanish, to help students to learn and to be very helpful. None believed their expectations of the course had changed during the semester.

The students had very similar ideas of what they liked. Two liked the teacher and peers of the course as well as the teaching approach used. One student responded that what she liked best about the course was learning new words. The dislikes of the students were quite varied. One responded that he did not like group work, another student did not like the way the assessment was conducted, and the third did not like the textbook used.

Only one of the students had considered withdrawing from the course due to pressure from other subjects. All the students acknowledged that they had sometimes felt nervous and anxious; however, two students revealed that talking to friends helped them to overcome these feelings. The assessment was the main anxiety producing activity in the class, with all students admitting they all felt some anxiety when exam time approached. The students’ main concerns with regard to anxiety were that they never felt too sure of themselves when they spoke in Elementary Spanish class, that they always felt their peers
were better, that it made them anxious when they were asked to speak without preparation, and that sometimes they got so nervous they forgot things they knew.

The data from Semester II, 2005, showed that the students liked the course overall. They all agreed to learn Spanish because they believed it would be a fun language to learn, while some of them also believed that having knowledge of another language was important and that they wanted to travel to or work in a Spanish-speaking country. The students’ expectations were all very similar as they wanted to learn the basics of the language from the course.

Foreign language student anxiety, much like in previous semesters, did exist for these students, particularly with regard to the examinations, however, the levels of anxiety were not elevated enough for any major issues to arise with their language learning.

4.4.5 Semester I, 2006

This semester did not see any changes to the textbook or the teaching approaches used, however there were some changes to the oral interview component of the assessment. Instead of the teachers interviewing and assessing each student individually, each student was given a scenario that they had to practise with a partner. The students then had to interview each other, with each one having the opportunity to ask and answer questions in Spanish. Therefore, the interviews now involved two people, with the teacher working as a facilitator and assessor, instead of asking all the questions and then assessing the student. There were no changes to the questionnaires or interviews used in the study.
4.4.5.1 Questionnaire Results - Withdrawn Students

According to the official records obtained from the School of Languages and Linguistics, 16 students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course during the first semester of 2006. There were 22 consent forms collected for the study at the beginning of this semester. Two students were contacted to participate after withdrawing from the course.

The two students who agreed to participate in the study after withdrawing from the course were both male, one between 35-44 years old and the other between 25-34 years of age. One student was enrolled part-time, while the other student was enrolled full-time. Both were enrolled in their preferred degree and neither was learning Spanish (or any language) as a compulsory part of their degree. Both students answered that their first language was English and that they were not international students. The data from this section showed that since withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish Course, both students had continued the rest of their studies at the university; one student had also started working part time.

Both students indicated that they wanted to learn another language, that they had plans to travel to a Spanish-speaking country, and that they thought Spanish would be a fun language to learn. One also mentioned that he thought the course would be enjoyable to take. Their responses showed that neither student thought Spanish would give them more job options, nor did they think learning Spanish was important, nor did they believe that having knowledge of another language is important, and neither indicated that they wanted to work in a Spanish-speaking country.
The data for the section on language learning background and expectations showed that neither student had previously learned a foreign language. One expected that the course would not be as much work as it was, while the other expected it to be an enjoyable course. The data also showed that neither student had expectations of the teacher nor did their expectations change through the time they attended the class. One student did mention however that he would learn Spanish again when he had more time.

According to the students, what they liked about the Elementary Spanish class was the teacher, their peers and the teaching approach used. Neither student liked the way the assessment was conducted in the course. One student also mentioned that the course moved too fast.

Unlike many of the students who had withdrawn during other semesters, the withdrawn students for this semester offered only one factor each that they believed influenced their withdrawal from the course. One believed that he just did not have enough time for the course, as the workload was quite large. The other felt that there were aspects of the Elementary Spanish course that he did not like, namely the assessment. Neither student had discussed their decision to leave the course with anyone before withdrawing. Both students agreed that had the workload had been reduced, they may have reconsidered staying in the course. One student also mentioned that modifying the teaching approaches would have helped him.

Both students who participated expressed that they felt some form of anxiety during their presence in the Spanish class. One believed that had he been better prepared by studying
more, he would have felt less anxious. For one student, most of the class activities made him feel inadequate: “Some students, like my partner, are better at languages, so much of the class made me feel inadequate” (Patrick, SI, 2006). For the other student it was the rapid pace of the class that most made him feel anxious. Both believed that their anxiety and nerves may have definitely played a part in their decision to withdraw from the course.

4.4.5.2 Interview Results – Withdrawn Students

The same two students took part in interviews following the questionnaires. The interview protocol was the same as the previous semester. In question one, both students expressed that the main reason they decided to learn Spanish was because they wanted to travel to a Spanish-speaking country. David was almost ready to graduate and had credit for an extra subject, whereas Patrick articulated that while studying at the university, he decided to include Spanish as part of his degree. Neither student had previously learnt a foreign language, although Patrick responded that he had travelled to France and Japan and could understand some words from both languages.

In discussing their reasons for deciding to withdraw from Elementary Spanish, both students expressed that they did not think the course was going to be so intense. David said that he was not prepared to work so hard during the semester, as it was his last. In the end he really was not prepared for the exams. Patrick also expressed that the intensity of the course was too much; however, he also felt he had already missed out on too much, as he started the course a week late.
Both students agreed that at the outset, they did not have any expectations of the course or the teacher. David responded, “It was the way I thought, very group orientated. Because I am a bit shy I didn’t want to be as involved. But I had no real expectations” (David, SI, 2006). Patrick commented that he was not as talkative as other classmates, so he felt overwhelmed as there was a high amount of group work occurring. He felt that as Spanish was spoken the whole time in class, he usually felt quite overwhelmed.

Both students believed that the course was very time consuming, especially with outside study. Had the course not been as time consuming, and more laid-back, David said he probably would have continued. Patrick answered that the course should have run at a slower pace and he believed that it took up a lot more time than his other classes, for only a fraction of the amount of learning.

Overall, David believed that he felt great when he understood something that was said by the teacher or peers in class and that was what he liked in class. For Patrick, “the interaction within the class was great” (Patrick, SI, 2006). In terms of dislikes, David pointed out that although there was nothing wrong with the course itself, it was a lot more work that other courses. Patrick expressed the same view, believing that the course was a lot to take on straight away, especially as a first year course. David also believed that the pace of the class was much too fast for first year students.

David believed that the Elementary Spanish course was different from all his other courses in that it was all language, and this was a very strange concept for him. As he had never studied an Arts subject before he believed he needed more preparation before
enrolling. Patrick felt that unlike other subjects, the Elementary Spanish course was a lot more study for not as many results. However, he did enjoy the fact that there were not lectures like his other subjects.

Discussing foreign language learning anxiety in their interviews, both students expressed that they felt nervous and anxious during the Elementary Spanish class. David replied that the anxiety was mostly due to the course being such a new concept, as he believed that everyone else in the class had a better grasp of the language than he did and that his peers knew more. Patrick said, “I felt that the others were so much more ahead because I was not as talkative” (Patrick, SI, 2006). Both students agreed that there was nothing in particular that affected their anxiety levels in the Elementary Spanish course, although they admitted to feeling anxious at times. David did believe however that the oral interview would have made him feel nervous had he stayed in the course.

Both students indicated that they did not discuss their feelings of anxiety with anyone and that their feelings of anxiety were not the main reason for their withdrawal from the course, although they may have contributed. David acknowledged that he could have overcome the feelings. Patrick said that while the anxiety contributed a little, the feeling of being overwhelmed was the real problem. “I did feel that being overwhelmed was not a good feeling” (Patrick, SI, 2006). In this instance it is important to make the distinction between feeling overwhelmed and feeling anxious as this particular student did not describe that he felt anxiety, but he did feel that the course was overwhelming him, or he felt that it was too much for him to take on, due to the workload or the teaching style being too much or too unfamiliar. Since withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish
course, both students had continued at university with their other courses but had not taken on another foreign language.

Overall, the data collected from the withdrawn students during Semester I, 2006, showed that both students suffered from at least some degree of anxiety while they attended the course. They were concerned about what their peers thought and they made comparisons between their knowledge and the knowledge they believed their peers had. One also indicated that he felt anxious when he could not understand all that was said by the teacher in the Elementary Spanish class, and when he was asked to speak without preparation in class.

The data also showed that both students probably lacked some preparation for the course, especially the student who said he was not prepared to work “as hard” during the semester as he wanted to take it easy during his last semester. Generally, the data showed that both students had different expectations of the course, especially with regard to the workload, compared to the reality that they experienced. As a result of this, both students had concerns about the class moving too fast and leaving them behind. Not unlike withdrawn and non-withdrawn students from other semesters, the issue of expectations was also relevant to these students. They did not expect the course workload and they were somewhat surprised by the interactive nature of the course, especially as both expressed that they were not very outgoing people. Studies by Elliot (1997), Long et al. (2006), Wilcox et al. (2005) and Hoyt (1999) all show that students can withdraw from university due to a lack of preparation. This perceived lack of preparation can stem from academic preparation, such as a feeling that they were not adequately prepared for
university study through their secondary schooling, to a more social preparation, such as a change in living arrangements (Hoyt, 1999).

4.4.5.3 Questionnaire Results – Non-Withdrawn Students

Students from two Elementary Spanish classes were approached and asked to fill out questionnaires. Sixteen students – 7 male and 9 female – completed non-withdrawer questionnaires in Semester I, 2006. Once the semester was over, 3 of the non-withdrawn students were contacted for an interview. The majority of the students were between the ages of 17 and 24; three (two female and one male) were 25 – 34 and one female student was 45 – 54. Again, the majority were full-time students enrolled in their preferred degree. Only one student responded that she was studying part-time and one responded that she was not enrolled in a preferred degree. For four of the students, learning a foreign language was a compulsory part of their degree. Four students were international students for whom English was not their first language.

The data collected showed that all of the students chose to study Spanish as they thought it would be a fun language to learn. Fourteen students chose the course because they thought it would be an enjoyable course to take and because they would like to learn another language. Thirteen students chose Spanish because they would like to travel to travel to an Hispanic country, 12 believed that having knowledge of another language is important, while 11 wanted to work in a country where Spanish is spoken. Nine students wanted to learn more about Hispanic cultures and 8 students believed that Spanish was an important language to learn. Six students believed that knowing Spanish would give them more work options and finally, 5 students had friends and/or family who spoke Spanish.
In terms of language learning background, 5 of the 16 non-withdrawn students had never previously studied a foreign language. Four had learned Japanese, 3 had learned English and French, 2 had learned Italian and others had learned Polish, Latin and Korean. Nine of the students believed that they expected to learn basic Spanish from the course. Other students expected the course to be interesting, to be a good communicative course, or to be hard. The data showed that the majority of students (9 students) expressed that they were expecting a teacher who was helpful, understanding and, in many cases, fun. In regard to whether their expectations changed or not during the semester, 5 students remarked that they had, but that they had changed for the better. Overall the students like pretty much everything from the course. The particular aspects of the Elementary Spanish course that the non-withdrawn students liked are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Aspects of the Elementary Spanish course liked by non-withdrawn students (Semester I, 2006)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Students (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  The teacher of Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  The peers in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  The teaching approach used in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.  The materials used in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.  The “Dos Mundos” text used</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Working with peers in Elementary Spanish 10

7. The way the assessment was conducted 7

Most of the non-withdrawn students (12 in total) never considered leaving the course. Only two students admitted that they had considered the option, and this was a result of believing they did not have enough time to study.

Asked about foreign language anxiety, 10 of the 16 students replied that they felt some form of anxiety whilst in class. In order to overcome their feelings of anxiety, the students spoke to their peers (3 students) and asked for their help, or tried not to think about their nerves (3 students). Ten students expressed that the assessment, especially oral assessment, was what made them feel nervous. Two students also indicated that reading aloud in class made them feel anxious. Of the 16 students who participated, 5 believed that they never felt any form of nervousness in class. Other students expressed that they all felt nerves at different times and with different activities, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Aspects of the Elementary Spanish course that contributed to non-withdrawn students’ anxiety in class (Semester I, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Students (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Worrying when not understanding everything said</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Being asked to speak without preparation 7
3. Feelings that peers speak better than them 6
4. Getting nervous and forgetting things learnt 6
5. Thinking that peers are better at Spanish than them 5
6. Not feeling “sure” when speaking in class 4
7. Not understanding what is being corrected 3
8. Feelings class is moving fast and not keeping up 3
10. Feeling more nervous than in other classes 1

4.4.5.4 Interview Results – Non-Withdrawn Students

From the 16 students who completed non-withdrawers’ questionnaires, 5 agreed to be interviewed. When the interviewing began, only 3 of the 5 could be contacted and interviewed for the study: Heather, Nicky and Frank. All were between 17 and 24 years old and were domestic (not international) students.

There were a variety of reasons why these students decided to learn Spanish at university. Heather explained that it was for a combination of reasons: “I studied Spanish because I thought it would be fun to learn and I already had knowledge of French and Italian” (Heather, SI, 2006). Mainly though, she thought speaking a foreign language was important for knowledge and future work opportunities. Nicky mentioned a love of foreign languages and that she thought Spanish would be a good language to learn. Frank thought Spanish would be a fun language to learn. Both Heather and Nicky had
previously learnt a foreign language, mainly at school, while Frank answered had no previous knowledge of any language.

In terms of course expectations, all three expected to learn the basics of the language in the Elementary Spanish course. Heather expected the teacher to teach the basics of the language and its structure, while Nicky expected a teacher who was fun and friendly. Frank expected the teacher to be fun, but also patient, professional, with good knowledge and approachable. None of the students believed that their expectations changed during the semester. As Nicky said, “I expected to have a basic understanding of the language and its structure and hopefully a teacher who could do this. My expectations didn’t change” (Nicky, SI, 2006).

All the students expressed that they were pretty happy with aspects of the course and did not have many dislikes. Nicky did not particularly like the textbook used in the course and Frank was not happy with the workload in the course and the oral assessment. As he explained, “I pretty much liked everything, but I wasn’t too happy with the workload. It seemed like we were trying to put too much into each class. I also didn’t like the assessment, especially the orals. They were too much pressure” (Frank, SI, 2006).

All the students mentioned that the main difference between the Spanish course and other courses they studied was its interactive nature. Nicky said it was more interactive than other classes and that the assessment (with the group orals) was different. For Heather, the main difference was that you could talk to your peers in class in the target language. Frank observed that the course structure was the main difference, as there were no
lectures and it was more student oriented. Heather articulated similar views. “Yes, in respect to structure there were differences. There are no lectures for instance and more emphasis is put on students, not the teacher talking and the others listening” (Heather, SI, 2006). These three students never considered leaving the Elementary Spanish course, although Frank referred to it, explaining, “I never really thought about it, although the workload got pretty big. I suppose sometimes I did think about it! I also worked outside of university” (Frank, SI, 2006).

Asked about foreign language learning anxiety, Heather and Nicky expressed that they often felt anxious in class. Nicky explained that the feelings of anxiety were directly related to the course, so they were never really overcome. Heather responded that she always felt nervous as she believed the other students knew more than she did in class. “Yes, I felt anxious all the time! I felt that most students knew more than I did and I was starting at the very beginning. I worked through them, but never really stopped feeling nervous” (Heather, SI, 2006). Frank said he never felt anxious during the semester at all, except when he sat exams.

All the students felt that the oral interviews were the one activity that could make them feel anxious. Nicky also mentioned that group work and answering questions in class made her nervous, so nervous that she sometimes forgot things. For Heather, although the thought of the oral interviews was anxiety inducing, once the interview started she relaxed. “The oral interviews were the worst, especially with someone else. You didn’t want to let your partner down. I sometimes also felt that I wasn’t progressing like the other students” (Heather, SI, 2006). Heather and Nicky spoke to peers and friends when
they were feeling anxious and/or nervous in the Spanish class. Frank did not believe the feelings of anxiety were strong enough to speak to anyone about them.

Overall, the outcomes from the data collected from the non-withdrawers in the first semester of 2006 show that the most common reasons they decided to study Spanish were because they thought it would be a fun language to learn, because they wanted to learn another language and because they wanted to travel to a Spanish-speaking country. Unlike in other semesters, there were also four international students who participated in the study in this semester.

4.5 MAIN FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO WITHDRAWAL

This section will address the sub-questions mentioned in the introduction to this chapter in terms of the students who withdrew from Elementary Spanish courses. It aims to assess the data analysed and relate it back to the main research questions being posed in the study. The themes emerging from these questions can then be related back to the relevant literature. The main themes discussed in this section are: Previous foreign language learning experience, Reasons for enrolling in the Elementary Spanish Course, Student’s initial expectations of the Elementary Spanish Courses, Reasons students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish Courses and Language learning anxiety in the Elementary Spanish courses.
4.5.1 Previous Foreign Language Learning Experience

From the data gathered during the first semester of 2004 for this study, it can be seen that five of the six students who participated had previously learnt a foreign language. The languages learned were predominantly Japanese, followed by Indonesian and French. In Semester II, 2004, it was found that both the participants had already learned a language. Chinese was learned by one student, whereas the other student learned both Japanese and Italian previously. In Semester I, 2005 the Asian languages were again the most popular, with Japanese and Chinese learned previously by the two participating students. There were no participants in Semester II, 2005. Finally, Semester I, 2006 was the only semester when none of the students who participated had learned a foreign language. Table 5 illustrates the languages previously learned by all the withdrawn students who participated in this study.

Table 5
Languages previously learned by students (Semester I, 2004 – Semester I, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Students (n = 12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Japanese</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. French</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Indonesian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Italian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. No language learned</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data analysis shows that a large number of participants who had already learned one or more foreign languages decided to withdraw from the course. Taking into consideration their previous experience with language learning, it is easy to assume that these students would have had an advantage in class, as they had already experienced the process of language learning, albeit not with the Spanish language. However, as Bonham and Luckie (1993), Glossop (2002), and Harvey (2006) mentioned in their studies, there is regularly more than one reason why students withdraw from courses. Although it is possible that a different teaching style or assessment style contributed to the withdrawal of the students studied here, as they may have become accustomed to learning a language a certain way in the past, it is unlikely that it would have been the only reason for withdrawal from the course. From this data alone, it can be seen that a student who has learnt a language previously is no less susceptible to withdrawing from a foreign language course than one who has no previous language learning experience. In fact, from the data collected during the semesters, it can be argued that students who had never learnt a foreign language could be more likely to continue the course.

4.5.2 Reasons for Enrolling in the Elementary Spanish Course

Students’ dedication to the course they are studying and the degree they are undertaking is crucial to their commitment to continue at university, according to Tinto (1975, 1993). So staunch was Tinto in this belief that his initial Student Integration Model used student commitment and dedication to degree as one of the determinants for student attrition. In the data collected from the withdrawn students in this study, what can be seen is that they
all had much the same reasons for wanting to learn Spanish. Table 6 shows the most common reasons students gave for wanting to learn Elementary Spanish.

Table 6

Most Common Reasons for Wanting to Learn Spanish (Semester I, 2004 – Semester I, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Students (n = 12)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Thought it would be a fun language to learn</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Had plans/ would like to travel to a Hispanic country</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Would like to learn another language</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Though it would be an enjoyable course</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Having knowledge of another language important</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, it can be seen that the students chose to learn Spanish for a variety of common reasons. In Semester I, 2004, the knowledge of another language being important was chosen by half of students, and liking to and/or having plans to travel to a Hispanic country, was listed by five of the students. Expectations that it would be an enjoyable course and the belief it would be a fun language to learn were reasons expressed by half the students also. Two students also answered in the interviews that they decided to learn Spanish because they had a Hispanic background. In the other semesters the student responses followed a very similar path. In Semester II, 2004, both participants agreed that
the main reasons they decided to learn Spanish were related to future plans to travel to a Hispanic country, expectations that it would be a fun language to learn and thought it would be an enjoyable course. However, unlike the previous semester, the students in Semester II also believed that they were interested to learn more about Hispanic cultures and wanted to learn another language. In Semester I, 2005 the student responses were very similar, with both participants deciding to learn Spanish because they wanted to learn another language and they thought it would be a fun language to learn. Semester I, 2006, found that the students wanted to learn Spanish because they liked to/had plans to travel to a Hispanic country, they would like to learn another language, and that they thought Spanish would be a fun language to learn.

What can be seen from these results is that having the knowledge of another language was considered important for many of the cohort, yet their other reasons for learning Spanish were generally not for academic purposes in particular, but rather motivated by leisure or fun. These reasons are unlikely reasons for choosing other (non-language) courses, which may then have some association with commitment to the course. Although, these reasons alone could not be directly linked to the students lack of motivation to continue in a course, it was found that these factors, when not in combination with a serious reason for learning the language (such as to enhance career prospects), saw that the students were less likely to continue in the course. In this respect, Tinto’s (1975) theory that (lack of) commitment to the course at hand can contribute to the students’ withdrawal from the course can be witnessed firsthand here, as students, shown by the data collected, may not be as committed to their foreign language learning as they are to their other academic courses.
4.5.3 Students’ Initial Expectations of the Elementary Spanish Courses

The issue of student expectations in tertiary education has become more prominent in recent years. Many researchers have been looking into how student expectations can affect retention rates and at what level students’ expectations not being met can influence their decision to withdraw from a course or university degree (Baxter & Hatt, 2002; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Lowe & Cook, 2003). One of the concerns voiced by Lowe and Cook (2003) in particular was in regard to academic difficulty and expectations of academic staff not being met. Their research showed that this could lead to disengagement from the educational and social aspects of university life, ultimately leading to a negative impact on student retention.

It is imperative to mention the role of classroom pedagogy in the interpretation of the term “expectations” for many students. Although the students’ expectations can be derived from many areas, such as the marketing the university delivers to local newspapers or word of mouth from other students, the data analysis for this study found that the definition was most closely related to activities in the classroom and with the teacher. Some students related their expectations to what they had previously seen in movies or to other foreign language learning experiences they had.

For this reason, it was important to discover what the students’ expectations of the Elementary Spanish teacher and course were. Rather than looking only at their expectations at the beginning of the course, the students were also asked if their expectations had changed at all during the semester, due to teaching styles, assessment types or any other issues.
In Semester I, 2004, two students answered in the questionnaires that their expectations were for a native speaker as a teacher; one student expressed the expectation that she would be able to speak fluently by the end of the course. In Semester II, 2004, both students who participated expected to learn the basics of the language in the Elementary Spanish class. However, when asked about their expectations of the teacher, one student stated that she had no expectations of the teacher, while the other responded that they expected a teacher to be good at teaching and make it fun. In Semester I, 2005, the answers differed slightly from those collected the previous semester. One student responded that she expected to be fluent by the end of the semester, whereas the other student expected an interesting language and a good time learning it. Their expectations of the teacher were for someone to teach Spanish at their level of understanding and someone who was patient and helpful. Finally, the students who participated in Semester I, 2006 replied in the questionnaires that they had no expectations at all of the teacher or the course and reiterated their lack of expectations when questioned in the interviews.

The student interview responses were similar to the questionnaire responses. There were many different expectations mentioned by the participants; however, some students claimed to have had no expectations of the course or the teacher at all. In Semester I, 2004, three of the students mentioned that they did not expect the course to have such a large workload. As a contrast the other half of the students who participated responded that they had no expectations of the course at all. In Semester II, 2004 both students answered that they had little expectations or none of the course and the teacher. This could mean that when asked face-to-face the students were uncomfortable discussing
their expectations, or they were unsure what “expectations” actually referred to and did not want to answer incorrectly. In Semester I, 2005, the students had varied expectations; however, they mostly indicated that they wanted to learn basic Spanish and to have a teacher who was approachable. The students who participated in the interviews in Semester I, 2006 expressed that they had no expectations of the course or teacher of Elementary Spanish, which was what they had also indicated in the questionnaires.

Negative expectations, such as “I didn’t think it would be as much work”, could have a detrimental effect on the student’s persistence in the course, which is what Baxter and Hatt (2002) found in their research. They called this process the “compatibility of expectations” and noted that it occurred when the teacher of a course had a particular expectation of the course, such as its workload, and the students did not have the same or similar expectations as the teacher, making their expectations incompatible. Baxter and Hatt (2002) found that the outcome of this process was a higher level of incompletion for these students.

Lack of realistic expectations could have also contributed to the students’ attrition from the course. Students who answered in the questionnaires that their expectation was for a “native speaker” (as a teacher) and to be able to “speak fluently by the end of the course” did not have realistic expectations of what was on offer in the course. Watson et al. (2004) describe this lack of realism as problematic as there could be a large gap between realism and expectation and this could also lead to student discontinuation.
4.5.4 Reasons Students Withdrew from the Elementary Spanish Courses

At the forefront of the research conducted in this study is the crucial question of why students withdrew from the Elementary Spanish course. Although much research has looked into why students withdraw from other courses, no literature has been found to answer this particular question. It is unusual to find a student who withdraws from a course due to only one factor, and there are several factors mentioned in the literature, such as foreign language anxiety, that could lead to student attrition in foreign language classes. However, after a thorough literature search it was found that no research has been conducted that looks directly at the foreign language classroom and, through questionnaires and interviews, determines why students withdraw from a first-year foreign language course. Although this overarching question looks at the factors that influenced the decision of these students to withdraw from a foreign language class, it does not suggest that the factors mentioned are all specific to foreign language student attrition. There are universal factors, such as financial problems or work commitments, that may affect students of all courses and degrees. However, what was aimed to do with this question was discover whether any factors in particular affected these foreign language students and set them apart from students of other courses and degrees.

The data collected from student responses illustrate that the students were a lot more direct about the main factor that contributed to their withdrawal when interviewed in Semester I, 2004. Although students mentioned in the questionnaires that Spanish took up too much time due to its higher workload, in the interviews more students expressed that the workload was the main factor that led to their withdrawal. Another reason mentioned
in questionnaires by almost half the students was that they did not feel connected to their peers in the Elementary Spanish class.

In Semester II, 2004, one student felt that she did not connect with the people at university and the other student had problems with her health. One student also decided she wanted to join the workforce and decided to defer from university and the Elementary Spanish language course until another time. The factors mentioned by the students in the questionnaires, with the exception of one student who felt no connection with the people at the university, cannot be considered specific to the Elementary Spanish course, as the reasons are in fact out of the control of the university. However, there is something that the university can do in order to ensure students do not feel isolated from the university as a whole or the courses they attend. Realistically, in order for these at-risk students to receive the help they need, they should be recognised as at-risk at the very beginning of their degrees or courses. If this occurred, there is every possibility that they could receive assistance quite early and perhaps never reach the point of withdrawal.

In Semester I, 2005, students responded that a number of factors led to their withdrawal. A combination of health problems, joining the workforce, and the decision that university just was not for them led one student to withdraw from university. The other student explained that she decided to learn another language at university and that there were aspects of Elementary Spanish that she did not like. Whilst deciding to join the workforce and health problems are factors that are out of direct university control, deciding that university was not for them and finding aspects of Elementary Spanish not liked are factors that could have possibly been improved, had the tutor or lecturer of the course
been made aware of this particular student’s needs. As mentioned previously, determining at-risk students from the beginning could be beneficial to the university and the course as a whole, as it would give teachers a better idea of what could be done in class to help students and encourage them to continue. Because there are no formal steps put in place in the Elementary Spanish course that require that the students speak to teachers or administrators before they decide to withdraw from the course, it is often difficult to determine why students leave. It would be highly beneficial to know what particular aspects of the course students did not like, in order to rectify them (if possible) and improve the course for future students.

In the responses from Semester I, 2006, it was found that one student withdrew from the course because the workload was too large and one withdrew because there were aspects of the course he did not like. In the interviews, both students agreed that they did not think that the course was going to be as intense. One student also answered that she did not feel prepared for the exams and the other felt she had missed too much already as she had missed the first week of classes. Overall, the students from Semester I, 2006, responded that the factors that led to their withdrawal were completely related to the course itself.

According to Tinto (1975), if students felt that they were not completely integrated into their course or degree, the outcome could often be withdrawal. Tinto maintained that it was not only crucial that students felt academically integrated at university, but that a lack of social integration also played an important part in their decisions to discontinue. If the particular factor of not feeling connected to the university or the people there continually appears as a factor for student withdrawal, then a genuine reason for concern
develops. Examination of the in-class dynamics for each class may be needed, as well as consideration of different ways to bring the students in each class into harmony. Other factors, such as there being aspects of the Elementary Spanish course the students do not like, and the workload being too large, are also mentioned frequently by students and can cause concern. Not only can these factors lead to a lack of commitment, a factor that according to Tinto can lead students to withdraw, but they can also be tied with students’ expectations of the course. Although many students responded that they had no expectations of the course or teacher, this seems unlikely. When a student answers that there were aspects of the course she did not like, it can be assumed that they entered with predetermined ideas of what aspects they would like. Any aspects not agreeing with their “ideal” of a course could be seen as clashing with their expectations. Not surprisingly, student expectations have recently become an even more important issue when discussing student retention. Studies by Miley and Gonsalvez (2004), Coghlan et al. (2005), Ellerington and Bayliss (2003) and McInnis et al. (2000) are proof that tertiary student expectations not being met can result in attrition.

4.5.5 Language Learning Anxiety in the Elementary Spanish Courses

This element was added to the questionnaires and interviews in 2005, therefore there are only two sets of data collected with the students’ responses to this question. In Semester I, 2005, both the students who participated answered that they felt some form of anxiety when in class, mainly when they were asked questions and had to respond. Students agreed that what made them feel nervous was when they could not understand what the teacher says in class and when they were asked to speak without preparation in Elementary Spanish class, and that sometimes they got so nervous they forgot things they
knew. Although Brian answered that his anxiety in class had nothing to do with his overall decision to withdraw, Kathrin student believed that anxiety played some role. In the Semester I 2005 interviews both students responded with the same factors, however, they also added that the assessment was a factor that definitely made them feel anxious in class.

During Semester I, 2006, the students agreed that they felt some level of anxiety in class. In the questionnaires, Patrick said that he felt inadequate in class, as some students are better than others at learning languages, whereas the other student expressed that the pace of the class made him nervous. The students also believed that their peers were better at Spanish than they were, that their peers spoke Spanish better than they did, and that they were afraid that the class was so moving so fast they would be left behind. Both students also believed that their feelings of anxiety to some extent led them to withdraw from the course. In the interviews, both students acknowledged that their feelings of anxiety did contribute to their withdrawal; however, they agree that anxiety was not the only reason for their withdrawal. One of the main contributing factors to language learning anxiety was the oral interview that the students had to undertake as course assessment. As mentioned previously, oral assessment is something which does bring on anxiety in many students, some of which feel like they forget everything when put in such a situation (Horwitz, 2006).

According to Horwitz (1986), foreign language anxiety is a genuine form of anxiety often felt by students learning a foreign language. It can often make students forget what they were going to say, have “blanks” when asked questions, and sometimes feel inferior to other students in the class. Unfortunately a common outcome of foreign language anxiety
is student withdrawal. As can be seen from the results, the majority of students who participated believed they suffered from some form of anxiety in class and this anxiety played a part in the withdrawal decision of most of them.

4.6 MAIN FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CONTINUATION

This section looks at all the themes that emerged for the data collected from non-withdrawn students and contrasts them with the data collected from the withdrawn students. By assessing the main topics for non-withdrawn students, it is hoped that the contrasts can be clearly seen and more can be learned about the reasons students choose to stay in their courses.

4.6.1 Previous Foreign Language Learning Experience

According to the data collected from all non-withdrawing students from 2005-2006, a total of 16 students had previously learned a foreign language before enrolling in Elementary Spanish. The languages were varied, but the majority were European languages and the others were Asian languages. Most of the students had learned the languages in high school and primary school, and some had already learned another language at university. Table 7 illustrates the languages the non-withdrawn students had previously learnt at university. It is important to point out that some students had learned (or were currently learning) more than one language.
In contrast to the students who had withdrawn from Elementary Spanish, the number of students who had not learned a foreign language previously was higher for the non-withdrawn students. Although there was still a high number of students who had learned languages in the non-withdrawn cohort, the data show that students who had never learned a foreign language are still quite likely to continue the course, whereas students who had already learned a language were just as likely to withdraw. As mentioned in the previous section, students who had already learned a language and withdrew from the
course could have done so for numerous reasons, some of which may have had nothing to do with their previous language learning experience. However, it is possible that changes in teaching styles and assessment types could have contributed to their withdrawal. Students with previous language learning experience could have enrolled in the Elementary Spanish course with some preconceived notions of what to expect from the course, by basing their expectations on their past language learning experience. Although these expectations could have helped some students, as they may have found similarities between the courses that made them feel more prepared, some students may have found the Elementary Spanish course too different from what they had learned before.

It is important to point out that the majority of languages learned by the non-withdrawers were European Romance languages, with linguistic structures that are generally quite similar to those in Spanish. However, the languages previously learned by the students who withdrew from the course were largely Asian languages, which generally differ quite substantially from European languages not only linguistically, but also in many cases, also in the way they are delivered and assessed. This is not to say that this factor could have contributed entirely to the withdrawal of students; however, in many ways the data point to previous language experience as a factor that could contribute to the withdrawal of some students.

4.6.2 Reasons for Enrolling in the Elementary Spanish Course

The reasons the non-withdrawn students gave for learning Elementary Spanish were not very different from those given by the withdrawn students. Table 8 shows the most common reasons why students wanted to learn Spanish.
Table 8

*Most Common Reasons for Wanting to Learn Spanish (Non-Withdrawn Students)*

*(Semester I, 2005 – Semester I, 2006)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Students (n = 24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Thought it would be a fun language to learn</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Like to/Have plans to travel to a Hispanic country</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Having the knowledge of another language important</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Thought it would be an enjoyable course</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Would like to learn another language</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Would like to work in a country where Spanish is spoken</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Would like to learn (more) about Hispanic cultures</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the data show that the non-withdrawn students really believed that Spanish would be a fun language to learn as almost all the students gave this response as a reason why they chose to study it. Other important reasons were plans to travel to a Hispanic country and that the students thought it would be an enjoyable course.

The main contrast between the withdrawer and non-withdrawer data for this question is the high number of students wanting to learn Spanish because they believed having the knowledge of another language was important. Although this factor was mentioned by some of the withdrawn students, the data showed that only 25% of them agreed with the
statement, compared to almost all in the non-withdrawn cohort. Another contrast is the high number of non-withdrawn students who wanted to work in a country where Spanish was spoken and who used this as a reason to learn Spanish. There were such a small number of withdrawn students that responded with this factor that it was not considered a sufficiently common factor.

There were no studies found in the literature that established the reasons why students decided to enrol in a language course or programme, therefore making it hard to pinpoint whether the students in this study were making an informed decision when deciding to take on a language. As mentioned in the previous section, reasons such as it being important to learn a foreign language and wanting to work in a Spanish-speaking country can be considered to be directed more towards study and work or employment opportunities, as opposed to factors such as having plans to travel to a Hispanic country and thinking it would be a fun language to learn, which seem to be more directed towards leisure and fun activities. If that were the case, then it is obvious from the data collected from the non-withdrawn students that they had a better balance of reasons for wanting to study Elementary Spanish than the withdrawers, who saw Elementary Spanish as more of a leisure activity. A mixture of study-related factors with leisure factors could show that the students were taking the course seriously as well as wanting to enjoy their language learning.

4.6.3 Initial Expectations of the Elementary Spanish Course

As mentioned in the previous section, student expectations are an important issue when discussing retention, as much recent research has shown. The data collected from the
non-withdrawn students show that most had expectations that the course would teach them the basics of the Spanish language. On the whole, according to the questionnaires the students expected to learn basic Spanish, conversational Spanish and a good basis for learning language. They all had different expectations of the teacher, but many expected the teacher to be helpful, fun, to have good knowledge and to teach Spanish. In contrast to the expectations of the withdrawn students, only one non-withdrawn student did not have any expectations of the course. The non-withdrawn students’ interview results were quite similar to those from the questionnaires, with all students agreeing that they expected to learn the basics of the language and expecting a fun teacher.

The majority of the non-withdrawn students knew what they wanted from the course and, judging by their responses, all had very realistic expectations of the course and teacher. Some of the responses gathered from the withdrawn students were not as realistic, such as “speaking like a native” and “having a native teacher”. Although none of the withdrawn students believed that their expectations of the course or the teacher led to their withdrawal, the data show that in comparison to the responses of the non-withdrawn students, it is likely that their expectations could have played some part in their departure decisions.

The fact that the majority of non-withdrawn students had expectations of the course and that many of the withdrawn students did not, also leads to the issue of student preparedness for university and how it can affect student retention. Student preparedness has more recently been studied and discussed in the area of tertiary education. According to most of the studies, including those by Watson et al. (2004), Donnelly (2007) and
Lowe and Cook (2003), a lack of preparation for the reality of university life can be detrimental to the student and can ultimately lead them to withdraw from courses or from university as a whole. Research by McInnis, James, and Hartley (2000) found through interviewing school leavers in their first year of university, that only 36% of these students believed that their final year of high school had been a good source of preparation for their university studies. Donnelly (2007) reiterates this point by discussing research conducted by the Victorian Department of Education. He acknowledges that all Australian states and territories, except Victoria, where the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning has been introduced, have adopted a “one-size-fits-all” approach to high school preparation for university (2007). Further research shows that Year 11 and 12 certificates have been transformed to such a degree that the 2006 Australian Certificate of Education report concludes: “With only a minority of young people now aspiring to enter university directly from Year 12, preparation for tertiary study has ceased to be the primary purpose of senior secondary schooling.” (DEST, 2006).

4.6.4 Language Learning Anxiety in the Elementary Spanish Course
Similarly to the withdrawn students, the non-withdrawn students also felt some form of anxiety while attending the Elementary Spanish course. In general, the responses from the non-withdrawn students to this question were very similar. The students felt that what worried them the most was when they could not understand what the teacher said in Spanish. In addition, they reported feeling anxiety when they were asked by the teacher to speak in class. Moreover, in the interviews the majority of students responded that the assessment, in particular the oral interviews, was what made them feel most anxious in
this course. Overall, in terms of foreign language learning anxiety, the responses from the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students showed some differences. Both sets of students felt anxiety, although the non-withdrawn students did not seem to find as many activities in the Elementary Spanish course to be as anxiety inducing as the withdrawn students. Some of the students who withdrew responded that anxiety and nerves did play a direct part in their decision to withdraw. Without a doubt, the students who believed that anxiety played a part in their withdrawal decisions definitely felt anxiety more often and with more in-class activities than those students who did not withdraw from the courses. Anxiety levels and the impact of anxiety on students’ learning is an area that should be researched further, as this study shows that it is a factor that contributes to the attrition of foreign language students. Studies have shown that with some support from teachers and counsellors, language learning anxiety could be overcome (Bailey et al., 2003; Castro et al., 1999). This shows the importance of identifying and ensuring that these students get help from the very beginning of the course as it could encourage them to continue and not withdraw.

4.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter aimed to answer the first research question developed for this study. In order to do this, the chapter analysed and interpreted the data gathered from the questionnaires and interviews conducted with withdrawn and non-withdrawn students from Semester I, 2004 to Semester II, 2006. The chapter also analysed the attrition data available in class assessment reports from 2001 to 2006 made available by the faculty administrator. The
data analysis and interpretation conducted in this chapter resulted in six main research findings, all of which will be discussed below. A brief critical reflection on how objectivity could have been compromised in this study will also be mentioned at the end of the summary.

The first finding shows that the analysis of the class assessment reports confirmed that in-course attrition had been occurring and was an ongoing problem in the Elementary Spanish course during every semester between 2001 and 2006. The class assessment reports also showed that the numbers of students enrolling in the Elementary Spanish courses had risen between 2001 and 2006 and that there was a possible correlation between the effective lowering of the OP scores of the students accepted into the courses and the higher number of student withdrawals.

The second finding showed that the majority of withdrawn and non-withdrawn students who participated in this study had at some stage learned a foreign language before enrolling in the Elementary Spanish courses. Even though these students had already learned a foreign language, and therefore were aware of what learning a foreign language entailed, they were just as likely to withdraw from the Elementary Spanish courses as student who had not learned a language previously. In terms of student expectations, one of the main factors for student withdrawal mentioned in chapter two, it could be seen in some instances that previous language learning experience had played a part in shaping the students expectations for the Elementary Spanish course, however, some students still expressed that they had no expectations of the course. Student expectations will be discussed in more detail later in this summary.
The third finding revealed that students who had withdrawn from the Elementary Spanish courses were more likely to have chosen to study Spanish due to less “serious” reasons. Reasons such as enrolling in the Elementary Spanish course for fun or enjoyment were more common with withdrawn students than with the non-withdrawn participants in the study. Non-withdrawn students were more likely to be learning Spanish because they wanted to further their career, or because they believed language learning was an important part of life. Although the majority of the non-withdrawn students also wanted to learn Spanish because they thought it would be “fun”, these students used a combination of “fun” and “serious” reasons to explain why they decided to learn Spanish, whereas on the whole, the withdrawn students did not use this combination. On the whole, it can be ascertained many students did not perceive Elementary Spanish as a “serious” course to study.

The fourth finding showed that the initial expectations of the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students were distinct. The attitudes of the withdrawn students confirmed that a number of them had unrealistic expectations of what the Elementary Spanish course entailed or what the teacher of the course would offer. Expectations such as being able to speak fluently by the end of a semester and having a native teacher, demonstrated these beliefs. In contrast, the expectations of the non-withdrawn students were considered more realistic. Most non-withdrawn students expected to learn the basics of the language and to have a teacher who could deliver the lessons with patience and knowledge. The data analysis showed that there were a significant number of withdrawn students who had no expectations of the course and/or teacher, whereas all of the withdrawn students
expressed some form of expectations. Overall, it can be concluded that the withdrawn students’ expectations were not being met, as they often were not in line with the reality of the course. This is a serious problem, which may need to be addressed by the people responsible for the marketing of these courses. Again, this finding shows its close relation to one of the main factors mentioned in chapter two, student expectations and perceptions of university life. Students being unaware of the demands of higher education and being ill-informed about university study can definitely lead to their withdrawal from university courses (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003, Lowe et al., 2003, McInnis, et al. 2003).

The fifth finding highlighted that there were many reasons why the students were withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses. Overall, most of these factors corresponded with the general withdrawal factors discussed in the literature (Elliott, 1997; Glogowska et al., 2007; Harvey et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2004; Roman, 2007). However, there were withdrawal factors that were exclusive to Elementary Spanish course students. The most common factor for student withdrawal was the workload of the course. As a consequence of this workload, some students reported that they felt the Elementary Spanish course took up too much of their study time. In addition, other students expressed that they did not connect with people in the class. Therefore, this again shows the significance of social and academic integration on student attrition (Beil et al., 1999; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993, 1997).

The sixth finding, regarding the issue of foreign language learning anxiety, confirmed that all students, not only those who withdrew, felt some form of anxiety. However, although both withdrawn and non-withdrawn students suffered from some level of
anxiety, the students who withdrew from the course indicated that their levels of anxiety may have contributed to their decision/s to leave the course. Both withdrawn and non-withdrawn students demonstrated that activities related to speaking and listening comprehension in Spanish, such as not understanding the teacher or being asked a question in class, were the activities that developed the highest levels of anxiety and nervousness. Although there were a variety of activities that contributed to their feelings of anxiety, the most anxiety inducing activity was the oral interview. It was found that numerous students found the oral interviews to be a real hurdle and difficult to tackle. This finding is in direct correlation with yet another of the factors mentioned in the literature review, the issue of foreign language learning anxiety (Bailey et al., 2003; Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001; Horwitz, 1986; MacIntyre, 1994).

As mentioned in chapter three (see 3.8.2) qualitative research recognizes that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved. To a great extent many elements of a qualitative research study are the products of the researcher’s preconceptions and previous knowledge. Although all due care was taken in terms of subjectivity, it is important to mention that the data collected still needs to be treated with caution. As the researcher was also the teacher of the course, some students may have toned down their critical comments, so as not to offend the teacher. Some comments from the withdrawn students may have also been overly emphatic in order to make a point about their dissatisfaction with the course itself.

It is also significant to mention that the researcher’s interpretation of the non-withdrawn students’ comments may had been influenced, although never intentionally, by knowing
that they had stayed in the course and as a result have proved themselves to be more “dedicated” to the study of Spanish.

Chapter Five will answer the second research question posed in this study by discussing the development, piloting and implementation of a prognostic approach to identify potential students at risk of withdrawing.
CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A
PROGNOSTIC APPROACH

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will describe the development, piloting and implementation of a prognostic instrument developed in early 2007. It discusses the second research question introduced in Chapter One, which is, how can potential in-course attrition be identified?

The literature review in Chapter Two showed that no significant models of student retention and attrition have been developed since the late 1990s, and nor were there any models or instruments available that dealt with students withdrawing from foreign language classes. More specifically, there were no published studies that focused on the factors that prompted students to withdraw from university before they actually withdrew from the course/s.

As a focus for this study, it was decided that a model and instrument should be developed to identify and support students at risk of withdrawing, to prevent their withdrawal as a consequence, and therefore to help improve course retention levels.
This chapter will be divided into two sections. Section one will discuss the model developed for the prognostic approach in this study and how it works to identify students potentially at risk of withdrawing. Section two will concentrate on the prognostic instrument developed, as well as how and when it was trialled, the outcomes of the trial, and the conclusions drawn from its development and implementation. Both the model and instrument aim to work together to identify students who are potentially at risk of withdrawing and help them to stay before they decide to leave university.

5.2 THE PROGNOSTIC APPROACH INSTRUMENT

Developed in 2007, the prognostic approach instrument was a result of the data collected and analysed from withdrawn and non-withdrawn Elementary Spanish students and the literature gathered on the topics of student attrition and retention.

According to the international literature available on retention and attrition, a number of student retention and attrition models were developed between the 1970s and 1990s. As discussed in Chapter Two, most of those models varied in terms of elements included, participating students, and final hypotheses. However, the model had one commonality: they each studied student retention and attrition from the stage the student had left. In a sense, these models all aimed to discover the factors why students were withdrawing from their studies and perhaps then offer ways in which to combat these withdrawal factors, even if each model did achieve this in a different way. The most well known is
the Student Integration Model developed by Tinto in 1975. Since then, other models have fallen mainly into two distinct categories: trying to improve Tinto’s original model, or trying to refute it.

For this study, the result of the analysis of retention and attrition models identified two distinct gaps. The first was the apparent lack of literature referring to in-course attrition, in any classrooms, but especially foreign language classrooms. Of the little literature that dealt with the withdrawal of students from language classes, the majority referred to the issue of foreign language student anxiety and how it could contribute to student withdrawal. The second gap was the lack of retention and attrition models that tackled the issue of student withdrawal from the beginning of the course, that is, before students had withdrawn. All the models were found to investigate the issue of retention once the students had withdrawn from their studies and never really developed a prognostic way in which to use the data collected from the students once they had left the course. Although these models were successful in determining the factors that contributed to student withdrawal, none were administered at the beginning of courses being analysed, and therefore they were not actively retaining any students in these courses.

By taking into account the other student retention and attrition models already developed (as discussed in Chapter Two), especially the Student Integration Model developed by Tinto (1975), the contributions these models made to the literature, and some shortcomings found within them, the First Year Student Survey and Attrition Model, to be described in this chapter, were developed. The following sections will discuss also how the model was administered and its advantages and limitations.
5.3 THE FIRST YEAR STUDENT ATTRITION MODEL

The First Year Student Attrition Model, was developed in 2007. The model, as seen in Figure 3 (on the following page), was divided into three main sections: Learning Energy Sources (Retention Factors), Learning Energy Levels (Levels of Student Integration and/or Engagement), and Overall Learning Energy Output (Outcomes of Integration and/or Engagement Levels and their relationship to the likelihood of Student Withdrawal).
Figure 3. The First Year Student Attrition Model – “Reenergize and Refuel”.

**LEARNING ENERGY SOURCES**

**What are they?**
Levels of Student Integration or Engagement in the course or university as a whole.

**How are they calculated?**
These are the scores the students receive on each learning energy source after completing the First Year Student Survey or FYSS.

**What do they mean?**
The higher their scores, the higher their learning energy levels and consequently the better their chances of completing the course.

**STUDENT WITHDRAWAL**
Student withdrawal is expected to occur if the students learning energy levels are low and they score a POOR on the FYSS. These students require monitoring and support.

**STUDENT RETENTION WITH ENCouragement AND SUPPORT**
The students who scored a FAIR in the FYSS are safe from withdrawal at this stage, but may need to be monitored as they could lapse into being at-risk of withdrawing.

**STUDENT RETENTION**
The students who have high energy levels and score an OPTIMAL on the FYSS can be expected to complete the course and be retained.

**OVERALL LEARNING ENERGY OUTPUT**

**STUDENT WITHDRAWAL**
Student withdrawal is expected to occur if the students learning energy levels are low and they score a POOR on the FYSS. These students require monitoring and support.

**STUDENT RETENTION WITH ENCouragement AND SUPPORT**
The students who scored a FAIR in the FYSS are safe from withdrawal at this stage, but may need to be monitored as they could lapse into being at-risk of withdrawing.

**STUDENT RETENTION**
The students who have high energy levels and score an OPTIMAL on the FYSS can be expected to complete the course and be retained.

**LEARNING ENERGY LEVELS**

**PERSONAL STUDENT FACTORS AND STUDENT LEARNING FACTORS**
- Gender
- Age
- Linguistic background
- Cultural Background
- Work Constraints
- Financial Constraints
- International Student
- Attendance Type
- Reasons for Learning Spanish
- Social Beliefs
- Academic Beliefs
- Learning Style
- Student Preparation
- Student Expectations
- Foreign Language Anxiety
- Motivation to learn

**TEACHING AND LEARNING FACTORS**
- Teaching Style
- Resources used in class
- Assessment preferences
- Classroom Peers

**UNIVERSITY FACTORS**
- University marketing
- University student support services
A metaphor was developed in order to explain clearly the prognostic approach developed in this thesis: “Reenergize and Refuel”. A decision was made to use “energy” as a key word for this model as energy illustrates the vigour that students need in order to continue studying and persist in a course at university. According to Ainley (2004), ‘Energy in Action’ is the connection between a person and an activity and is used by him to describe the engagement of students in their studies. Energy is an outcome of getting more fuel, be it in a vehicle or as a human getting more “brain food”, therefore the term “energy” was considered appropriate for this use, as well as being a term easy to recall.

The first section of the model interprets “learning energy” coming from different sources as contributing to the retention of students in a course. Learning energy can be described as help, knowledge or encouragement coming from different sources, such as the family of the student (encouraging him/her to continue at university) or the study habits of a student (studying in groups). Basically, the more family support or better the study habits the student has (among a multitude of other encouraging activities), the more likely it is that the student will continue to study in the course. The model also illustrates that more knowledge and understanding of useful learning energy sources is beneficial to the student. That is, a student who does not have much knowledge of the learning energy sources (such as student loans being available when a student is in financial trouble or knowing that they can speak to a university counsellor for free) has a higher chance of withdrawing from a course. The sources referred to in the model are made up of four categories with a number of factors in each. These factors have been included in the different sections dealing with the First Year Student Survey (see section 5.4).
The second section of the model acknowledges the importance of measuring the “learning energy levels” of the students. This part calculates the total scores gained by the students and assesses whether these are poor, fair, or optimal. An optimal level of energy is the ultimate result for the student, as this means that they have a high level of awareness about this source and may be less likely to withdraw from the course. Students identified as having a poor or fair level of energy will be considered to be potentially in the at-risk category. The way the model aims to work (once all the piloting has taken place) is by determining that a student who has a lower score is therefore higher at-risk of withdrawing from the course. What the model aims to do is at this point is determine in what learning energy source the student may be weaker. Once it is ascertained that the student is weak in any particular area, they can obtain the support needed to increase their awareness of this particular learning energy source.

The third section of the model is called the “Overall Learning Energy Output”. This section aims to measure the total score for each student, or the “output”, according to their score for each individual learning energy source. The tool was designed so that the higher the overall score for the student, the less at risk they are considered and therefore the less likely they are to withdraw from the course in question. However, at this stage, this is only an aim. Although the tool was developed to function in this way, and the outcomes have looked positive, there is still no valid statistical evidence to prove that the scores from each student can reliably prove that a higher student score can determine that a student will be retained in the course.
Once the tool has been tested statistically, the aim is to encourage the students to add up their total scores and determine if they are considered at risk according to the score cut-offs provided. If they are considered at risk, they should then look at which particular learning energy source area/s are deficient. Once this is determined, they are given information that will lead them to support and encouragement with the aim of helping them to improve that area.

The main aim of the model proposed is to determine at the beginning of the course those students who are at risk, and then help them to develop a better awareness of the learning and other student support available to them. The ultimate goal of this approach is to help them to progress successfully in the course. In order to do this, a student support sheet, with useful information for students about university, personal and learning and teaching factors, was developed, and instructions to teachers on how to use this approach was introduced (see section 5.4.5).

### 5.4 The First Year Student Survey – FYSS

Once the need for a prognostic approach instrument was identified, it was then necessary to determine the best way in which to develop the instrument, so that it would be easy to complete by the students and easy to analyse by the researcher. Due to the previous successful use of questionnaires with the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students (see Chapter Four), it was decided that the best way to set up the prognostic approach instrument would be as a survey. A survey could include all the important elements
required for the instrument, while allowing the students to answer the questions at their own pace. Questionnaires have been found to work well when what is required is fairly straightforward information from participants (Sarantakos, 2005). This was certainly the case with the First Year Student Survey (hereafter FYSS). Clarity was crucial for the survey, as it was paramount that the students understood what was being asked of them, in order to obtain the best results. Therefore the instructions, questions and layout of the instrument needed to be very concise.

5.4.1 The Layout of the Survey

The literature review and data analysis revealed that a number of factors (17 in total) could significantly influence a student’s decision to withdraw from a course. Overall, it was determined that the many factors contributing to student withdrawal could be grouped into three categories: (a) personal student factors and student learning factors, (b) teaching and learning factors, and (c) university factors.

The layout of the FYSS was divided into the three main categories mentioned above, with a sub-category, student learning factors, included in the first category of personal student factors to further explore the topic. The aim was to make the survey clear, concise and very easy to complete by the students and easy to analyse by the teachers and researcher. In order to do this, each category was made up of a number of “yes” or “no” questions with which the students had to agree or disagree (see Appendix 8 for the FYSS). Each response on the questionnaire was given a score. A “yes” answer scored two points, while a “no” answer scored one point. Once the survey was completed,
students’ responses for each category were calculated and then added up for an overall score. The questions were phrased in such a manner as to ensure that, as long as the assumptions underlying the questions were valid, higher scores would imply lower chances of withdrawing from the course.

It is important to reiterate at this point that the model, tool and associated student support sheet are part of an exploratory study. Many modifications have yet to be made to all aspects of the tool and its associated parts in order to allow it to function in a statistically reliable and valid way. There was no guarantee that the tool could determine all the students who were to remain in the course, however, the preliminary cut-offs were developed to allow the teacher to select groups considered at high, medium and low risk of withdrawing and identify who to offer extra support to. In the context of this study, the preliminary cut-offs developed showed that they may have been capable of determining at-risk students, however, by no means was there any guarantee that they would work in other courses, with other students or at other universities without being statistically tested first. The modifications needed to make the tool statistically valid will be discussed in section 5.4.6.

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, in order to help teachers identify which students were most at risk, preliminary, pilot score cut-offs were determined. As each section had a different number of questions, the total for each category was different. Category one—personal student factors and student learning factors—had a total of 92 points, 40 for personal student factors and 52 for student learning factors; category two—course factors—had a total score of 26 points; category three—university factors—had a total of
36 points. Thus the maximum score that a student could gain was 154 points and the minimum was 77 points.

The preliminary cut offs were determined as follows. Students scoring between 80% and 100% were considered at very little risk of withdrawing (so were regarded as optimal); students scoring between 60% and 79% were considered at a low risk of withdrawing (hence, fair). The students with the lowest scores (50%-60%) were considered to be highly at risk of withdrawing (so, poor). This amounted to students’ scores being lower than 55 points in category one, 15 points in category two, or 21 points in category three. These students were considered to be in the at-risk zone and therefore would be encouraged to seek support. Details of the support given to students will be discussed in section 5.4.5.

Students who scored over 60% and up to 79% were classified fair, and students who score over 80% were generally considered safe from withdrawing. However, that is not to say that students who scored over 80% would not withdraw at all. Although the prognostic approach aims to identify and offer support to students to prevent their withdrawal, it cannot guarantee that every student will be retained in the course.

Unfortunately, it was due to the combination of the number of participants and the time constraints of this study that it was not possible to ensure that the tool valid statistically. Due to these reasons, steps should be taken to ensure this tool and its cut-offs are statistically reliable and valid by piloting the tool with more participants and therefore ensuring that the items in the FYSS matter by having more evidence. As a result, more valid and reliable cut off’s can be derived and used. Modifications, limitations of the tool and recommendations will be discussed further in chapters five and six.
5.4.2 The First Section: Student Factors

The first section of the prognostic instrument aimed to discover the personal demographic characteristics of each student. The literature indicated that several personal factors could lead to student attrition from tertiary courses, such as personal problems, health issues, student age and gender, to name only a few. This part of this chapter will make clear why these factors were included in the instrument, by relating the factors back to the literature on the topic and to the student data gathered.

5.4.2.1 Personal Student Factors

This part asked students general questions about themselves and their studies as it aimed to document the reasons why they chose to enrol in the Elementary Spanish Course. It collected information about seven specific factors that, according to the literature and the empirical data analysed in this study, could affect the withdrawal of student from their tertiary studies. These seven factors are discussed below.

1. Gender

Studies on the effect of student gender on student retention have shown a shift through the years. Earlier studies claimed that female students in Anglo-Saxon countries were more likely than males to discontinue their tertiary studies (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Tinto, 1975). However, with the female tertiary population rising to above that of males (for Australia see DEST, 2004), the situation has changed. Recent research shows that the
proportion of females completing a degree once started has greatly exceeded the proportion of males (Bidgood et al., 2006; Gabb et al., 2006; Scott, 2005).

In recognition that gender may now be a factor that could contribute to student non-withdrawal, the question, “Are you female?” was included in the prognostic instrument.

2. Age

Some studies report persisters to be younger students between 17-20 years of age and non-persisters to be older students over 20 years of age (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Scott, 2005). From such research, it can be presumed that a student who is over 20 years old will be more at risk of withdrawing from the course than a school leaver. The data analysed for this study found that the majority of students who participated in the study and had withdrawn from the course were in fact younger students; however, this is likely to be due to the small numbers of mature-aged students who enrol in the course. The mature-aged students who did participate in the study had different concerns and worries and withdrew for slightly different reasons than the younger students.

3. Linguistic and Cultural Background

Being a member of an ethnic minority has been mentioned in the American literature as having an impact on student retention (Bonham et al., 1993). Students from Hispanic, Asian and African-American backgrounds are often underrepresented in the academic realm, and in Australia it is a fact that proportionally not as many indigenous students
attend university as other domestic students (DEST, 2004). Elsewhere in the world, it has been revealed that only 13% of U.S.-born Latinos in California gain a bachelor’s degree, and the figures are almost identical for African-Americans (Hendricks, 2007). In New Zealand, research has shown that retention is increasingly a concern with regard to Pasifika students (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson and Anae, 2006). While enrolment numbers are increasing at university, Pasifika students are disproportionally represented among those students who do not complete their courses and degrees (Benseman et al., 2006).

The data analysed for this study found that among the participants, the withdrawn students were all from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds and cultures. However, this in itself does not contradict the literature, as very small numbers of domestic students from ethnic backgrounds enrol in the Spanish programme and in some years there are no domestic students from ethnic backgrounds enrolled at all.

For these important reasons it was considered that the questions of linguistic and cultural background should be included in the instrument to determine whether the students could be at risk. As a result, the questions: “Is your cultural background Anglo-Saxon?” and, “Are you from an English speaking background?”, were included.

4. Work and Financial Constraints

Work and financial constraints have been a topic of concern for researchers of student retention for a long time. Many studies have examined both factors and their underlying effects on student retention. In current times, and in light of the costs associated with living and attending university, it is impossible to assume that students will stop working
once they start their university degrees. According to Curtis and Klapper (2005), many students in the UK graduate with a high amount of debt; often their work interfered with the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills. Research conducted by Blanchard and Mascetti (2000), Glossop (2002) and Lee (1996) found that financial and work constraints were among the top three reasons students gave for withdrawing from their tertiary courses. Long (2006), Ferrier et al. (2006), and Scoggin et al. (2006) conducted research which showed that full-time employment seems to impact on students’ studies negatively, more so than part-time employment. Barrett’s (2000) research also illustrated that the predicament of combining work and study seems to affect non-traditional students (e.g., mature age students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds) more than traditional domestic students. It is also notable that one of the factors from Tinto’s (1975) Student Integration model showed that students who worked or had outside commitments that took up a lot of their time, had a much higher chance of withdrawing from university courses.

The empirical study conducted here also found that some students had financial concerns or needed to work, and this led to their withdrawal. However, work and financial issues often were only part of a number of reasons why students withdrew. Due to financial reasons playing some part in the responses in the data analysis, it was important to determine whether the students were working during their studies and if they believed they would have any financial difficulties during the semester. Therefore, the following questions were included: “Do you have a job outside of university study?”, “Will your work duties impede with your study time?”, “Will you set aside the recommended amount of hours each week to dedicate to study?”, “Do you believe that any extra-
curricular activities you take part in will cut into your study time?” and “Could you continue your university study working only a small amount/no hours each week?”.

5. International Student Status

According to figures provided by the Department of Education, Science and Training, the percentage of international students withdrawing from Higher Education degrees is considerably lower than that for domestic students (DEST, 2004). Research by Deng (2007) at the University of South Australia and Elliot (2007) at Curtin University also shows that international students, especially Chinese students, generally have lower attrition rates than domestic students.

The data analysis revealed that as far as the Spanish course in which the FYSS was trialled is concerned, the attrition rates for international students in this course are much lower than those for domestic students. At the university in question, the international students enrolled have an obligation to complete at least 30 credit points worth of courses to maintain their enrolment. However, they are by no means obliged to select particular courses (set by their universities at home, for instance) nor are they forbidden from swapping or changing courses. Taking all that information into consideration it can be said that overall, international students have a lower chance of withdrawal than domestic students, making this status an important factor to determine with the instrument. Thus the question, “Are you an international student?” was included.

6. Attendance Type

In the literature, it was found that attendance type is in many ways related directly to work and financial constraints. The majority of students who decide to study part time are
often engaged in full-time work (Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005). A NCES study in 1998 found that students who did not work or who worked part time had a lower attrition rate than those who worked full time, even if these were only enrolled part-time at university (Bradburn, 2002). Other research shows that high work hours could adversely affect the social and academic integration of these students and, following Tinto’s Student Integration Model, this could lead to withdrawal (Curtis et al., 2005; Tinto, 1975). Research by Lee to determine the reasons why students did not return to university after one semester also found that the higher percentage of students not returning were those who were part-time students and those between the ages of 22 and 50 (Lee, 1996). Given all these findings, it was considered important to also ask the students if they were studying full-time or part-time.

The empirical data for this study found that there were only a small number of part-time students who withdrew from the course; however, taking into consideration the lower number of students who study part time, this number is not disproportionate. As a result of the data collected, the following question was added to the prognostic instrument: “Are you enrolled as a full-time student?”

7. Reasons for Learning Spanish

This question was very specific to this study. It aimed to discover whether the reasons students chose to learn Spanish were different between the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students. This was important to establish as the empirical data showed that the withdrawn students had a tendency to learn Spanish for more non-academic reasons, whereas the non-withdrawn students generally wanted to learn Spanish for more serious
reasons, such as future employment opportunities. For this reason the following questions were added to the instrument: “Do you believe that having the knowledge of a foreign language is important?”, “Do you have plans/would like to travel to a Spanish speaking country?”, “Would you like to learn more about Hispanic cultures?”, “Do you think knowing a foreign language will open up your job prospects?”, “Do you have family/friends that speak Spanish?”, “Did you think it would be an enjoyable course to take?”, “Did you think it would be a fun language to learn?”, “Do you have friends studying in the same course?” “Are you studying Spanish as an elective?”.

5.4.2.2 Student Learning Factors

This section gathered data about the reasons why the student chose to enrol in the course. This was important because according to the literature there are learning factors that could affect students negatively and ultimately lead to their withdrawal (Braxton et al., 2000; Yorke, 2000).

1. Social and Academic Beliefs

According to Tinto’s Student Integration Model, developed in 1975, the importance and the effects of social and academic integration on students’ continuation at university were paramount (see Chapter Two). Tinto (Tinto, 1975) believed that students who were not unreservedly integrated into university life in either area had a much higher chance of dropping the course or degree they were undertaking. Research by Bean (1980) also showed that a higher level of social and academic integration was seen as a positive factor contributing to student retention. In the empirical data for this study it was found
that peers, and activities involving peers, were on three occasions mentioned negatively and for three particular students they were a factor that influenced their decision to withdraw. This data also revealed that some students felt that they were lagging behind and overwhelmed by the course and therefore were not achieving their optimum results academically. This factor definitely also contributed to the withdrawal of the above students.

Due to all these points it was important to address academic and social factors in the prognostic instrument. The following questions dealing with social integration were therefore included in the instrument: “Is making friends at university important to you?”, “Are the social elements of university an important part of your university life?”, “In your opinion, is it imperative that students join sports and social clubs at university?”, “Would you be disappointed if you did not make friends in the courses you are attending?”.

With regards to academic integration, the following questions were included: “Is getting good grades important to you?”, “Will you aim for a High Distinction in this course?”, “Would you be disillusioned if you did not get good marks in this course?”, “Do you believe that it is important to have a good association with the tutor/lecturer of your courses?”, “Is it important for you to think highly of the university that you are attending?”. 
2. Learning Style

This factor was included in the prognostic instrument as a result of research conducted by Braxton et al. (2000). Although it did not result in the development of a model of retention, their work emphasised the influence of learning style/s on students persistence at university. Braxton et al. (2000) believed that faculty classroom behaviours played a role in the student departure process and that types of teaching methods, the application of principles and good practice, and adherence to norms governing teaching role performance could contribute to student departure decisions. According to the empirical data collected for this study also, some students believed that the teaching style used in the course was not compatible with their favoured learning style, and some of these students believed that this influenced their decision to withdraw from the course. The following questions were included in the instrument as a result of this: “Do you believe you have a particular way of learning that helps you to learn better?”, “Is it important that your tutor/lecturer helps you to establish/polish learning strategies for you to learn better?”, “Are you capable of studying successfully outside of class by yourself or in a study group?”.

3. Student Preparation and Expectations

Student preparation and expectations were included in the instrument as a result of literature substantiating how increasingly important meeting student expectations and having students prepared for higher education is to the issue of student retention (Elliot, 1997; Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Hoyt, 1999; Long et al., 2006; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke, 2001). Lowe and Cook (2003) in particular believed that many students were simply not prepared when they commenced university and that maybe as a result of their lack of preparation, their expectations of university were not
met on many levels. In Australian states and territories, except Victoria, where the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning has been introduced, high schools have adopted a one-size-fits-all approach to high school preparation for university. With only a minority of young people now aspiring to enter university directly from Year 12, preparation for tertiary study has ceased to be the primary purpose of senior secondary schooling (Donnelly, 2007). As a result of this lack of preparation, first-year students may not feel they have the tools necessary to study at university and this could lead to their withdrawal (Pargetter, R., McInnis, C., James, R., Evans, M., Peel, M., Dobson, I., 1999).

Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003) point out that if the reality of the student experience is different from their expectations, the potential for disappointment, and perhaps withdrawal, is increased. Lowe and Cook (2003) believed that the problem associated with inaccurate prior perceptions by students of university life was that it contributes to a disengagement from the educational (and social) aspects of university life. This disengagement could ultimately lead to students lacking the motivation to persist with the course or degree. The empirical data gathered in this study found that there were higher numbers of withdrawn students (in total, 6 of the 12 withdrawn students who participated) with unrealistic or no expectations of the Elementary Spanish teacher and course, than students who had not withdrawn from the course. The data also found that as a result of these expectations, some students just were not equipped with sufficient preparation mechanisms in the course, which led them to not only withdraw, but perhaps suffer from anxiety as a result.
For all these reasons, and the possible impact of student expectations and preparation on the issue of student retention, this factor was included in the prognostic instrument through these questions: “Have you taken steps to prepare yourself for university life?”,
“Have you taken steps to prepare yourself for the language course Elementary Spanish?”,
“Do you believe that high school/other study have prepared you with the skills you require for university?”, “Do you believe that the workforce has prepared you with the skills you require for university?”, “Do you have certain expectations of what the course will be like?”, “Will you be able to continue in the course if your expectations are not met?”, “Have you ever seen advertising (like brochures, web pages or other publicity) of the course?”. 

4. Foreign Language Anxiety

Onwuegbuzie (1999) has shown that a growing body of research has demonstrated that language anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that is most closely related to the acquisition of a foreign language. This effect is compounded by the fact that these students tend to underestimate their competence relative to less anxious students and therefore become themselves anxious about their performance (MacIntyre, Noels & Clement, 1997). Studies of anxiety have also focused on different language outcomes, such as rate of second language acquisition, performance in language classrooms, and performance in high-stakes language testing (Zheng, 2008). The theoretical spectrum of these studies ranged from strictly behavioural to psychodynamic. The primary sources of language anxiety, clarified by Horwitz (1986), are communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety and it has been found that foreign language anxiety is a very real danger to the continuation of some foreign language students. In spite of
substantial advances in teaching methods and techniques, apprehension continues to exist in the university foreign language classroom (Casado & Dereshiwsky, 2001).

The empirical data collected here also showed that most students who participated felt some level of anxiety whilst attending the course. Their anxiety was related to a variety of different activities that occurred in the course and some students felt that a combination of activities had led to their feelings of anxiety (Liu, 2007). Some students believed that they decided to withdraw from the Elementary Spanish course as a result of their feelings of anxiety in combination with other factors. This evidence gathered from the empirical data and supported by the literature ensures that foreign language anxiety is a very important issue when discussing student attrition in foreign language classes. The issue of foreign language anxiety is also the only issue which specifically targets the retention of students in foreign language classes, making it extremely relevant to this instrument (MacIntyre, Noels & Clement, 1997). As a result, these questions were included in the research: “Have you learned a foreign language previously?”, “If you have learned a foreign language before, did you feel calm/not anxious in class?”, “If you ever felt anxious, did you overcome these feelings to continue learning the language?”.

5. Motivation to Learn

Student motivation and commitment was considered as paramount to student retention by both Tinto (1975) and Spady (1972) in their student retention models. Moreover, the importance of commitment was, according to Tinto, fundamental to the goal of course and degree completion. The empirical data gathered for this study found that some withdrawn students (five in total) were not only unprepared for the course, and holding some unrealistic expectations, but also showed they did not have a high level of
motivation for the course. Students expressing that they wanted an “easier” course, or who were not prepared to put in “too much work”, exemplified this. As an outcome of both the literature and the empirical findings, these questions were included: “Do you feel you will complete this course?”, “Is it important to have goals for each course you attend?”, “Do you believe you are committed to the degree you are enrolled in?”, “Is there anything in particular that motivates you to learn Spanish?”.

5.4.3 The Second Section: Teaching and Learning Factors

The second section of the prognostic instrument discussed the course factors that could have influenced the students’ withdrawal. This was perhaps the most specific section of the instrument as it asked questions relating to the Elementary Spanish course in particular. All the categories used in this section were developed after consulting the data gathered from other student retention and attrition models, notably the models developed by Astin (1970), Spady (1972), Tinto (1975), Bean (1980), and Voorhees (1997), in conjunction with the empirical data collected and analysed from the student questionnaires and interviews conducted with the participants in this study. The flexibility of the instrument is displayed in this context, as it could easily be used with any other discipline by substituting questions relevant to the course in question.

1. Teaching Style

In research conducted by Braxton et al. it was found that faculty teaching skills could influence the student departure process. These researchers also concluded that active learning enhances student knowledge and the understanding of course content, therefore
allowing students to perceive themselves gaining knowledge and understanding from their course work (Braxton et al., 2000).

The empirical data collected also showed that learning styles and teaching styles could play an important role in the student withdrawal process. Some withdrawn students believed that the teaching approach (the Natural Approach combined with TPR) did not suit their learning style and therefore expressed that the approach, in combination with other factors, could have led to their withdrawal from the course. As a result, the following questions were incorporated into the instrument: “Do you have a particular teaching style that you find most useful in class?”, “Are you comfortable with the use of different teaching styles?”, “Do you believe you will adapt to the teaching style used in Elementary Spanish?”.

2. Resources Used in Class

Research by Braxton et al. (2000) showed that a combination of teaching style and in-class resources could play an important part in students’ decisions to withdraw. The empirical data collected also showed that some students believed that the use of more in-class resources would have helped them to learn better and perhaps consequently have encouraged them to continue the course. As a result of this, the following two questions were included in the instrument about resources: “Do you require the use of visual/audio resources in class to improve your learning?” and “Do you believe you will adapt to the Elementary Spanish course if these resources are not used all the time?”.


3. Assessment Preferences

The issue of assessment and the assessment conducted in the course was mentioned negatively in the empirical data many times by the participants. Students’ views were varied but overall, many believed that the assessment was too spread out, that it occurred too infrequently, and that the oral component put too much pressure on the students on the whole. The assessment was also a cause for concern with regards to the students’ anxiety in class. According to the participants, the oral assessment was by far the most anxiety inducing activity or event in the Elementary Spanish course. The issue of student assessment was researched by Yorke (2001), who argued that no feedback at all, or belated feedback (as can be the case with summative, end-of-unit assessment) cannot be expected to advance student learning. Formative assessment, in his opinion, is then of critical importance to student learning and retention. As a consequence of the empirical data and literature findings, the following questions were included in the instrument: “Do you have a preferred assessment type?”, “Do you think you are able to adapt to the different assessment types that are offered at university?”, “Would you prefer to do assessment every few weeks instead of a big exam at the end of semester?”, “Do you think it is important to receive feedback during the semester?”.

4. Peers

Three students who participated in the study, in the first semester of 2004, mentioned that their peers had influenced their decision to withdraw from the course. These students believed that the peers in their class, along with any activities they had to perform with
them, did not add to their enjoyment of the course and definitely contributed, along with other factors, to their decision to withdraw.

The topic of in-class peer activities and peer personality clashes was not found in the literature. However, due to the number of students who mentioned this as a factor contributing to their withdrawal, it was considered important to the study. “Peers” as a factor for student withdrawal could be specific to foreign language classes. Given the current gaps in the literature concerning the issue of retention and attrition with relation to foreign language classes and students, this topic could still be relatively under represented in the literature. As a consequence of this discovery in the empirical data, the following questions were incorporated into the instrument: “Do you believe that having an interactive class is beneficial for your learning?”, “Do you think you will adapt to the different personalities in-class?”, “Do you believe you will be able to participate comfortably in groups with other classmates?”, “Are you open to participating in group activities that you may have not done before?”, “When choosing this course, did you believe that you would have to study for as many hours as other courses?”.

5.4.4 The Third Section: University Factors

In this final section, students were asked about their knowledge of university services useful to them. It gathered information concerning the expectations students held about the university as a whole and how they gained their knowledge about the university.

The support services mentioned in this section were unique to the university in question and allowed the researcher to recognize how aware the students were of all the student
support services made available to them. The aim of this section was to determine (a) if the students were aware of the services available at the university, and (b) if they were making use of any of the services already.

As mentioned in section 5.4.2.2, according to the literature and empirical data gathered for this study, student expectations are believed to be very relevant to the issue of student retention. Some withdrawn participants, as indicated in the empirical data, had unrealistic or no expectations of the course and teacher; according to much of the literature on expectations, the combination of unrealistic expectations and the reality of university study will often lead to the withdrawal of students.

The questions included in this section were: “Were you aware of any advertising for the university (brochures, media) before enrolling?”, “Did you make up your mind about enrolling at the university independently from this advertising?”.

5.4.5 Administration of the First Year Student Survey (FYSS)

The process of the FYSS took place in two stages. During the first stage, the survey was administered to students during the first week of the semester by the teacher of the relevant course. The timing was considered crucial in terms of individual student support, as the literature and the empirical data show there is often a combination of factors why students withdraw from a course (Harvey, 2006).

The students were asked to complete the survey and add up their scores, according to their responses to each question (see section 5.3 for more details). About half an hour of
class time was dedicated to this activity during the first week of study and it was followed by a second session (to be discussed later) in the sixth teaching week of the semester. Once students had calculated their scores, the teacher asked them to compare their individual scores with the official survey cut-offs presented. If their scores were lower than these, the students were made aware that their “energy levels” were quite low and that they needed to “refuel”. In order for the students to receive the support they needed (refuel), each student was given a First Year Student Support Sheet by their teacher, regardless of whether they were potentially at risk or not.

The support sheet was developed as a resource to help show students how to acquire the support they needed. It was first developed in late 2007, as a result of the pilot study of the FYSS in Semester I, 2007. However, the support sheet was not designed only for those students who consider themselves at risk; rather, it aimed to work as a tool for all first year students studying in the course, as it equipped them with useful, practical and supportive information to help them throughout the semester. It contained study information and ideas, and the students could use it as a type of “contacts book”. All the contact information for their course tutors, lecturers and convenors was included and there was also room to include details of their classmates. A sample of the First Year Student Support Sheet can be found in Appendix 9.

The support sheet was divided into the same three categories as the FYSS. Each contained a variety of websites and/or suggestions to help the students with that particular category. For example, a mature-aged student might find that he or she has had problems integrating into university life and due to this may have scored poorly in the Student factors category of the survey. On receiving the support sheet, this student can go straight
to the student factors section and look up the support available for that category. They may find that there is a website dedicated to mature-aged students studying at university or that there is a mature-age student club operating at the university. This support could genuinely help and encourage the student to stay in the course or at university.

The role of the language teacher with the FYSS and Student Support sheet was a very important one. Before administering the surveys, the teachers involved must take part in a training session where they are given all the details of the FYSS, what it aims to accomplish, how to identify and approach at-risk students and what steps should be taken in order to offer them encouragement and support. During the whole FYSS process the teacher acts as a facilitator. In class, the teacher explains the survey, by discussing with the students the importance of the surveys and the data it was gathering and how it could potentially help them. The teacher then administers the surveys, waits for the students to complete them and count their scores, while at the same time answering any questions the students may have. Once the teacher has collected the completed surveys, he/she then hands out the support sheets to all students. The teacher will then ask the students to look at their final scores and compare them to the scores on the support sheet. By doing this, the students will be able to determine if they are considered at-risk in any of the FYSS categories and if so, they can look at the many suggestions for improvement and encouragement on the Student Support sheet. Back in the office, the teacher looks over the surveys and the students’ scores and determines, by referring to the cut-offs, which students can be considered at-risk of withdrawing from the course. By doing this, the teacher then has a clear idea of which students may be at risk and offer more encouragement or support to those students by potentially offering help during
consultation hours, suggesting websites for the students to use or leading them towards student support counsellors.

The second stage of this process took place in week six of the semester. During this follow-up stage the students were reminded of the FYSS and asked about their progress. They did not complete another survey at this point, but instead were encouraged to discuss their progress as a class. The teacher facilitated the class discussion by encouraging the students to talk about their progress and asking if any students were still having any problems. Once again, this stage of the process took about half an hour of class time.

5.4.6 Advantages and Limitations of the FYSS

The survey was the research instrument chosen to collect data from the students as it was the instrument considered most beneficial to this part of the study. Overall, surveys have the advantage of supplying more standardised answers, making it a lot easier to make contrasts and comparisons between the results gathered from all participants (Sarantakos, 2005). The survey was also chosen as it was low in cost, relatively easy to prepare, and allowed the students to complete their responses at their own pace. The survey allows the students to read the questions as many times as necessary in order to process them.

There were some limitations found with the use of the survey, starting with the way in which students may have interpreted the survey questions. Although all care was taken to make the questions in the survey easy to understand and students were encouraged to ask questions if they needed clarification, there was concern that some may have interpreted
the questions in different ways. This is a common problem with surveys and unfortunately can affect the results (Bryman, 2004; Kumar, 1999). A way in which to tackle this potential problem is to pilot the survey questions with different sets of students several times and ask the students to explain what they understand by each question. In this way, if there are significant discrepancies between what the students understand by each question and what the researcher wants to ask, modifications can be made. It is believed that some questions may have to be modified for ease of understanding and also to save time.

The other limitation is that students sometimes do not want to participate in research, for a variety of reasons, and reply to the questions without any thought. In this study it was crucial that the students answered honestly as it could help to identify if they were in need of support.

However, the biggest limitations for the FYSS were the number of participants, the time constraints and the fact of not having been evaluated for validity and reliability. Due to the small number of participants with the FYSS and Student Support Sheet, the cut-offs used for each category, as well as overall, could not be considered statistically reliable. Having the FYSS piloted on an appropriately large sample size of participants would test its statistical validity and reliability and possibly make way to some changes to the content currently being used in the survey. Categories such as “gender” and “anglo-saxon”, may have to be modified as evidence to show that they are reasons for students withdrawing may not be as relevant today as what they were some years ago. Certain questions have already been identified as needing to be rectified, such as those concerning work and extra-curricular activities. Another challenge is that judgments cannot be made about the extent to which ranges of scores on the tool predict decisions.
since no scores from comparable a measure have been collected nor have real-world outcomes to justify these ranges been systematically observed. The tool would have to be analysed and each statement would have to be tested for importance and relevance before valid and reliable conclusions could be drawn.

The following section will discuss the piloting of the prognostic approach with students in Semester I, 2007 and the implementation and evaluation of the prognostic approach in the first semester of 2008.

5.5 THE PILOT OF THE PROGNOSTIC APPROACH – SEMESTER I, 2007

The development of the First Year Student Survey and Attrition Model occurred just before the first semester of the Elementary Spanish course in 2007. Therefore, the trialling of the prognostic approach could take place with a group of 18 Elementary Spanish students in the first week of Semester I, 2007. Table 9 shows a demographic breakdown of the students who participated in this pilot.

Table 9

Demographic Breakdown of Students Participating in the Pilot of the FYSS – Semester I, 2007

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### Results of the Pilot of the Prognostic Approach – Semester I, 2007

The pilot of the FYSS took place during the second class of the first week of Semester I, 2007. It was decided not to complete the surveys in the first class as many students were still undecided about their studies then; the second class generally had a more accurate number of students currently enrolled. As seen in Table 9, 12 female and 6 male students participated, with 17 students 17–24 years old and 1 student 25–34 years old. There were considerably more domestic than international students participating.

The results from the FYSS showed that the highest score obtained by any student in the first pilot was 142 (of a possible 154), while the lowest was 82. In terms of cut-off points, this showed that there were students who were not in any danger of withdrawing as well as some potential withdrawers. When breaking down the scores for all students, the results showed that a total of three female students were found to be at no risk of withdrawing: all three scored highly in the survey (between 138 and 142); student monitoring during the semester revealed that none of these students showed any inclination of withdrawing from the course. According to the First Year Student Attrition
Model, these students could be considered optimal. These particular students also received high results for the assessment in the course, showing a positive correlation between student results and retention. This correlation, more often referred to as academic integration, is discussed by Tinto (1975, 1993), Beil et al. (1999), and Bean (1980) in his student retention model.

The data gathered also found that over half of the students—11 in total—fell into the low risk category, with scores falling between 98 and 122. These students were classified as fair in the First Year Student Retention Model. Of these 11 students, 4 were male and 7 were female. Only 1 of the students (a female) in the low risk category decided to withdraw from the Elementary Spanish course. The academic results of these students varied; however, none failed the course.

Four students, 2 males and 2 females, fell into the some risk category, or poor on the First Year Student Attrition Model. These students all had scores between 87 and 91. As the survey and model predicted, 3 of these 4 students withdrew from the course before the end of the semester. In their surveys, these students showed that they were not very aware of the student support services available to them at the university, and their preparation for and expectations of the course were quite low. This again shows the correlation between student results and withdrawal, as well as the importance of student expectations on their consequent withdrawal.
Encouragingly, the results above demonstrated that the FYSS and Attrition Model could determine, with some level of success, whether students with lower scores were potentially more at risk of withdrawing from their courses than those students who scored higher.

The results of the 2007 trial also showed, however, that not enough knowledge about how to monitor and support students had been available at the time of the pilot. As a result, three students withdrew from the course. Although efforts were made to help the at-risk students immediately, the pilot shows that solid support mechanisms needed to be identified and put into place before the FYSS was conducted again with students, in order to gain the most positive results.

5.6 IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF THE PROGNOSTIC APPROACH – SEMESTER I, 2008

As a result of the prognostic approach pilot in 2007, some modifications were made in order to ensure that its goals were met. The next implementation and evaluation of the prognostic approach took place in the first week of Semester I, 2008 with 31 first year Elementary Spanish students. Table 10 shows a demographic breakdown of the students who completed the FYSS in 2008.
Table 10

Demographic Breakdown of Students completing the FYSS – Semester I, 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOTAL PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>AGES</th>
<th>STUDENT STATUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=31</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMPLEMENTATION –</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semester One 2008</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6.1 Results of Implementation and Evaluation of the Prognostic Approach

The implementation and evaluation of the FYSS took place during the first semester of 2008. There were several improvements made to the approach for this semester: As a result of the withdrawal of the three students during the pilot study in 2007, the First Year Student Support Sheet was developed (see section 5.4.5). The support sheet was given to all students, regardless of whether they were considered at risk or not. It was hoped that this support sheet would offer more help to students and potentially increase student retention.

The other modification was that instead of analysing only the final score for each student, and deciding if they were potentially at risk through that score only, each individual category was analysed. This modification was introduced because the pilot had revealed that many students who had a low awareness in a particular category were still able to get a high score and not be considered at risk, when they may in fact have needed support.
This semester more students complete the survey: 31 in total, 8 male and 23 female. Thirty of the students were aged between 17 and 26 and one student was aged between 25 and 34 years.

By looking at the cut-offs this semester, it was found that again there was a wide range of scores. The highest score was 144, while the lowest was 77. When breaking down the scores for this semester, the surveys found 12 students who were optimal, or in no risk of withdrawing from the course. These students, 9 females and 3 males, had scores between 123 and 144. All these students were hard working, and through in-class monitoring they were seen to be enthusiastic and never requesting support. The surveys also showed that in each discrete category, none of these students was at risk.

Fourteen of the students—12 females and 2 males—who participated in the second pilot were found to be fair, or in the low risk zone. These students all scored between 94 and 120 points. Of these 14 students, it was found that the most common category where they had a very low or poor score was university factors. In fact, 9 of the 14 students scored poor in this category, showing that their awareness of the support offered by the university was a concern. The other 5 students did not have poor scores in any individual categories, but they did have lower scores over all categories in general.

Finally, there were 6 students with poor scores in the survey overall. These students, 3 males and 3 females, all scored between 77 and 90 points. While these students had lower
scores overall, the categories where they scored the lowest were university factors and student learning factors. In terms of university factors, the results showed that the majority of these students did not have ample awareness of the support made available to them at the university. The results also showed that most of them did not feel prepared to start the Elementary Spanish course; that they did not feel that their high school or other study prepared them sufficiently for university, and that they did not have enough awareness of what the Elementary Spanish course would be like.

As a result of the implementation and evaluation of the prognostic approach, more components will be added for future use to improve the approach in reaching its goals, the first being an internet option for the student support sheet. The support sheet was shown to be a success in terms of helping students; however, in this age of technology it was considered appropriate to also make it available electronically. All students who completed the survey had an email address and access to the Internet on campus, therefore making this option viable. Instead of copying the links on the support sheet and searching for the appropriate web sites, the electronic version of the support sheet would have automatic links, making access to support so much easier and less time consuming. This process would also reduce the printing of hard copies, making it more environmentally friendly. An electronic process would also make it easier for teachers to collect information about which web sites the students visited, how valuable they were, and any possible changes that could be made. As the student support sheet would need to be updated on a regular basis, this system would facilitate that process.
Up until May 2008, no students had withdrawn from the implementation group and there was evidence that the student support sheets had been successful. In week 6, the teacher of the course carried out the second stage of the FYSS process. During this follow-up stage the students were reminded of the FYSS and asked about their progress and recommendations. Overall, the discussion of the survey and support sheet indicated they were considered successful as at least one third of the students had used the support sheets for the contact details of staff and peers for the class. One student in particular had found the support sheet very useful as a way in which to reconcile financial problems. The student support sheet had made this student aware of the existence of student loans offered by the university and this was a positive outcome.

Overall, the findings this semester showed that there seemed to be more students who had a better understanding and awareness of their “Learning Energy Sources”, although there were still some students who were considered to be at risk of withdrawing from the course.

5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter aimed to answer the second research question posed for this study, namely “How can potential in-course attrition be identified?”. In order to do this, the chapter focused on discussing three major elements: the development of a prognostic approach to identify students at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses at an
Australian university, the results of the prognostic approach trial with 18 students in 2007, and its implementation and evaluation with 31 students in 2008.

The chapter began by discussing the gaps in the literature pertinent to student attrition models and the development of a new prognostic approach for student attrition. The prognostic approach was developed to help identify students who were potentially at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course. The model, metaphorically titled “Reenergize and Refuel”, was divided into three main sections.

The approach uses two tools, the First Year Student Survey and the First Year Student Support Sheet. It was distributed by the teacher of the course during the first week of classes. The aim of the survey was to identify those students at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course at the very beginning of the semester. To determine which students were at risk was easy as the survey scores showed that students who had higher scores were at a lower risk of withdrawing and those with low scores had a higher chance of withdrawing.

The results of the trial conducted in 2007 showed that once the at-risk students were identified it was crucial to offer them the support they needed. As a result, during the implementation stage in 2008 an improved prognostic approach was introduced, which included the First Year Student Support Sheet, developed in late 2007. However, the support sheet was not only for those students who consider themselves at risk: it aimed to
work as a tool for all first year students studying in the course, as it equipped them with useful, practical and supportive information to help them throughout the semester.

The results of the trial in 2007 and the implementation and evaluation of the approach in 2008 were positive in terms of showing how successful the survey was in identifying students at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses. From the trial findings in 2007, it can be deducted that the survey was successful in identifying whether students were not at risk, at low risk, or at a high risk of withdrawing. Eighteen students participated in the pilot this semester and 4 were found to be particularly at risk, with 3 withdrawing from the course. Although this result was considered a success in terms of survey performance, it illustrated that the support offered by lecturers to these students may have been inadequate. As a result, for its implementation in 2008, the First Year Student Support Sheet was developed.

The implementation and evaluation in Semester I, 2008, saw 31 students participate. The results this semester showed that there were 6 students identified as potentially at high risk of withdrawing. During this implementation stage all students who participated in the survey were given a First Year Student Support Sheet regardless of whether they were considered to be at risk or not. The aim was that the sheet would ultimately offer every student from the pilot ideas for support and useful learning strategies. A follow up to the survey was conducted in week six of the semester by the teacher of the course. The goal of the follow up was to ask students how they felt about the course since the first week
and if they were more aware of the support available to them as an outcome of their use of the First Year Student Support Sheet. No participants had withdrawn from this stage.

From the overall findings in this chapter, it can be surmised that with the trial of the prognostic approach in 2007 and its implementation and evaluation in 2008, the FYSS was successful in identifying students at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course. However, despite the positive findings of the study, caution must be exercised when attempting to generalise from these results, as the FYSS and Attrition Model are still in the early stages of development. It is important to mention that there are some limitations to take into consideration, such as the importance of having solid support in place to help students who are at risk of withdrawing from the course and that at this stage the pilot and implementation have only been conducted on a small scale.

Chapter Six will discuss the conclusions, main research findings and limitations of the study as well as recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Recommendations to improve the rate of language learning and attitudes to learning languages in Australia really came to the fore in 2007. The Group of Eight, made up of Australia’s leading universities, produced a discussion paper that pointed out the critical need to improve the state of language education in the country. The paper stressed the importance and need for language learning in Australia and explained that “the decline in language education poses serious national security and international relations risks for Australia” (Group of Eight, 2007).

The push for more language education in Australia could not have come soon enough, as research and current news reports have shown that Australia has one of the lowest rates of second language education in the world (Anonymous, 2008; Mueller, 2003). Unfortunately, from the late 1990s to 2006 governments have expressed little enthusiasm or commitment to continue vitally important language learning programmes and policies (Lo Bianco, 2008). Between 1996 and 2000 the Howard government removed all funding from Language Australia, the national institute for coordinating, researching and documenting language needs and problems, leading to its closure in 2004 (Lo Bianco,
By 2002 the National Asian Languages programme had already been abandoned (Lo Bianco, 2008).

The work that the Group of Eight presented is encouraging the views of many to change positively in relation to language learning, which is especially fitting with 2008 being UNESCO’s International Year of Languages. Adding to the encouraging push for language learning, the Prime Minister of Australia is a fluent speaker of Mandarin. There is no denying that this has had a very positive influence on the way people will continue to view the importance of foreign language learning in this country (Wiltshire, 2008).

6.2 THESIS SUMMARY

This thesis was an investigation of student attrition in Elementary Spanish courses at an Australian university and the consequent development of a prognostic approach to identify students who are potentially at risk of withdrawing from these courses. The research did this by investigating two specific research questions, namely,

1) Why are students leaving the Elementary Spanish courses during the semester? and
2) How can in-course attrition be identified?

The Elementary Spanish courses investigated were two distinct courses offered at the participating university during Semesters I and II of the academic years from 2001 – 2006. As outlined previously, the study was completed in three stages. The first stage examined a total of 12 class assessment reports for the Elementary Spanish courses. This
analysis was undertaken to acquire the background of the courses and discover whether student attrition was problematic for the courses in question.

The second stage gathered secondary data from withdrawn students (a total of 12) and non-withdrawn students (a total of 24) from the courses through questionnaires and interviews. Finally, as an outcome of the literature reviewed and the data already gathered and analysed, the third stage developed a prognostic approach to identify students who were potentially at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses.

In light of the international literature available on the topic of student retention and attrition, it could be surmised that there were 17 main factors that contributed to the withdrawal of students from university courses internationally. These factors were considered general factors that could affect students studying in any discipline. One of the major findings in the literature review was the lack of research into the issue of student attrition in foreign language courses. The lack of literature in this area added to the timeliness, relevance and importance of the research reported in this thesis.

The literature review revealed a number of conceptual student attrition models that had been developed between the 1970s and 1990s (Astin, 1971; Bean, 1983; Bean et al., 1985; Rootman, 1972; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1997; Voorhees, 1997). These models aimed to explain the issue of student attrition and offer suggestions to improve the student retention of the courses in question. It was found that these conceptual models all analysed the issue of student attrition and retention from the end of the process, or once
the students had already withdrawn from the course. As result of this discovery, a prognostic approach to identify students potentially at risk of withdrawing was developed.

6.3 MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

The class assessment reports analysed in stage one showed that between 2001 and 2006, there was an increase in the numbers of students withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses analysed for this study. The data pointed towards a possible correlation between the effective lowering of the Overall Position scores (the rank given to Queensland students at the end of Year 12 as an official numerical outcome of their overall results) of the students accepted into the courses and the higher number of withdrawn students.

These findings from the class assessment reports revealed that there was a problem with student in-course attrition in the Elementary Spanish courses. The students expressed in questionnaires and interviews that they were withdrawing from the courses due to a combination of reasons, ranging from foreign language learning anxiety, to the size of the study workload, the time required for study and their in-class peers. These factors showed that sometimes students were withdrawing for reasons that the teachers, coordinators and convenors of the programme could affect. This implies that teachers could introduce strategies to encourage the students to stay in the class and monitoring those students who may be considered at risk.
It was evident from student responses to questionnaires and interviews that their expectations of the course were not being met. This had much to do with the unrealistic expectations that many students held about the content of the course, the teaching staff, and what they would and could achieve in the period of one semester. The reality of student expectations versus the reality of their course experiences has been widely acknowledged as problematic in the literature on student retention and attrition (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Lowe et al., 2003; McInnis et al., 2000; Peel, 2000). It is often hard to establish what resources students have used to build their expectations of the course (such as the course marketing), and most importantly, whether these materials offered realistic and reasonable information about the courses in question (Schwartz, 2007). However, it is also important to mention that in society today, where people are generally time poor, it may be considered unfavourable to advertise that language learning takes years (Lo Bianco, 2008). This lack of fit could develop into a serious problem for the Elementary Spanish programme as the students’ expectations could be unrealistic as a result of the soft, appealing advertising and marketing currently offered by the university in question.

Secondly, many of the withdrawn students participating in the study did not perceive Elementary Spanish as a “serious” university course. This was not such a surprising revelation, as encouragement to learn a language has not been great, nor have current numbers of high school students learning languages been significant in Australia for a number of years (Anonymous, 2008). This opinion was reflected in the withdrawn students’ responses. The results showed that these students decided to study Spanish mainly because they thought it would be a fun or enjoyable course to take. In contrast, the
non-withdrawn students were more inclined to study Elementary Spanish for reasons such as enhancing job prospects and because they believed language learning was important to their personal development. This attitude could have serious implications not only for the Elementary Spanish courses but also for other foreign language courses nationally.

The third stage of the study was introduced in Chapter Five. This chapter presented the prognostic approach to identify students potentially at risk of withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish courses. The approach was developed as a result of the review of international literature for this study, as well as the data collected and analysed from the withdrawn and non-withdrawn students who participated in stage two of this study.

The approach consisted of two parts: the First Year Student Attrition Model and The First Year Student Survey (FYSS). The model was used as a guide to identify students at risk of withdrawing, whereas the survey was implemented with the students in the classroom setting. Once the students were identified it was important to provide them with information they could use to support them. As a result, The First Year Student Support Sheet was developed.

The initial trial, carried out with 18 students in 2007, found that 4 students were potentially at risk of withdrawing. Three of the students, identified as high risk by the prognostic tool, subsequently withdrew from the course. Although the result was considered a success for the survey, it was disappointing in terms of student retention and indicated that modifications had to be made. The pilot demonstrated that the support
offered to students at this point was not adequate and more research needed to be done in order to discover how to better support the students.

The implementation and evaluation stage occurred in 2008 and saw 31 students participate. The main alteration was the introduction of the First Year Student Support Sheet, given to all students when they completed the survey whether they were considered to be at risk or not. This allowed all students to become aware of the support available to them. The use of the 2008 tool found that 6 students were considered to be potentially at risk of withdrawing from this cohort; however, none of them had withdrawn from the course by the end of the semester.

6.4 LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Like other research studies, this research was not without its limitations, the most significant concerning its time frame. The relevance and significance of the prognostic approach (the combination of the FYSS and The First Year Student Attrition Model) was measured in 2007 and 2008 by its preliminary success in identifying students at risk of withdrawing from their courses in the context of the study. However, as mentioned in Chapter Five, caution should be exercised when attempting to generalise from these results. The FYSS, is still in the early stages of development and as noted in section 5.4.6, still needs to be analysed and each element revised as necessary, in order for it to function in a statistically valid manner. Furthermore, due to the limited amount of time
available in this study, it was not possible to trial it with a larger group of students. This was a small-scale, exploratory study, and despite its potentially positive findings, it would be highly beneficial to use it with more participants to further test its statistical effectiveness and reliability when identifying potential at-risk students. More piloting is required to ensure the tool’s overall statistical validity and this is something the researcher is willing to continue with. Other emerging issues, such as the impact of low scores on student’s perceptions and confidence will also have to analysed, to ensure that the tool always works in a positive manner.

It is also important to look into the possible implications the administration of the tool could have on universities as a whole. Modifications to teaching schedules, staff training courses and longer consultation hours are all possible outcomes of the implementation of the tool and they need to be seriously considered.

There is a need also to trial the prognostic approach with other disciplines. The approach was developed in such a manner that it can be easily modified and employed outside of Elementary Spanish courses; only one section of the survey and the support sheet would need to be altered. Testing the approach with other disciplines would help to evaluate the whole approach further. Discussions with the School of Languages and Linguistics and the Institute of Higher Education at the university participating in the study have also taken place to explore the development of a larger-scale project to trial and implement the prognostic approach with other foreign languages and other disciplines.
It is strongly recommended that further studies into foreign language student expectations and the reasons why some students are not as serious or as engaged with the language learning courses they are undertaking be conducted. The issue of conflicting student expectations could have serious implications for the Elementary Spanish courses, such as student confusion, lack of preparation and ultimately, attrition. Until students start to develop more realistic expectations of the course, there will always be a conflict between what the students expect and the reality of the course. A way in which to address this issue is through marketing. It is understood that the marketing for the Elementary Spanish courses to date has not been excellent. Brochures and information available in booklets produced by the university have clearly not been capable of illustrating what is expected of students in the course. Although previous attempts have been made by the course coordinators to address this issue, the most recent brochures still use pictures of celebrities as a way in which to promote the Elementary Spanish courses. Unfortunately, this may add to the unrealistic expectations held by students and exacerbate the “fun” or “enjoyable” image already held by students about the course.

There is also the issue that some students are not as serious about language learning as they are about their other disciplines. However, this issue could be harder to address. It cannot be denied that Australia has one of the lowest rates of language education in the world. In 2005, less than 50% of the nation’s students studied a foreign language and worryingly, the number of Year 12 students studying a foreign language has been steady at 13% for a number of years (Mueller, 2003). According to recent research, students are purportedly deciding not to learn languages in high school because their parents or career teachers have told them that having a second language is irrelevant, which is in stark
contrast to Europe, where it will now be compulsory for children to learn two languages, and ideally, three (Anonymous, 2008; Wiltshire, 2008). This lack of seriousness or academic engagement can lead to a much higher chance of the student withdrawing from the course in order to pursue a more “serious” discipline that the students consider could make a better contribution to their professional future. Again, this is in profound contrast to what has been occurring for decades in Europe, Asia and America, where language learning is encouraged and in many cases compulsory, for the personal and educational development of students, starting at primary school and continuing all the way to tertiary levels.

The issue of student attrition has been researched and analysed for over 40 years. During this time many effective attrition models have been developed and theories established, all aiming to clarify why student attrition occurs and what can be done to remedy it. However, the real complexity associated with student attrition is the fact that it is often found to be out of the control of the institutions that experience it. Taking this fact into consideration, it is fundamental to ensure that students who are enrolled in a course are aware of the support available to them when at university. Tutors, lecturers and course convenors have a responsibility not only to educate the students in their courses, but also to offer additional academic support to these students as required and encourage them to seek other forms of support when needed. Putting into action an approach that does this at an early stage during the first year of a student’s tertiary education could go a long way in achieving the aim of retaining more first-year students overall.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX 1

Student Information Sheet
Investigating First-Year Second Language Retention and Attrition: A Case Study from an Australian University.

STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

Research Conducted by: Ana Lobo
School of Languages and Applied Linguistics
Contact Ph: 3875 6751
Contact Email: Ana.Lobo@student.gu.edu.au
Main Supervisor: XXXXXX
Contact Email: XXXXX@xxxxxxxxxxxx.edu.au

Why is this study being conducted?
This study is being conducted to investigate retention and attrition among first-year language students of a foreign language programme. It aims to do so by finding the specific reasons why students leave the courses at elementary levels and having knowledge of how students feel about their foreign language learning experience in the first year. The study also looks at speaking with students who continue in the course and discover the reasons they decided to stay. This study aims to find if it is possible to improve language students’ retention procedures and therefore decrease current attrition rates.

The basis by which participants will be selected:
Student participants will be recruited for this research through a consent form being given to all first-year students in a foreign language course at XXXXX. The consent form will invite them to participate in the study by providing their names; telephone numbers, email address and date of birth so that they can be contacted at a later date.

What will you be asked to do?
A student who has given consent to participate in this study and finds himself/herself withdrawing from the first-year course will be approached via email to participate further in the research. If they still consent to taking part in the research they will be asked to fill out a questionnaire. After the questionnaire they will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. Both the questionnaire and interview will concentrate on finding the specific reasons why students have withdrawn from their first-year second language class. Some students (approximately nine) from the classes will also be asked to participate in the research and will be asked to participate in an interview asking their opinions concerning the course and the reasons they decided to continue with the foreign language.

The expected benefits of the study:
The information and conclusions gathered from this research may be used to develop retention strategies to reduce the number of students from discontinuing their first-year language courses at XXXXXX.

Your confidentiality:
All the personal data to be collected in this study will only be viewed and kept in a private, safe location by the researcher. No other body will be given access to this information at any time during this research. When the research is finished, this data will be destroyed and no results published will have any identifiable data. All results will be written up anonymously and participants will not be identifiable in any written works.
The researcher abides by XXXX University’s policy on privacy and confidentiality. If you would like any further information regarding the University’s Privacy Plan please contact; (07) 3875 5585 or www.gu.edu.au/ua/aa/vc/pp

Your participation is voluntary:
By no means will you be penalised for not participating in this study and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without comment. Your participation in this study does not influence or contribute in any way to the course assessment. Your decision to participate, not participate or withdraw from this study at any time will not under any circumstance impact upon your relationship with XXXXX University.

Questions/Further information?
If you have any questions or queries regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact any members of the research team.
Researcher: Ana Lobo Ph: (07) 3875 6751 Email: Ana.Lobo@student.gu.edu.au
Main Supervisor: XXXXXXXX Ph: (07) 3875 7264 Email: XXXXX@xxxxxx.edu.au
Co-Supervisor: XXXXXX Ph: (07) 3875 7218 Email: XXXX@xxxxxx.edu.au

The ethical conduct of this research:
XXXXX University conducts research in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3875 5585 or research-ethics@xxxxxx.edu.au.

Feedback to you:
All data collected in this study will be published in the form of a doctoral thesis. This thesis will be made available to all the participants of this study and the university body as a whole at the University library.

Privacy statement:
The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University’s Privacy Plan at www.gu.edu.au/ua/aa/vc/pp or telephone (07) 3875 5585.
APPENDIX 2

Student Consent Form
Investigating First-Year Second Language Retention and Attrition: A Case Study from an Australian University.

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Research Conducted by: Ana Lobo
School of Languages and Applied Linguistics
Contact Ph: 3875 6751
Contact Email: Ana.Lobo@student.gu.edu.au
Main Supervisor: XXXXXX
Contact Email: XXXX@xxxxx.edu.au

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- I understand that my involvement in this study may include the completion of a student questionnaire, and also the completion of an interview with the researcher;
- I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction;
- I understand that there will be no direct benefit to me from my participation in this research;
- I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary;
- I understand that if I have any additional questions I can contact the research team;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- I understand that my participation in this study does not influence or contribute in any way to the course assessment;
- I understand that I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics at XXXX University Human Research Ethics Committee on 3875 5585 (or research-ethics@xxxxx.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the study; and
- I agree to participate in the study.

Name: ________________________________________________________________

Contact Phone Number/s: _____________________________________________

Email: _______________________________________________________________

Date of Birth: _________________________________________________________

Signature: ___________________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX 3

Student Research Participation Letter
Dear student,

My name is Ana Lobo and I have previously contacted you either by phone or email with regard to the PhD research I am doing about First Year Language Student retention and attrition. The reason you were chosen to take part in this research was that at some stage during semester XX of 200X, you decided to discontinue your studies in the Elementary Spanish Course offered at XXXXX University.

This research aims to discover the specific reasons why students leave the course at an elementary level by having knowledge of how students feel about their Spanish learning experience in the first year. As a researcher, I believe it is important to find if it is possible to improve retention procedures and therefore decrease language students’ current attrition rates.

In addition to this letter of introduction, in this package there is an information sheet about the research, a consent form for you to sign, a postage-paid envelope and a questionnaire. Please read the information sheet, as it will give you all the information you need to know about the research.

This questionnaire deals with your experience in the first year Spanish program and your reasons for not continuing the course. Please return the questionnaire and consent form on or before the XX of November. I will also invite you to take part in an interview, conducted by myself, concentrating on the topic of First Year Language Student retention and attrition and more specifically your experience in the first year Spanish course. This interview is a telephone interview and will take approximately 10 minutes, so please leave your phone number and a date so that I can contact you.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and if you find that you do not want to take part in the research, I ask that you send it back in the postage paid envelope, by the XX of November. If you feel that you need some clarification on any aspect of the research, please do not hesitate to contact me. It is important to mention that all questionnaire responses will be kept completely confidential.

When you have completed the questionnaire, please put the signed consent form and the questionnaire in the postage-paid envelope and send it back to me by the XX of November.

In order to thank-you for your participation in this research, on the arrival of your completed questionnaire and your participation in the interview I will send you a Birch Carroll and Coyle movie pass to enjoy.

Thanking you in advance for your cooperation,

Ana Lobo
Researcher
APPENDIX 4

Questionnaire for Non-Withdrawn Students
Investigating First-Year Second Language Retention and Attrition: A Case Study from an Australian University.

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE 200X

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out about your experience in the Elementary Spanish course and your reasons for continuing in the course.

PART ONE

General Information

A) Sex:
1 □ Male  
2 □ Female

B) Age
1 □ 17-24  2 □ 25-34  3 □ 35-44  4 □ 45-54  5 □ 55+

C) Did you enrol at the University as a mature age student?
1 □ Yes  
2 □ No

D) Is English your first language?
1 □ Yes  
2 □ No  
If no, please specify: ______________________

E) What was your enrolment status at the time of your involvement in Elementary Spanish?
1 □ Part-time  
2 □ Full-time

F) Was the course you were in your preferred course?
1 □ Yes  
2 □ No

(Please write down the name of your degree in the space provided)
Degree:- ______________________

G) Was learning Spanish (or another foreign language) a compulsory part of your degree?
1 □ Yes  
2 □ No

H) Are you an international student?
1 □ Yes  
2 □ No

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PART TWO

I. The Elementary Spanish course

A) Why did you decide to study Spanish at XXXXX University? (please choose as many as relate to your circumstance/s)

- I think having the knowledge of a foreign language is important ☐
- I would like to learn another language ☐
- I would like to /have plans to travel a Spanish speaking country ☐
- I think it is important to learn Spanish ☐
- I would like to learn (more) about Hispanic cultures ☐
- I think that knowing Spanish will bring me more job opportunities in my area ☐
- I would like to work in a country where Spanish is spoken ☐
- I have friends/family who speak Spanish ☐
- I am from a Hispanic background and would like to preserve my knowledge of the Spanish language ☐
- I thought it would be an enjoyable course to take ☐
- I thought it would be a fun language to learn ☐
- I had to learn a language as part of my degree ☐
- I have friends who are also studying the Elementary Spanish course ☐
- Other? ____________________________________________________________ ☐

II. Language Learning Background

B) Have you ever studied a foreign language before? ☐ ☐ No (please move on to question C)

☐ ☐ Yes
Which Language? _______________ Where did you learn it? _______________

C) What did you expect from the Elementary Spanish course? ____________________________________________________________

D) What did you expect from the teacher of Elementary Spanish? ____________________________________________________________

E) Did these expectations change during the course of the semester? How? ____________________________________________________________
F) What did you like most about the Elementary Spanish classes? *(Please choose however many are appropriate to your circumstances)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My teacher of Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My peers in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with my peers in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teaching approach used by my teacher in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way the assessment was conducted in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The text, “Dos Mundos”, used in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The materials my teacher used in class in Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other? (Eg, Overhead Transparencies, Pictures)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

G) What did you like the least about the Elementary Spanish classes? *(Please choose however many are appropriate to your circumstances)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My teacher of Elementary Spanish</td>
<td>□ 1</td>
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</tr>
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<td>□ 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other? (Eg, Overhead Transparencies, Pictures)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Foreign Language Anxiety and Elementary Spanish

H) Did you ever consider withdrawing from the Elementary Spanish course at any time during the semester? If so, please explain your reason/s.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

I) Did you ever feel anxious and/or nervous in the Elementary Spanish class? If you did feel nervous and/or anxious, how did you overcome these feelings?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

J) What type of activities and/or events in the Elementary Spanish class made you nervous and/or
K) Thinking about you time in the Elementary Spanish course, please tick any of the following statements that apply to you. *(Please choose however many are appropriate to your circumstances)*

I never felt too sure of myself when I speak in the Elementary Spanish class  
It worries me when I can’t understand all the teacher says in the Elementary Spanish Class  
I always think that my peers are better at Spanish than what I am  
It makes me anxious to be asked to speak without preparation in Elementary Spanish Class  
In Elementary Spanish class, I sometimes get so nervous that I forget things I know  
It worries me when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting  
I often feel that my class peers speak Spanish better than what I do  
I feel uncomfortable and/or self conscious when I have to speak Spanish in front of my peers  
I often feel as if the Elementary Spanish class is moving very fast and that I will be left behind  
I feel more anxious and/or nervous in Elementary Spanish that in any other of my classes  
I get nervous when I don’t understand every word my Elementary Spanish teacher says  
I get worried and think that my peers will laugh at me when I speak Spanish in class  

**The Interview**

Short phone interviews (10-15 mins) about Elementary Spanish and your opinions will be conducted between weeks 1 & 3 of Semester 2. Please advise me if you would like to take part in these interviews.

Your participation would be greatly appreciated.

*Please fill out the table with your details so I can contact you for the interview.*

| YOUR NAME | DATE  
|-----------|-------
|           | (Between Weeks 1 & 3 Sem 2) |
|           | DAY  
|           | (Monday to Friday) |
|           | TIME  
|           | (Between 9am and 4pm) |
|           | YOUR PH. NUMBER |

*I would like to thank you for your participation in this research by filling out this questionnaire. I look forward to discussing this topic with you when we have the interview.*

Thank –You
APPENDIX 5

Questionnaire for Withdrawn Students
Investigating First-Year Second Language Retention and Attrition: A Case Study from an Australian University.

**STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE 200X**

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out about your experience in the Elementary Spanish course and your reasons for not continuing in the course.

**PART ONE**

**General Information**

A) Sex: 1 Male  2 Female

B) Age  
   1 17-24  2 25-34  3 35-44  4 45-54  5 55+

C) Did you enrol at the University as a mature age student? 1 Yes  2 No

D) Is English your first language? 1 Yes  2 No  If no, please specify: ______________________

E) What was your enrolment status at the time of your involvement in Elementary Spanish?  
   1 Part-time  2 Full-time

F) Was the course you were in your preferred course? 1 Yes  2 No  
   *(Please write down the name of your degree in the space provided)*  
   3 Degree:-

G) Was learning Spanish (or another foreign language) a compulsory part of your degree? 1 Yes  2 No

H) Are you an international student? 1 Yes  2 No
I) What are you doing now? *(Please select as many statements that best describe your situation at the present. If nothing matches your situation, please write in the space provided what you are doing now)*

I have left University and have no plans of returning □ 1
I have left University but would like to return sometime in the future □ 2
I am working full-time □ 3
I am working part-time/casual □ 4
I have changed my studies to another tertiary institution □ 5
I am continuing my Spanish studies at another institution □ 6
I have continued my studies at XXXX University without Spanish □ 7
I have changed my degree, but I am still at XXXX University □ 8
I changed my enrolment status to part-time study □ 9
I have deferred my studies □ 10
I have decided to study another language at XXXX University □ 11
I have decided to study another language at another institution □ 12

Other? ____________________________________________

PART TWO

1. The Elementary Spanish course

A) Why did you decide to study Spanish at XXXX University? *(please choose as many as relate to your circumstance/s)*

I think having the knowledge of a foreign language is important □ 1
I would like to learn another language □ 2
I would like to /have plans to travel a Spanish speaking country □ 3
I think it is important to learn Spanish □ 4
I would like to learn (more) about Hispanic cultures □ 5
I think that knowing Spanish will bring me more job opportunities in my area □ 6
I would like to work in a country where Spanish is spoken □ 7
I have friends/family who speak Spanish □ 8
I am from a Hispanic background and would like to preserve my knowledge of the Spanish language □ 9
I thought it would be an enjoyable course to take □ 10
I thought it would be a fun language to learn □ 11
I had to learn a language as part of my degree □ 12
I have friends who are also studying the Elementary Spanish course □ 13
Other? ____________________________________________________________

II. Language Learning Background

B) Have you ever studied a foreign language before?  □ No (please move on to question C)
□ Yes
Which Language?____________________ Where did you learn it?____________________

C) What did you expect from the Elementary Spanish course?______________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________

D) What did you expect from the teacher of Elementary Spanish? _______________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________

E) Did these expectations change during the course of the semester? How? _____________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________________

F) What did you like most about the Elementary Spanish classes? (Please choose however many are appropriate to your circumstances)
My teacher of Elementary Spanish □ 1
My peers in Elementary Spanish □ 2
Working with my peers in Elementary Spanish □ 3
The teaching approach used by my teacher in Elementary Spanish □ 4
The way the assessment was conducted in Elementary Spanish □ 5
The text, “Dos Mundos”, used in Elementary Spanish □ 6
The materials my teacher used in class in Elementary Spanish □ 7
(Eg, Overhead Transparencies, Pictures)
Other? ______________________________________________________________________________________

G) What did you like the least about the Elementary Spanish classes? (Please choose however many are appropriate to your circumstances)
My teacher of Elementary Spanish □ 1
My peers in Elementary Spanish □ 2
Working with my peers in Elementary Spanish
The teaching approach used by my teacher in Elementary Spanish
The way the assessment was conducted in Elementary Spanish
The text, “Dos Mundos”, used in Elementary Spanish
The materials my teacher used in class in Elementary Spanish
(Eg, Overhead Transparencies, Pictures)
Other? ____________________________________________

PART THREE

I. Factors influencing your withdrawal from your Elementary Spanish studies

A) I decided to withdraw from elementary Spanish because...(please tick the boxes that relate to your circumstances)

Financially it wasn’t possible for me to continue studying at this time □ 1
I had problems with my health □ 2
Someone close to me had problems with their health □ 3
I decided to defer my Spanish studies until another time □ 4
Please write reason__________________________________________.
I decided to defer my University studies until another time □ 5
Please write reason__________________________________________.
I decided to join the work force □ 6
I decided to learn Spanish somewhere else □ 7
I decided to learn another language at the University □ 8
I decided that studying at University wasn’t really for me □ 9
There were aspects of the Elementary Spanish course that I didn’t like □ 10
There were certain things about XXXXX University that I didn’t like □ 11
I thought that there wasn’t enough support for students at XXXXX University □ 12
(for example, counselling, teacher)
I didn’t feel I connected with the people at the University □ 13
I didn’t feel I connected with the people in my Spanish class □ 14
Other? ____________________________________________

B) When you decided to withdraw from Elementary Spanish, did you discuss you decision with anyone?

2□ No  If no, please continue to question D
1□ Yes  Who did you speak to? (For example, your parents, the University Guidance Counsellor)
C) Did you withdraw from Elementary Spanish before attending any classes?

1 Yes If yes, please continue on to Part Four on page 6 of the questionnaire
2 No If no, please read all the statements in question D below and tick the boxes that best show how you believe your experience in the Elementary Spanish course could have been improved.

D) My experience in Elementary Spanish course could have been better if… *(please tick the boxes that relate to your circumstances)*

- If I had a different teacher
- If I had a different group of peers
- By making the classes smaller
- By modifying the assessment method/s
- By modifying the teaching approach/es
- If there were more opportunities for me to speak Spanish outside of class
- If the course could be taken in another attendance mode (Eg, Part-time)
- If there were more options with the Elementary Spanish timetables
- If it could be taken as an elective for more Degrees
- If the workload wasn’t so large
- Other? ____________________________________________________________________________

II. Foreign Language Anxiety and the Elementary Spanish Class

E) Did you ever feel anxious and/or nervous in the Elementary Spanish class? If you did feel nervous and/or anxious, how did you overcome these feelings?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

F) What type of activities and/or events in the Elementary Spanish class made you nervous and/or anxious? Eg: Oral interviews, groups work…

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

G) Do you believe that your feelings of nervousness and/or anxiety played any part in your withdrawal from the Elementary Spanish course?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________
H) Thinking about you time in the Elementary Spanish course, please tick any of the following statements that apply to you. (Please choose however many are appropriate to your circumstances)

I never felt too sure of myself when I speak in the Elementary Spanish class □ 1
It worries me when I can’t understand all the teacher says in the Elementary Spanish Class □ 2
I always think that my peers are better at Spanish than what I am □ 3
It makes me anxious to be asked to speak without preparation in Elementary Spanish Class □ 4
In Elementary Spanish class, I sometimes get so nervous that I forget things I know □ 5
It worries me when I don’t understand what the teacher is correcting □ 6
I often feel that my class peers speak Spanish better than what I do □ 7
I feel uncomfortable and/or self conscious when I have to speak Spanish in front of my peers □ 8
I often feel as if the Elementary Spanish class is moving very fast and that I will be left behind □ 9
I feel more anxious and/or nervous in Elementary Spanish that in any other of my classes □ 10
I get nervous when I don’t understand every word my Elementary Spanish teacher says □ 11
I get worried and think that my peers will laugh at me when I speak Spanish in class □ 12

PART FOUR
The Interview
Short phone interviews (10-15 mins) about retention and attrition in Elementary Spanish and your opinions on the topic will be conducted before Friday the X of June. Please advise which of these days and the time that would suit you best for the interview. Please write down a suitable contact telephone number for the interview.

DO YOU WANT A DOUBLE MOVIE PASS?

If you decide to take part in the interview, I will send you a double movie pass to Birch Carroll and Coyle cinemas for your participation.
To be eligible for the movie pass you will have to participate in the interview before Friday the X of June and return your completed questionnaire by Friday the X of May.
Please fill out the table with your details so I can contact you for the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOUR NAME</th>
<th>DATE (Until Friday 2\textsuperscript{nd} June)</th>
<th>DAY (Monday to Friday)</th>
<th>TIME (Between 9am and 4pm)</th>
<th>YOUR PH. NUMBER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I would like to thank you for your participation in this research by filling out this questionnaire. Please put the questionnaire and the consent forms in the pre-paid envelope included in this package and return them as soon as possible (before May X).

I look forward to discussing this topic with you when we have the interview.

Thank – You
APPENDIX 6

Interview Questions for Non-Withdrawn Students
# INTERVIEW QUESTION SHEET FOR NON-WITHDRAWERS – SEM X, 200X

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>CONTACT NUMBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>ANSWER</th>
<th>TRACK #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Why did you decide to study ES? Why at X?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Have you previously learnt a foreign language? If so, where and how did you learn the foreign language?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What were your expectations of the ES course and the teacher? Did this change at all during the semester?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Is there anything you particularly liked about the ES course?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Is there anything you particularly disliked about the ES course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How was the ES course different to other courses you study/studied? For example, format, assessment…</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Did you ever consider leaving the Elementary Spanish programme at any stage of the semester?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Have you ever felt nervous and/or anxious in the Elementary Spanish class? If so, how have you overcome those feelings?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What type of activities and/or events in the Elementary Spanish class would/have made you nervous and/or anxious? For example; oral interviews, written tests, group work…</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>If you have felt nervous and/or anxious, have you spoken to anyone about it? For example: teachers, friends, counsellor etc…</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Do you have any further comments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Commentary:
APPENDIX 7

Interview Questions for Withdrawn Students
### INTERVIEW QUESTION SHEET FOR WITHDRAWERS – SEM X, 200X

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>ANSWER</th>
<th>TRACK #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Why did you decide to study ES? Why at X?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>In your words, why did you decide to withdraw from the ES course?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Have you previously learnt a foreign language? If so, where and how did you learn the foreign language?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>What were your expectations of the ES course and the teacher? Did this change at all?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Is there anything that could have been modified in the ES course that would have encouraged you to stay? What would you have changed?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Is there anything you particularly liked about the ES course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is there anything you particularly disliked about the ES course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>How was the ES course different to other courses you study/studied? For example, format, assessment…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Did you ever feel nervous and/or anxious in the Elementary Spanish class? If so, did you overcome those feelings?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>What type of activities and/or events in the Elementary Spanish class made you nervous and/or anxious? For example; oral interviews, written tests, group work…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>If you did feel nervous and/or anxious in class, did you discuss these feelings with anyone? For example; teachers, friends, a counsellor…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Do you believe that being nervous and/or anxious in the Elementary Spanish class could have contributed to your withdrawal from the course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>What have you been doing since you withdrew from the ES course?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Do you have any further comments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>Commentary:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 8

The First Year Student Survey - FYSS
THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SURVEY (FYSS)

AIMS: The aim of this survey is to help you to identify the factors that contribute to your completion of the Elementary Spanish course.

SECTION 1: STUDENT FACTORS

Please tick YES or NO to each question and/or statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. GENDER</td>
<td>A) Are you female?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. AGE</td>
<td>A) Are you between 17-24?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND</td>
<td>A) Are you from an English speaking background?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CULTURAL BACKGROUND</td>
<td>Is your cultural background: A) Anglo-Saxon?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. WORK CONSTRAINTS</td>
<td>A) Do you have a job outside of university study?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Will your work duties impede with your study time?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C) Will you set aside the recommended amount of hours each week to dedicate to study?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D) Do you believe that any extra-curricular activities you take part in will cut into your study time?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS</td>
<td>A) Could you continue your university study working only a small amount/no hours each week?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. INTERNATIONAL STUDENT STATUS</td>
<td>A) Are you an international student?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. ATTENDANCE TYPE</td>
<td>A) Are you enrolled as a full-time student?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. REASONS FOR LEARNING SPANISH</td>
<td>A) Do you believe that having the knowledge of a foreign language is important?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Do you have plans/would like to travel to a Spanish speaking country?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C) Would you like to learn more about Hispanic cultures?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D) Do you think knowing a foreign language will open up your job prospects?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E) Do you have family/friends that speak Spanish?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F) Did you think it would be an enjoyable course to take?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G) Did you think it would be a fun language to learn?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>H) Do you have friends studying in the same course?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I) Are you studying Spanish as an elective?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL POINTS =

Please tick YES or NO to each question and/or statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. SOCIAL BELIEFS</td>
<td>A) Is making friends at university important to you?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Are the social elements of university an important part of your university life?</td>
<td>Yes 2 No 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C) In your opinion, is it imperative that students join sports and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. ACADEMIC BELIEFS
   A) Is getting good grades important to you? Yes    No
   B) Will you aim for a High Distinction in this course? Yes    No
   C) Would you be disillusioned if you did not get good marks in this course? Yes    No
   D) Do you believe that it is important to have a good association with the tutor/lecturer of your courses? Yes    No
   E) Is it important for you to think highly of the university that you are attending? Yes    No

3. LEARNING STYLE
   A) Do you believe you have a particular way of learning that helps you to learn better? Yes    No
   B) Is it important that your tutor/lecturer helps you to establish/polish learning strategies for you to learn better? Yes    No
   C) Are you capable of studying successfully outside of class by yourself or in a study group? Yes    No

4. STUDENT PREPARATION
   A) Have you taken steps to prepare yourself for university life? Yes    No
   B) Have you taken steps to prepare yourself for the language course Elementary Spanish? Yes    No
   C) Do you believe that high school/other study have prepared you with the skills you require for university? Yes    No
   D) Do you believe that the workforce has prepared you with the skills you require for university? Yes    No

5. STUDENT EXPECTATIONS
   A) Do you have certain expectations of what the course will be like? Yes    No
   B) Will you be able to continue in the course if your expectations are not met? Yes    No
   C) Have you ever seen advertising (like brochures, webpages or other publicity) of the course? Yes    No

6. FOREIGN LANGUAGE ANXIETY
   A) Have you learned a foreign language previously? If not, go to question 7. Yes    No
   B) If you have learned a foreign language before, did you feel calm/not anxious in class? Yes    No
   C) If you ever felt anxious, did you overcome these feelings to continue learning the language? Yes    No

7. MOTIVATION TO LEARN
   A) Do you feel you will complete this course? Yes    No
   B) Is it important to have goals for each course you attend? Yes    No
   C) Do you believe you are you committed to the degree you are enrolled in? Yes    No
   D) Is there anything in particular that motivates you to learn Spanish? Yes    No

TOTAL POINTS =

SECTION 2: TEACHING AND LEARNING FACTORS

Please tick YES or NO to each question and/or statement:

TEACHING AND LEARNING FACTORS THAT MAY CONTRIBUTE TO COURSE COMPLETION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. TEACHING STYLE</td>
<td>A) Do you have a particular teaching style that you find most useful in class? Yes    No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B) Are you comfortable with the use of different teaching styles? Yes    No</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C) Do you believe you will adapt to the teaching style used in Elementary Spanish? Yes    No</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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2. RESOURCES USED IN CLASS

A) Do you require the use of visual/audio resources in class to improve your learning?  Yes ☐ No ☐
B) Do you believe you will adapt to the Elementary Spanish course if these resources are not used all the time? Yes ☐ No ☐

3. ASSESSMENT PREFERENCES

A) Do you have a preferred assessment type? (for example, exams or essays) Yes ☐ No ☐
B) Do you think you are able to adapt to the different assessment types that are offered at university? Yes ☐ No ☐
C) Would you prefer to do assessment every few weeks instead of a big exam at the end of semester? Yes ☐ No ☐
D) Do you think it is important to receive feedback during the semester? Yes ☐ No ☐

4. CLASSROOM PEERS

A) Do you believe that having an interactive class is beneficial for your learning? Yes ☐ No ☐
B) Do you think you will adapt to the different personalities in class? Yes ☐ No ☐
C) Do you believe you will be able to participate comfortably in groups with other classmates? Yes ☐ No ☐
D) Are you open to participating in group activities that you may have not done before? Yes ☐ No ☐

SECTION 3: UNIVERSITY FACTORS

Please tick YES or NO to each question and/or statement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACTOR</th>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. UNIVERSITY MARKETING</td>
<td>A) Were you aware of any advertising for the university (brochures, media) before enrolling? If not, go to C. Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>B) Did you make up your mind about enrolling at the university independently from this advertising? Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C) Do you believe you received accurate, reliable information about the university before you enrolled? Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. UNIVERSITY STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES</td>
<td>Were you aware of any of the following services made available to students at the university? Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A) Health Service Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>B) Student Equity Service Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C) Library Services Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>D) Information Services Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>E) Indigenous Student Support Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>F) Academic Services Support Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>G) Safety and Security Services Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>H) Chaplaincy Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I) Gumurrii Centre Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>J) Careers and Employment Services Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>K) Industry mentoring Program Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>L) Interest-free University Loans Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td>M) Disabilities Service Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>N) Childcare Services Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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<td></td>
<td>O) Campus Life Yes ☐ No ☐</td>
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</table>

Your cooperation has been greatly appreciated. Thank you.
APPENDIX 9

The First Year Student Support Sheet
## OUTCOMES ANALYSIS AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Energy Levels</th>
<th>Strategies for Refuelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Student Factors</strong></td>
<td>Check out these websites for some ideas to help your studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Score = ____________ | - XXXX University [Counselling service](http://www.xxxxxxx.edu.au/ua/aa/ss/counselling/)  
| If you scored below 24 points in this section, consider these strategies for refuelling:  
If you scored over 24 you may still find these websites useful, so have a look! | - Clubs at XXXX [http://www.xxxxxxx.edu.au/ocs/clubs/](http://www.xxxxxxx.edu.au/ocs/clubs/)  
| **Student Learning Factors** | |
| If you scored below 32 in this section, consider these strategies for refuelling:  
If you scored over 32 you may still find these websites useful, so have a look! |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching and Learning Factors</th>
<th>University Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Score = ________________</td>
<td>Score = ___________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you scored below 16 in</td>
<td>If you scored below 22 in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this section, consider these</td>
<td>this section, consider these</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strategies for refuelling:</td>
<td>strategies for refuelling:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you scored over 16 you</td>
<td>If you scored over 22 you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may still find these sites</td>
<td>may still find these sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>useful, so have a look!</td>
<td>useful, so have a look!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- XXXXX Course Enquiries
- Information about different teaching and learning styles
  * www.highlandschools-virtualb.org.uk/ltt/multiple_intelligence/teaching_app.htm
- Additional Spanish Language Resources
  * www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/
  * www.studyspanish.com
  * www.donquijote.org/spanishlanguage/
- “Dos Mundos” Student Resources
- XXXXX University Assessment Information
- Relationships with Classmates

- XXXXX University Information and Facts
- School of Languages and Linguistics
- Student Administration and Support Officers
  * http://www.xxxxxx.edu.au/ua/aa/crp/
- Student Policies
  * http://www.xxxxxx.edu.au/ua/aa/policies/
- XXXXX University News and Events

TOTAL SCORE =

If you require any more details about this information sheet, please contact:

Ana Lobo
PhD Candidate
Email: a.lobo@xxxxxx.edu.au

If you feel you need to at discuss any issue regarding your learning in the Elementary Spanish programme, please contact your Tutor. If you have an administrative issue, please contact the Course Convenor.

Tutor:
Ana Lobo
Office: Arts & Education 1 (G30) 4.29
Email: a.lobo@xxxxxx.edu.au
Tel: (07) 555 28604

Course Convenor:
Dr XXXXXXX
Office: Arts & Education 1
Email: XXXXXXX
Tel: XXXXXXX
REFERENCES


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Rovai, A. (2002). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *Internet and Higher Education, 140*, 1-16.


