

**Insights into the Activity Systems of First-Year University
Students: Approaches and Personnel Influencing Student
Success**

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**Insights into the Activity Systems of First-Year University
Students: Approaches and Personnel Influencing Student
Success**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

Considerable attention is being afforded to the First-Year Experience (FYE) of University students to enhance student retention and success. The importance of social capital and acquiring academic skills and argumentative essay writing (AEW) in the FYE is seen to be influential for students. More recently, in response to these influences, there has been a trend for Universities to appoint specialist personnel, such as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Coordinators, First-Year Coordinators, Mentors, Subject Tutors and various Advisors, whose purpose is to assist in enhancing student success and retention.

The key research question guiding this thesis was - By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches, and, personnel are most influential for student success? The supporting research questions were:

- 1. In what ways do academic skills development, and especially AEW, influence student success in the FYE?*
- 2. In what ways do support personnel influence student success in the FYE?*

Therefore, this study aimed to better understand approaches and support personnel who potentially assist University students to succeed and continue with their studies in the FYE, including how they make decisions about learning new academic skills, including AEW, in a contemporary education environment.

The research used a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2010; Neuman, 2011) through a combination of exploratory and descriptive research methodologies conducted in two phases. In Phase One, survey data were collected from 218 Education students at the regional University in Australia being studied. In Phase Two, case studies for four University students were constructed, and subsequently, a cross-case analysis was conducted. The four students in the case studies were:

- 1 One student who was defined as being **first in family** to study at University;
- 2 One student who was defined as **not being first in family** to study at University;

- 3 One student who was defined as being a **school leaver**; and
- 4 One student who was defined as being a **mature age, non-school leaver and a Fail grade**.

Data analysis of the student survey provided demographic information about the students surveyed, student perceptions about Orientation, academic skills, AEW skills, support personnel, and themes revealed through student perceptions of aspects of University that influenced student success.

By drawing upon Activity Theory, the study was significant for three main reasons, within the context that the FYE was critically important as it influenced student success and retention which has become a priority for higher education institutions in Australia.

First, it provided insights into the academic skills, including AEW, which students might have before entering University, and their perceptions of how these might influence student success. Second, it provided insights into the ways in which various support personnel might influence student success. Through investigating the activity systems of four University students, the importance of their perceived relationships with support personnel and others, such as other students, were illuminated. This also provided some guidance about who might be best in helping students with their FYE, and, for example, with developing their academic skills, including AEW writing skills. Third, it contributed to the use of Activity Theory through its application in this study within the context of the FYE in higher education.

From the findings reported, implications were identified from the student survey and from the case studies. The thesis concludes with reflections on the study, and suggestions for further research.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. Data and information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been, to the best of my knowledge, cited in the text and a list of references is given. Every reasonable effort has been made to gain permission and acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would encourage any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged to contact me.

Signed:

Date: September 2017

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LIST OF MAIN ABBREVIATIONS

ACER	Australian Council of Academic Research
AEW	Argumentative essay writing
ASD	Academic Skills Development
AT	Activity Theory
Bb	Blackboard (online learning site)
FYE	First-Year Experience
FYHE	First Year in Higher Education
GU	Griffith University
OWL	Online Writing Laboratory
PASS	Peer-Assisted Study Sessions
QUT	Queensland University of Technology
SCU	Southern Cross University
SEET	Student experiences and expectations of technology
SI	Supplemental Instruction
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UIG	Unit Information Guide
UoW	University of Wollongong
USQ	University of Southern Queensland
UTAS	University of Tasmania

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PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

During my candidature, the following journal articles and conference presentations were undertaken.

Published journal article

Fenn-Lavington, A. (2016). Improving the First-Year University Experience: Implications for addressing the influence of social capital and academic skills, including AEW. *Journal of Contemporary Education and Communication Technology*, 2(2), 25-31.

Conference Presentations/acceptances

Fenn-Lavington, A. (2016). Improving the First-Year University Experience: Implications for addressing the influence of social capital and academic skills, including AEW. *APIAR Conference*, Legian, Indonesia, 2016.

DEDICATION

This Doctoral Thesis is dedicated to my mother, Gwenda Isobel Lavington (nee Parnell) 12.6.24 – 8.8.15.

A wonderful, loving and caring mother to her family and who lived by the maxim '*What a friend we have in Jesus*' – she was one of the main inspirations behind this research project.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

For many academics and students at University, the first-year experience (FYE) is critically important as it largely determines student success and retention. As outlined in this chapter, the aim of this study was to identify implications for informing the improvement of the FYE, through examining the effectiveness of the relatively new roles of the personnel who help students in building academic capital through argumentative essay writing (AEW) capabilities. To illuminate these implications and perceptions of effectiveness, the research explored the lived experiences of University students through an Activity Theory lens (Engeström, 1987). The key research question guiding this thesis was – By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?

Student retention is a major issue for Universities in Australia and internationally, with students' engagement with their studies – and ultimately their success and completion of a course – improving the student experience, enhancing the University's reputation and contributing to its long-term financial security. Therefore, a University's retention and engagement strategy should be given a high priority and positioned alongside the University's strategic plan for learning and teaching and the FYE protocols (UTAS, 2017). Further, the retention and success students have at University is enabled by a whole-of-institution approach underpinned by quality learning and teaching and an excellent student experience of both curricular and co-curricular (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; De Aizpurua, 2016).

Students remain at or leave University for many complex reasons. With an increasingly diverse cohort, there are many student groups who may appear more at risk of attrition than others; however, all students of any demographic can be at risk at times during their studies (Tinto, 2010). There are many factors outside of a University's control – such as personal and life issues – that also impact upon student retention. Further, there are cases where it is in the interests

of a student and/or the University that a student does not continue with his or her course.

Key factors of student success have been identified in a range of research (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010; Wilson, 2009; Tinto, 2012; Yorke & Longden, 2004) and are also captured in this study, where the focus is particularly on the importance of the transition and retention of first-year students related to academic skills, and especially argumentative essay writing (AEW) (UTAS, 2010; Tinto, 2010; Kuh, 2010). The role of social capital and academic skill development, including the role of writing when considering assessment tasks and design, particularly AEW, is of interest here. Consistent themes point to the importance of a connected approach (Engestrom, 1987, Lizzio, 2006; Monash University, 2015) across an institution involving partnerships between academic and professional staff and considering both curricular and co-curricular design, transition, engagement and support. Students' success is underpinned by the development of a range of factors, including their sense of purpose, resourcefulness, connectedness and capability (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010). Improvements in retention have been found following interventions that enhance students' preparedness to study and create an effective orientation and transition experience. In addition, other interventions are concerned with the increase of personal communication and advice to students, providing early detection and intervention for students at risk, enhancing the quality of the learning experience, and increasing student engagement and quality with their peers, with staff and of the campus experience (Scott et al., 2008; Tinto & Pusser, 2006; UTAS, 2017).

A pertinent observation in this study is the lack of research concerning student engagement and success *and* the approaches and support personnel who assist students, for example, in developing their academic skills, including their AEW skills. The quantitative and qualitative aspects of this study, therefore, investigated the dynamic connection between people, academic skills and socio-cultural experiences and is positioned at the intersection of three main research fields: academic skills and AEW, support personnel and student beliefs about learning, and Activity Theory (AT) (Engestrom, 1987). Academic skills and AEW situates this study in relation to the setting in which the *activity* occurs, that is, an AEW environment. The research on support personnel and student learning

beliefs established the educational underpinnings of support agents and students' intentions and actions. Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1987) and cultural diversity (Wacquant, 2014) provide the descriptive and interpretive framework supporting this study. The rationale for the study is supported by the importance of researching the connections between individual students, social structures and the decisions about learning and implementing academic and AEW skills in the FYE at University.

1.2 The Aim of the Study and the Research Questions

This study aimed to better understand approaches and support personnel that assist University students succeed and continue with their studies in their first year, including how they make decisions about learning new academic skills (including AEW) in a contemporary education environment. Understanding the cultural, social and mediated nature of learning (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 1993; Wacquant, 2015), the intent of this study is to describe and interpret the multi-faceted nature of learners in the first year of study at a regional institution of higher education. Unless first-year students are aware of their own cognitive disposition and the dynamics that influence their decision making regarding academic skills and AEW, they may become a statistic of those who choose to withdraw from study in their first year of study (Lizzio, 2010; Tinto, 2014; Federation University Australia, 2016). Further, this study assisted in understanding how the attributes of the individual (such as their beliefs about learning, academic skills, AEW and support personnel available at University) connect, interact and sometimes conflict with their surrounding academic, cultural and social contexts. The study contributes to discussions about the use of Activity Theory as a research tool in institutions of higher education.

The review of the literature, outlined in Chapter 2, informed the formulation of the main question reflected in the thesis title and the key research question guiding this study: By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?

In addition to the main research question, the following questions also supported the key research question guiding the research project:

In what ways do academic skills development, and especially AEW, influence student success in the FYE?

In what ways do social interactions influence student success in the FYE?

What implications are there for the roles of personnel in assisting students to be successful in the FYE?

1.2.1 Adopting an Activity Theory Approach

The main concepts obtained from a review of the relevant literature presented later in Chapter 2 indicate the importance of the first-year experience (FYE) in influencing student success. These indicate that the FYE is complex; for example, there are challenges associated with the diversity and equity of all students on and off campus and in a range of study locations (Anderson, Singh, Stephens, & Ryerson, 1998). To investigate the guiding research question and the supporting questions, this study draws upon Activity theory (Engestrom, 2001) to examine the activity systems of students in their first year of University studies.

Activity Theory (AT) is a cross-disciplinary, theoretically based conceptual framework stemming from Vygotsky's work on the nature and development of human behaviour (Lantolf, 2006; Wacquant, 2014) in the 1920s. Vygotsky proposed that culture and social interactions are not external to the mind, but instead are part of the way that the mind is formed (Engestrom, 2001; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

This study, through drawing upon Activity Theory, investigated approaches and personnel that can influence student success and retention. In particular, this aimed at illuminating the lived first-year experiences of four University students through identifying their activity systems. For example, there are studies identified in the literature review presented in Chapter 2 that point to the importance of academic skills and their link to the success of students in tertiary studies (McInnis et al., 2000, p.22; Cottrell, 2007, p. 57; Grellier & Goerke, 2006 p. 106; Krause et al., 2008). According to Grellier and Goerke (2006, p. 96), much of the students' time at University will be spent on critical academic thinking, reading, research and writing. Two key elements of student success include AEW and social capital. Over the years, researchers (McInnis & Hartley, 2002; Kuh, 2012;

Krause, 2009; Tinto, 2011) have identified the need to monitor students in the initial stages of their coursework, and this study acknowledges the importance and potential of academic capital being developed through effective support from University personnel.

Therefore, the initial stages of tertiary education can be seen as 'a time for transition, growth, and development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes essential for academic success, intellectual growth, living independently and developing interpersonal relationships, and emotional well-being' (California State University, 2017). Indeed, other studies have highlighted the specific areas of writing and social aspects as predictors of student success at University (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Lizzio, 2010; Cottrell, 2010; Tinto, 2014). This further reinforces the need to investigate how students perceive the effectiveness of various approaches and various support personnel to add to the findings of those studies. This was achieved through the employment of Activity Theory (Engestrom, 2001) to provide a rich account of the students' activity systems to illuminate the roles and relationships that impact positively upon their academic success and retention.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The context of this research project was concerned with the success and retention of first year students in higher education, which has become a priority for higher education institutions in Australia and elsewhere. Thus, the study, by drawing upon Activity Theory, finds its significance through aiming to better understand approaches and support personnel that assist University students succeed and continue with their studies in their first year, including how they might make decisions about learning new academic skills, including AEW, in a contemporary education environment. This can help inform approaches to address the challenges and problems relating to the FYE reported in the literature, such as high attrition rates, lack of preparedness for self-study, lack of confidence, lack of motivation, lack of IT skills, and general dissatisfaction with the learning environment (Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2014). These crucial aspects are also substantiated via recent studies on attrition from many

Universities, including Southern Cross University, Griffith University and University of Wollongong (SCU, 2015; GU, 2014; UoW, 2014).

The issue of attrition is reinforced by many studies that emphasise the importance of social aspects relating to student success. Engestrom (2001) notes that there are contradictions and tensions within any activity system and, if not monitored correctly, these tensions can inhibit the flow, resulting in what Engestrom refers to as disruption and discoordination. These tensions are referred to as *contradictions* (Engestrom, 2001) in Activity Theory and are the underlying causes of visible problems and conflicts. While contradictions generate disturbances in any activity system, they are also seen as important drivers for innovation and change. Indeed, they are seen to have the potential to transform an activity system. Furthermore, Wacquant (2014) also shows that any social system will have tensions and that when they are acknowledged and acted on by the participants, they can transform the system in a positive way. This is also strongly supported by Tinto (2012) and Kuh (2014), who emphasise the point that the FYE in higher education does have multifaceted tensions between students and students, students and staff, and staff and staff, and that these interactions, if handled well, will transform the institution in a positive way.

Engagement can be both formal and informal. It is based on reciprocal, two-way relationships that are built upon trust, connectivity and shared understanding (Bourdieu, 1993; Wacquant, 2014). Engagement can occur at individual-to-individual, individual-to-organisation, or organisation-to-organisation levels. It can enhance the wellbeing of communities from human, social, and/or economic perspectives and contribute to the community. Engagement is not a simple or formulaic activity, but a mix of inter-related, multi-level, holistic and interdependent activities, as this thesis revealed. Engagement activity can enable the development of ideas and concepts, including engagement practices such as partnerships and knowledge development, and these practices can provide a greater sense of ownership (Tinto, 2012) and community benefit. Giving students support in the crucial first year of study is paramount to their success (De Aizpurua, 2016) and this project investigated the importance of having strategic support personnel on hand to aid the students in their first year.

The change in teaching style in recent years has placed more focus on learner and learner-centred instruction even at the tertiary level in education. This is confirmed by the principles of social constructivism (McLeod, 2007; Neuman, 2011). The review of this literature articulates how learning at University is a social phenomenon (Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2014), and that it can be enhanced through the development of academic skills, including AEW. This literature review established that more research is needed that investigates student perceptions of the importance of AEW, and how important the social connection is in acquiring these writing skills. Consequently, it is important to examine to what extent the various support personnel at University and beyond, have on influencing a student's success with academic writing. Given that student success and retention are important aspects of any University, the conceptual framework developed from this literature review guided this research into academic and AEW skills and social capital.

Constructivism presents learning as a social process and, therefore, in that sense constructivism informs learning at the tertiary level. This understanding is very important to this study, as one of the central themes is the relationship between the learner and the educator. Furthermore, Nunan (1999, p. 304) defines constructivism as 'a philosophical approach that argues that knowledge is socially constructed rather than having its own independent existence' and, therefore, as placing more emphasis on the critical thinking processes of learning rather than memorising a set of formulae.

This constructivist approach to learning is prevalent and expected at the tertiary level and it is often demonstrated via AEW. This method is distinct from traditional writing forms that simply require students to regurgitate information. Rather, it requires a more active, discerning and critical analysis of the knowledge being sought and presented. Such social constructivism is argued to most likely happen when the learning is within the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1997). This means that skills can be better developed when learners are within an optimal condition, such as ZPD, and guided by key University personnel.

Further, according to Wacquant (2014) and linking with Bourdieu (2000) and Engestrom (1987), this aspect is particularly important as first-year University

students face the volume and difficulty of this new culture of learning. This new culture, or new *country*, where the experience of AEW inspired by social constructivism places importance on the process of learning, critical thinking and social and communicative skills, has led to recent calls for more active student engagement in the FYE at University (Krause, 2005; Kuh, 2014; Tinto, 2011; Lizzio, 2007; Kift, 2010). The need for providing better support for first-year University students has seen an expansion of learning support mechanisms, including Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS), Mentor programs, academic skills support centres, first-year units that incorporate foundational academic writing skills and first-year academic advisors.

Therefore, this research project, in investigating the key guiding question and employing AT, understands the importance of social capital on student AEW success, and constructivism as an underlying educational framework expected of students in higher education. The proposed study provided information that enabled the University being studied to implement and/or modify the way in which social capital principles are followed to increase student engagement and success in the FYE at University.

1.3.1 Importance of Academic Skills

Ensuring that students can research and write clearly, coherently and critically from the beginning of their studies at University is obviously a high priority for educators. The acquisition of these academic writing skills has drawn much attention in the late 20th and early 21st Century and research shows that a lack of these writing skills is becoming more common in higher education. The change in teaching style over the past few decades has placed more focus on the learner and learner-centred instruction, which is supported by Vygotsky (1997) and others (Golding, 2008; Langrehr, 2004). Examples of academic skills needed for successful study at University include, but are not limited to, preparing for and completing different forms of study and assessment tasks, such as assignments; examinations; effective reading; taking notes at lectures and tutorials; and independent and collaborative study.

The written texts of students are the means by which many of the assessment tasks are presented. AEW, as a specific part of academic skills, covers a high

percentage of tasks that are given to students throughout their University studies (Education Seattle, 2017; Ivycoach, 2017). The written text, and especially critical and analytical writing, is also the main means through which the process of learning occurs. Classifying, establishing causal relations, connections between theory and practice, all greatly depend on the written texts.

Lack of preparedness for University life, especially in relation to academic skills, encompasses a range of factors (Williams & Pepe, 1983; Kuh et al., 2008). Compatibility between the student and his or her course and institution partly depends on adequate pre-entry information, but is more concerned with students' experience once they begin their degree. At this stage, key influences on retention include the learning, teaching and assessment strategies employed (McInnis, 2000; Tinto, 2011; Yorke, 2002), the quality of relationships between academic staff and students, and the process of establishing friendship networks and peer support (Komarraju & Karau, 2005). The approaches most widely advocated for improving retention during the early part of the course focus on learning and teaching strategies, including academic skills, but also on the use of interactive and collaborative learning methods to facilitate the development of peer group and staff–student relationships (McInnis, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 2002).

Therefore, there is a real need to have students at University grounded in these academic writing skills. The 'how' of student learning is a key element for University students (ACER, 2008) and good habits must be learned (Wignell, 2007). Informed research on this area of writing has seen in recent years the development of programs and courses that introduce students to these skills early in their studies. For many academics and students, however, the role of language, and in particular writing, in constructing knowledge in a disciplinary context is new and relatively unexamined. For lecturers, this often has the consequence that problems with students' academic writing are explained in terms of a deficit model, especially in the FYE at University (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 2002). Students are seen as having developed the necessary writing skills for University or, if not, as needing intervention measures. For students, this new (for them) area of academic writing is often seen as having little or no significance beyond University studies. A more detailed understanding of the role

that academic and AEW skills play in disciplinary learning could contribute to current debates on student writing, lecturer and student engagement with issues of literacy and learning and the development of effective study and writing regimes.

1.3.2 Argumentative Essay Writing (AEW) at University

There are many familiar problems that emerge for students in their academic writing. According to Rocco (2011), these include irrelevance, weak structure, insufficient evidence and examples to support the arguments, lack of fluency between paragraphs, and inconsistent arguments. As mentioned earlier, AEW skills are considered essential for first-year University students. The argumentative essay is defined as ‘a genre of writing that requires the student to investigate a topic; collect, generate, and evaluate evidence; and establish a position on the topic in a concise manner’ (Purdue Education, para.1, 2017). For the purposes of this study, student AEW skills refers to the definition from Purdue Education:

Some confusion may occur between the argumentative essay and the expository essay. These two genres are similar, but the argumentative essay differs from the expository essay in the amount of pre-writing (invention) and research involved. The argumentative essay is commonly assigned as a capstone or final project in first-year writing or advanced composition courses and involves lengthy, detailed research. Expository essays involve less research and are shorter in length. (Purdue Education, 2017, para. 3)

Many processes are involved and students often need to be taught how to approach essay writing. The structure of an argumentative essay is also a vital consideration that students must learn and implement. A generally accepted approach for essay writing involves the Five Paragraph formula, which is by no means the only way to write essays. This method consists of an introductory paragraph, three evidentiary body paragraphs and a concluding paragraph. Key steps include research, planning, drafting, final copy and revision (Richards & Miller, 2005). If these are omitted or rushed, familiar problems will emerge in the

writing process. For example, the introductory paragraph of an argumentative essay must contain specific elements, such as a lead-in sentence, a thesis statement and a summary of the supporting points. Thus, it can be seen that, for the novice University student, the essential elements of AEW are often an obstacle that they find difficult to overcome. The need for support personnel in this FYE is vital to the students' acquisition and application of AEW and other academic skills.

Therefore, using AEW as an example, support personnel in the FYE might be required to help students develop a range of academic skills. The importance of investigating how students might experience and develop their relationships with support personnel to help them succeed is central to this study. Various support personnel are discussed in the following section.

1.3.3 Support Personnel Associated with Academic Skills, including AEW Development

This section outlines several specific social elements that research clearly identifies as practices, and personnel, that affect student success at University, and in particular, AEW. One student stated, 'It was nothing to do with the University, it was just the people' (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This quote highlights the very important role of social interactions in enhancing learning and connection at University (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu 2001; Lizzio, 2009), and was central to this study.

Theorising support personnel has been a lively area of debate within the education field – starting with a number of influential papers in the 1970s that suggested that social support was beneficial to learning (McInnis, 2003) – and there is now much literature on the effects of social support on individual well-being for students transitioning to University (Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Wacquant, 2014). Studies that have investigated social support in relation to the transition to University have usually taken a psychological perspective, and have shown that social support is vital for successful adjustment to University life (Kuh, 2012), and that support from various sources, such as peers, tutors and parents, plays distinct roles (Krause, 2002; Tinto, 2012). However, there is little analysis of the structural and material aspects of these areas, and this study investigated

aspects relating to student engagement and success in the areas of academic and AEW skills. Moreover, the study examined some of the new roles of the support personnel being provided for first-year students.

Kuh (2012) and Tinto's (2014) predictors of student success, as well as Lizzio's model (2009) of the five senses, reinforce that a sense of connectedness is a strong predictor of student success at University. This study explored the experiences of first-year students to try to capture their social development and support, and ascertain what impact it has had on their University achievement. The concept of social support was used to investigate the processes through which social integration (or the lack of it) influenced students' decisions to stay and engage with their studies at this University.

The principal areas under investigation were the effects that social practices had on a student's success at University with academic and essay writing skills (Rowntree, 1993; Krause, 2007; Lizzio, 2009; Tinto, 2012). While much FYE research has focused on social support within the academic environment (Kantanis, 2000) the specific focus on roles and relationships associated with AEW was investigated in this study. Therefore, the data was explored through the theoretical lens of academic and social support (Bourdieu, 2001; Engestrom, 1987; Wacquant, 2012) and looked at the types and sources of support that students receive, including the effects the aspect of connectedness (Lizzio, 2009) had on a student's success.

Those authors who have investigated aspects of students' lives and their course have found that the students' social experience plays a significant role in their decisions about staying at University or leaving (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 2002; Lizzio, 2006; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012). As mentioned, this research project looked at the specific social practices that foster engagement and success with academic skills and writing in the FYE. For example, Tinto (2011) found that leaving in the early part of the course frequently resulted from a failure in social integration, such as difficulties in making friends or homesickness. Kuh (2012) demonstrated that the students' new social networks at University often provided support to overcome first-year difficulties. This clearly links to Engestrom's AT model and the importance of the social and academic community of institutions and organisations for the individual student.

Therefore, the social aspects of AEW cannot be overemphasised, especially how these relationships assist students to succeed. Indeed, Tinto (2012) posits that 80 per cent of students who drop out of University study attribute their leaving to a poor first-year experience. Therefore, the key social areas related to academic success identified in this study included: student-to-tutor/lecturer help; student-to-student help; PASS programs; Mentor programs; and academic skills in the FYE. Figure 1.2 illustrates a conceptual model that displays the importance of relationships built, maintained and sustained in social capital development and implications for health and well-being. At the heart of this study, Activity Theory was employed to gain insights into the relationships that students develop during their FYE.

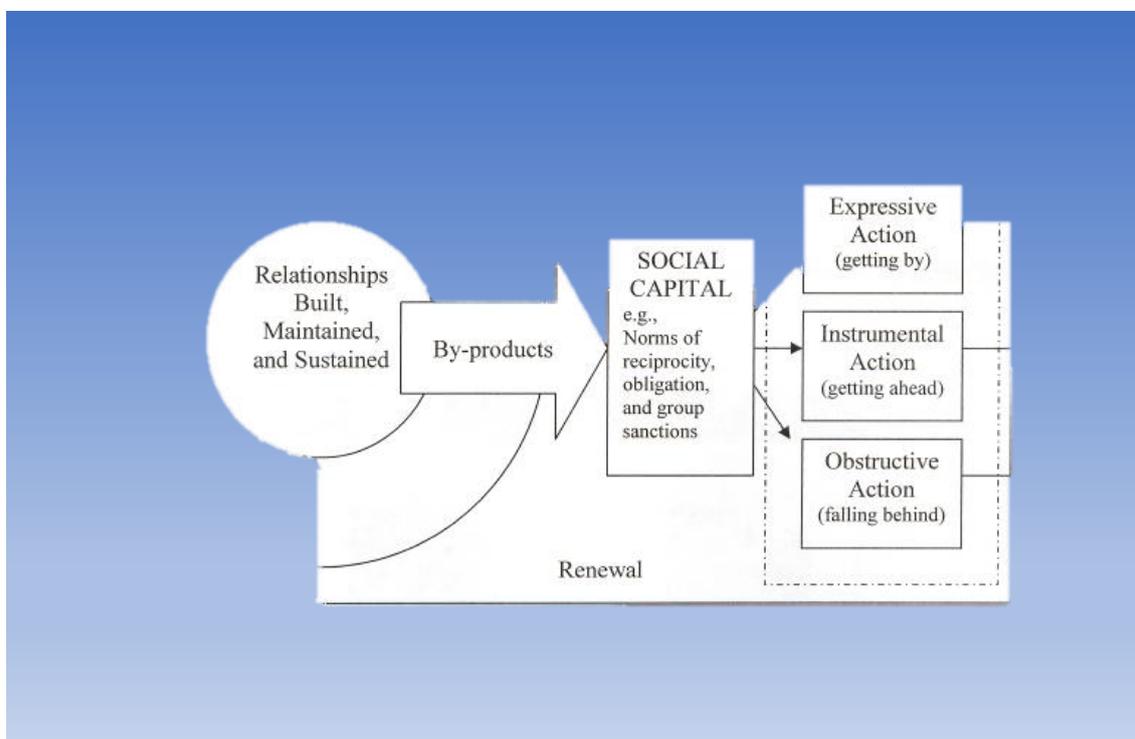


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Model Depicting the Process of Social Capital Development (Glover & Parry, 2005).

As displayed in Figure 1.1, the social capital aspect of student engagement with AEW supports the view of a constructive approach to learning. Constructivism focuses on the active engagement of the learner in *constructing* their own learning (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 2002; Turner, Ireland, Krenus, & Pointon, 2011) and this supports the research of this study, as it involved investigating students interacting on a social level with various support personnel to foster

strong academic skills. It does not take away from the independence of the student, but rather complements it via an interdependent approach, as the student constructs their own way of learning through acquiring academic and AEW skills. Furthermore, it is also reported that learners in a constructivist environment are responsible for their own learning, which includes discovering, constructing, practising and validating this acquired knowledge (Krause, 2007). This is also supported by many Universities that are seeking to listen to the 'student voice' (Gibbons, 2007; Krause, 2007). Students are encouraged to engage collaboratively through conversation, solving problems, connecting to the new knowledge with prior experiences and self-assessment and reflection. These elements were closely investigated throughout this study by implementing quantitative and qualitative research methods that explored student perceptions relating to support personnel at this University.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical starting point for this research emphasised the social connections of support personnel with students that might influence student engagement and success. The key researchers and theorists who highlight the importance of social connections, and were considered in relation to the framing of this study, included Vygotsky (1978), Engestrom (2001), Freire (1970), Bourdieu (1993) and Tinto (2011). Drawing upon their theorising, the study focused on students from a regional University to determine the impact the support personnel had on their success with academic and AEW skills. The ideas of Bourdieu (social capital) (1986), Tinto (2012), Freire (1980) and Engestrom's AT (1987) were relevant as they highlighted the importance of socio-cultural aspects in education. Other theories with explanatory power and connectedness (Kuh, 2012; Lizzio, 2009; Tinto, 2012) include *belonging* and *belongingness*, *identity*, and *sense of place/place-making*. These ideas were explored in the context of Activity Theory and social connection to student studies with AEW skills, and relevant ideas were drawn upon for the thematic analysis presented within the study.

Another theme of relevance within this study was the importance of acceptance and social integration into a new learning culture. For first-year students, this can be the key to achieving a sense of belonging, as indicated in the work of Lizzio

(2006), Tinto (2010) and Wacquant (2014). Such a sense of connectedness to community could be recognised through empowered AEW skills provided by the support personnel. Therefore, the Freirean view of education (Shor, 1992) and student engagement played a key role in this study, as this model is about learning to take control. A main goal is to empower these first-year University students with skills in AEW that will be taken with them into their future studies. Freire (1970) and Engestrom (1987) have emphasised the need for students to be involved in the planning and action of their studies – this provides personal student empowerment for learning connected to the academic community at University.

An example from Engestrom's AT, and from Wacquant (2014), of the application of an empowering effect in education involved seeing the interdependent nature of change not just as individual student improvement but as inclusive of community and environmental change. This is closely linked to the aims of this study, in that this research investigated self-empowerment in learning for the individual student as well as for the institution as an entire learning entity, especially relating to AEW skills. The need is to target all levels, not just the individual but the group and overall community (Engestrom, 1987) as per an AT model. These examples demonstrated to the researcher that empowerment can be seen as a broad process involving prevention, as well as other goals of University connectedness, self-development, improved study habits and success in the first year and beyond. This is paramount to the AT model and all these are crucial to student engagement and success with AEW in the FYE.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is organised in five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research project, aim of the study, the research questions, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 introduces the literature review and the sources that prompted and motivated the project. It also outlines the educational philosophies and pedagogical approach that guided this project's implementation. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology that was used to design and implement the study, as well as specific discussion about the implementation of an Activity Theory approach. This section includes commentary on how the methodological

considerations were guided by the literature, the main thesis questions, the research population sampling and data analysis strategies. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the student survey and the student case studies and an analysis of their data. Chapter 5 provides the concluding chapter, which presents a summary of the study's key findings, highlights limitations and identifies a number of implications for practice and future research arising from the study. The thesis concludes with several final comments.

1.6 Conclusion

This introductory chapter described the overall aim of the study, stated the key and supporting research questions, established the significance of the research, and outlined the organisation of the thesis. The following chapter provides a review of relevant literature.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter – related to the main research question of this study, *By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?* – is to present a review of the relevant literature relating to four key aspects. Firstly, it examines the FYE and student engagement at University, which is critically reviewed in terms of its relationship to student engagement and attrition to establish the context in which the study is located. Key researchers in this field are presented to further understand the trends and tensions related to student attrition in the first year at University. Secondly, literature relating to the background and importance of academic skills, including AEW skills, before and during University study is reviewed. Thirdly, support personnel, including PASS tutors, Mentors, academic skills and class tutors, and others who assist students with their academic and AEW skills are discussed. Finally, related notions of Activity Theory (AT) and its relationship to University students and the University support personnel who give guidance to the students in their FYE are reviewed.

AT is presented as the theoretical framework drawn upon to underpin the inquiry of this thesis. The development of AT (Engestrom, 1987) is discussed to build a clear picture of the theoretical constructs employed to characterise and interpret the complex activity of student learning in the FYE at University within an academic context. An examination of the contradictions and tensions is also presented to determine the extent to which these, when handled correctly, can enhance learning in the FYE. To sum up, this chapter iterates the examination of the literature in relation to the study's key and supporting research questions, with a specific focus on the key aspects of student engagement, academic and AEW skills, support personnel deployed to assist students, and AT and its relationship to all these aspects.

2.2 Student Engagement and Attrition at University

Strategic initiatives must be implemented by all Universities (Fenn-Lavington, 2016) as a way of identifying and addressing practices at University that impede student engagement and success. High levels of attrition are morally indefensible and hugely wasteful. To illustrate this, a 2010 study of retention in the Australian higher education sector estimated that the total cost of first-year attrition was more than A\$1 billion per year. The cost for each public University was estimated as being between A\$20 million and A\$36 million (Kift, 2016). Kift adds:

And it gets worse. Official attrition statistics do not account for the significant percentage of students who leave without ever being counted in the first place. This includes those who don't take-up their offer, don't make it to O Week or don't make it to the official week four census date. (Kift, 2016, para.7)

To support this debate, findings were reviewed from many sources, including *The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from a Decade of National Studies* (Krause et al., 2005), ACER's (2009) *Engaging Students for Success*, *AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement)*, *NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement)* (Kuh, 2017), and *First Year in Higher Education Survey* (FYHE, 2015). These and other studies have been referred to in various papers from the *First Year Curriculum Design Symposium* held at QUT in February 2009, as well as at earlier and more recent First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) conferences.

Furthermore, recent data (Universities Australia, 2016) shows that about one in five commencing bachelor degree students in Australia left their original course in 2014, and about 15 per cent dropped out completely. These data also indicate that the number of students not completing their chosen course climbed to more than one million for the first time (Jackson, 2016). Reasons for non-retention reflect not only academic failure or drop-out, but also factors such as cross-institutional mobility, course transfer and temporary deferral. Although the data are both convincing and concerning, caution should be used in applying national data to a specific student body, as the demographics, experiences, expectations and needs of the student body vary *between* institutions and, indeed, *within* institutions.

The number of students leaving their first-year courses is increasing, whether or not they find another place for themselves in the higher education system. This is a major concern for all Universities, and particularly for the regional University in this study. In terms of national retention data in Australia, the University of Melbourne had the lowest attrition rate at 7.5 per cent. Its adjusted rate (Universities Australia, 2016), after taking out students who had left their course but enrolled in another, was only 3.74 per cent. The research on first year indicates that it is inappropriate for Universities to blame perceived student inadequacies for retention concerns. Rather, there needs to be a more nuanced and complex understanding of the reasons. For example, it might be that some Universities have enrolled students but not provided appropriate University transition support and assistance. According to Kift (2016), Universities need to consciously make first-year student learning, success and retention their core business. This approach was a key aspect of this research investigation.

At the University with the worst reported attrition rate, the University of Tasmania, 42.26 per cent of students left their course during the first year, with most of those – 38.13 per cent of all first-year students – dropping out of University altogether (Universities Australia, 2016). Another major concern, and highly relevant to the rationale supporting this research project regarding graduate students, was suggested by Andrew Norton of the Grattan Institute (2016, para. 2), who summed up the problem very well: '*Mapping Australian Higher Education 2016*, shows that in 2015, only half of bachelor degree science graduates seeking full-time work had found it four months after completing their degrees'.

Elsewhere, Nelson, Clarke, Kift and Creagh (2011) had earlier noted that 'the study of the FYE is now well established in Australasia as a focus for research and evidence-based practice. Further, the FYE movement is on the cusp and ready for more sophisticated research such as inter-professional teams implementing institution-wide projects' (p. vi). From their review of 399 pieces of research spanning more than 40 years, they indicate that, 'the development and implementation of sustainable FYE policy, practice and associated infrastructure is long-term work' (p. 44).

As mentioned, there are many factors that compound the lack of student engagement at University and especially within the FYE. Lizzio (2006) states that the return of their first assignment may be needed to prompt them to seek assistance, and his 5 Senses model, as shown in Figure 2.1, reinforces this. Lizzio clearly illustrates the need for students to connect with the many facets of University culture and particularly the personnel who offer valuable assistance.

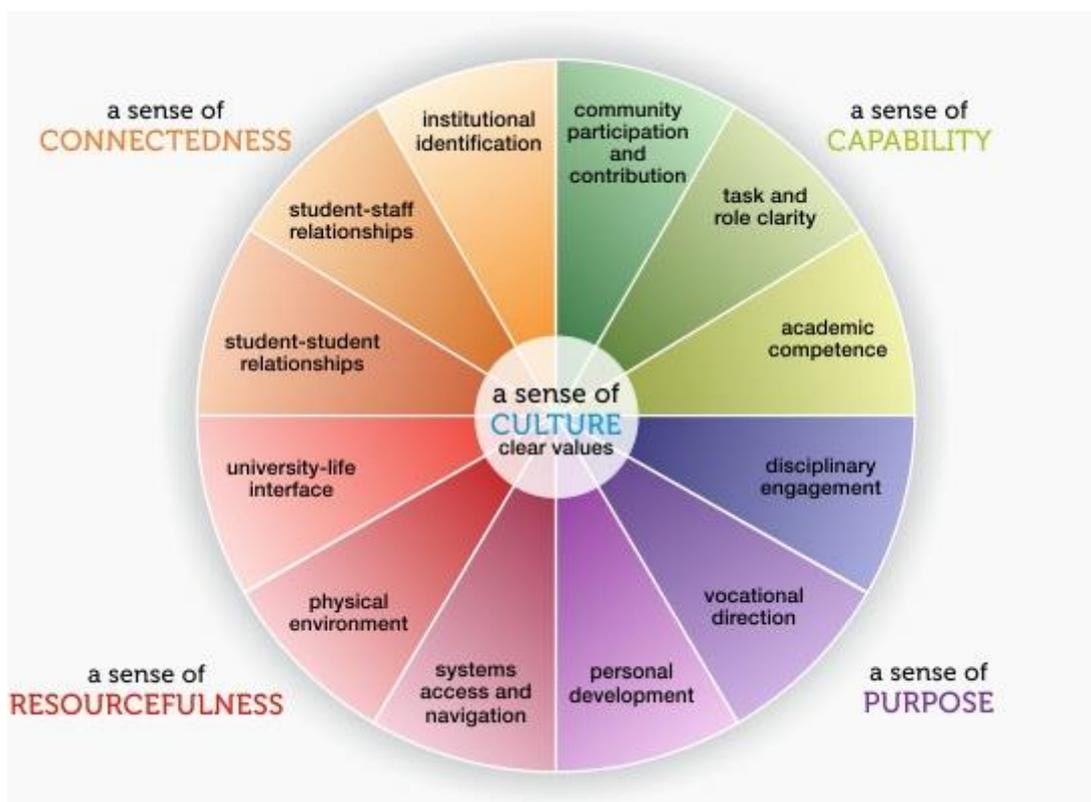


Figure 2.1 The 5 Senses approach to Student Engagement and Success at University (Lizzio, 2006)

The model above illustrates the 5 Senses approach (Lizzio, 2006) to student engagement and success at University. It supports some of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study by emphasising key aspects of culture, connectedness, capability, purpose and resourcefulness. The sense of connectedness is of particular relevance to this study as it aligns with the aspects of student engagement and success and the support personnel who were most helpful to the students in their FYE.

2.3 The Importance of Academic Skills, including AEW

Therefore, the importance of acquiring academic skills, and AEW skills in particular, is an important first-year priority that is likely to enhance student engagement. Indeed, course convenors and First-Year Advisors recognise that failure in summative assessment outcomes is sometimes the point of realisation for many students that their transition to higher education has not been successful (Lizzio, 2006). For too many students this is too late, as academic, economic and emotional factors often force a withdrawal from studies.

To illustrate further, critical thinking and writing at University is very different to the requirements of secondary study or even that of study in TAFE (Mayfield, 2007; Wignell, 2010). As stated in *Academic Skills Development* (SCU, 2014), critical thinking at University calls for careful analysis of the material being used. Cottrell (2013) also states that the level of thinking required in critical analysis is a lot higher than most students are used to. For example, in our everyday lives we think of the word 'critical' as meaning 'negative'; however, at University it has another meaning (Chanock, 2004). Without effective support personnel in the FYE, students may feel overwhelmed by these recent changes and this could be a contributing factor to University attrition rates.

Many Universities are introducing new courses as well as embedding critical thinking and writing skills into the units, as well as having human and technical resources available to help students, especially in the FYE. This specialisation is often presented as a high-level academic skills course or materials designed to increase the level of academic preparedness prior to commencement of studies at University. The course equips students for full participation and engagement with studies by building awareness and understanding of the core values and expectations of academic culture (Coursera, 2017).

The researcher of this thesis has coined the term 'Columbus Principle' (Fenn-Lavington, 2016) to highlight the importance of students gaining a voice in their studies, including AEW and public speaking. This principle is derived from the example of Christopher Columbus, who was alleged to have said that the world was round. Many of his contemporaries discounted his theory as nonsense, but Columbus held on to his theory and proved that those who disagreed with him

were wrong. At University, being critical means taking a critical approach to learning and this also includes critical writing skills. A critical approach involves clarifying what it is being investigated and making judgements about its value or worth or truth. It means, as with the Columbus Principle, not accepting ideas at face value, or believing that there is only one way of thinking about something (SCU, 2014). It also means recognising that when thinking critically, and analysing and judging things from a variety of perspectives (Mayfield, 2007), there is seldom one 'right' answer or viewpoint. While there is seldom one 'right' answer or viewpoint, one's argument and viewpoint must nonetheless be credible and based on appropriate literature and research of the discipline/subject area (ASD, 2009; Cottrell, 2008). This is clearly supported by the literature and is another example of why it is important that first-year University students learn these key academic skills in the FYE.

Summers and Smith (2009) also clarify this type of thinking by saying that, in order to be critical – that is, to make judgements – criteria are needed to 'measure' or judge the idea/approach/statement/document/issue that is under examination. Sometimes these criteria are given by the lecturer as part of the assignment task (e.g. when directed to use a particular model), sometimes the criteria are more obvious than others (e.g. when asked to evaluate a manager in relation to models of leadership). Grellier and Goerke (2006) add that often the literature must be read closely and analysed to discover valid ways of judging the idea, model, theory, statement, practice or behaviour specified in an assignment task. Many AEW skills include the abovementioned aspects and this study investigated the importance of student acquisition of these skills. If these concepts are not fully revised by students at University, they are most likely to fail in their early attempts with writing and speaking assignments. Therefore, the impact that the support personnel, including PASS and Mentors discussed in the following section, had on student retention and success was investigated.

AEW is defined as 'a genre of writing that requires the student to investigate a topic; collect, generate and evaluate evidence; and establish a position on the topic in a concise manner' (OWL, 2017, para. 1). Indeed, students' learning at University is assessed primarily through written work and essays, including AEW, are one of the most common writing tasks (USQ, 2017). Effective essay writing

is a key for success at University and especially in the first year of study (Deakin University, 2016). Literature on the FYE suggests that not all students will complete their transition to tertiary education in the first six months of their program of study in the same way (Carter, 2015). Some students may engage in transition processes early in the academic year by identifying their academic literacy needs during the first few weeks at University, while others may not recognise and address their needs until critical stages of their program (Tinto, 2012). Students battling disadvantage are also more likely to have thought about leaving. The particular challenges faced by these students underscore the importance of support programs run by Universities to help students with their degrees, to not just get them in, but keep them in (Jackson, 2016).

Additionally, the Australian first-year student population is increasingly diverse, consisting of proportions of school-leavers and older students, diverse demographic representations, and varied preparedness of students for tertiary studies (Zimitat & Horstmanshof, 2007; Kift & Nelson, 2005). Challenges associated with high levels of first-year student attrition are evident.

For all their diversity, students come to higher education to learn, and it is within the first-year curriculum that students must be inspired and supported, and realise their sense of belonging (Kift, 2009). This comment also supports this research project, as it highlights the point that University students need a sense of belonging and must be supported early on in their studies. Kift goes on to state that this is important, 'not only for early engagement and retention, but also as foundational for later year learning success and a lifetime of professional practice' (Kift, 2009). The FYE work and research that has occurred to date has mainly been around the curriculum, or in support of it, but has not focused on the syllabus edges to concentrate on what intentional first-year syllabus design – which is at the centre of the student FYE – might involve (Stars Conference, Perth, First Year in Higher Education, 2016). This requires a shift from 'primarily co-curricular "first generation" FYE approaches, to second generation FYE strategies' (Gale, 2009, p.13; Wilson, 2009) that focus on enhancing the student learning experience through pedagogy, syllabus design, and learning and teaching practice in the physical and virtual classroom (FYHE, 2016).

Furthermore, in support of the importance of the FYE, a study amongst a first-year cohort of Australian-born Griffith University (GU) students found that there was a significant correlation between perceptions of inclusion and intention to continue University studies (GU, 2012; 2017). Students were also found to manage priorities in their lives through a cost/benefit analysis of particular activities. The more studies were perceived to be relevant to personal priorities and goals, the higher the satisfaction with University and the more likely students were to persist (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007); therefore, retention rates were increased. An important fact to understand is that there is much literature on student engagement and academic skills. In general, however, there is a big gap in the literature regarding the importance of AEW skills and student engagement and success at University. This research project aimed to narrow the gap in the literature and present recent findings in order to ascertain to what extent AEW skills assist students in their engagement and success at University.

In response to these concerns, Tinto posited three principles of student retention (Tinto, 1993). Firstly, institutional commitment to students was seen to be paramount: effective retention programs are committed to the students they serve. They put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals. This was pertinent for this study, which investigated socio-academic aspects of the FYE. Secondly, the educational commitment was a high priority, and, again, this was highly relevant to this thesis, as it sought to investigate the importance of students learning and implementing academic skills in the FYE. Effective retention programs are, first and foremost, committed to the education of all, not just some, of their students. Finally, social and intellectual community aspects were also given high priority: Effective retention programs are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members. This research study used the key aspects of Tinto's findings as a guiding vehicle to help investigate the student and support personnel relationships at the regional University study with the aim of combatting poor retention rates.

In addition, this study was also underpinned by the following five important conditions reported to promote persistence during the University experience (Tinto, 2003, p.2).

1. Expectations – students are more likely to persist in a setting that expects them to succeed.
2. Support – students are more likely to persist in settings that provide academic, social and personal support.
3. Feedback – the provision of frequent and early feedback about their academic performance.
4. Involvement – the frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence. This is particularly so in the first year, when attachments within the context of the University environment are tenuous and weak.
5. Learning – institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students are successful in retaining their students. Students who are seen to be actively involved in learning are more likely learn and, thus, more likely to stay.

Again, these elements are very important to this study as they highlight key areas of social interactions between students and other key University personnel that are essential for positive student retention. These ideas will be thoroughly investigated via this research project.

More recently, in order to address the specific concerns of student inclusion, Tinto (2012) advocated group-based practices that foster learning, retention and participation, such as cooperative/collaborative learning, problem-based learning, learning communities, supplemental instruction, and service learning. These were examined to compare academic participation and retention of the student populations. The key area of this research used this information to help find what key social and academic aspects were working well at this University.

To sum up, there is a real need to have students at University grounded in academic skills, and especially AEW skills. The 'how' of student learning is a key element for University students (ACER, 2009) and good habits must be learned (Wignell, 2007). Informed research on this area of writing and retention has seen in recent years the development of programs and courses that introduce students to these skills early (Kuh, 2011). For many students, however, the role of language, and in particular writing, in constructing knowledge in a disciplinary context in higher education is new and relatively unexamined. As already

mentioned, for lecturers this often has the consequence that problems with students' academic writing are explained in terms of a deficit model, especially in the FYE at University (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 2002; Kuh, 2011; Tinto, 2012). Students are seen as having developed the necessary writing skills for University or if not, as needing intervention measures. For students, this new area of academic writing, and especially AEW, is often seen as having little or no significance beyond University studies. This section presented a detailed understanding of the role that AEW plays in disciplinary learning and current debates on retention related to student writing and study in general. Therefore, the literature suggests that it is essential that first-year University students acquire the AEW skills to enable them to succeed with their assessment tasks that require this.

2.4 The Importance of Support Personnel in the FYE

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of key support personnel (social) who were employed to help first-year students with AEW skills. The following section outlines several specific social elements that research clearly identifies as practices that affect student success at University.

The literature states that first-year students arrive with very different academic and social skills, and from diverse backgrounds and cultures (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2012). Many are also making big life adjustments: for example, living away from home for the first time. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the one thing that all students have in common is that they come to University to learn. The first-year curriculum is the obvious centrepiece of that learning. The University governs it, all students must access it, and it is where students are entitled to expect relevance, support and engagement, both academically and socially.

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to add to the already developing research by incorporating an investigation into the aspects of the research question and the relevant literature. Therefore, the major purpose of this section of the study was to inform, through relevant and credible sources, the importance of the relationship of the first-year student to the key personnel available to help with academic skills and AEW. To investigate the research question, the project includes the design and implementation of a FYE system which aims to enable

student success and adds to the already important body of knowledge associated with social and academic capital and student performance at this University.

As stated by Kift (2016), whole-of-institution approaches should be 'comprehensive, integrated and co-ordinated'. Their organising device, the missing link in the understandings of the FYE until recently, is the curriculum. What works and what is sustainable in resource-poor Universities is, in short, a better curriculum delivered by good teachers, through what's known as a *transition pedagogy* (Kift, 2014). Adding urgency to the challenge is the sharp rise in the number of students at Australian Universities in recent years. Traditionally under-represented groups are accessing higher education in greater numbers. Many students who started University in 2014 were the first in their family to do so (Universities Australia, 2015). This concept added support to the investigative nature of this study, which primarily centred on first-year University students and support personnel.

Theorising social support has been a lively area of debate within education, starting with several influential papers in the 1970s that suggested that social support was beneficial to health (Vygotsky, 1978; Bourdieu, 1993; McInnis, 2003), and there is now substantial literature on the positive effects of social support on student education, and why it is imperative that Universities implement these practices (Wacquant, 2012; Kuh, 2016; Kift, 2016). A key aim of this study was to investigate to what extent these socio-academic principles were working at this University; although many institutions are aware of these issues, not all of them are applying the remedy. To do this, Universities must adopt whole-of-institution approaches, where academic and non-academic staff work together quite intentionally to level the academic playing field and support student success. This gives all students an equal opportunity to be successful, regardless of their backgrounds.

Studies that have investigated social support in relation to the transition to University have usually taken a psychological perspective, and have shown that social support is vital for successful adjustment to University life (Kuh, 2003). Support from various sources, such as peers, tutors and parents, plays distinct roles (Krause, 2002). However, there is little sociological analysis of the structural and material aspects of these roles and relationships, and this study investigated

this aspect in relation to student engagement and success and the key personnel who assisted these students. Lizzio's 5 Senses model (2006) also supports this, with a sense of connectedness as a predictor of student success. This study explores the experiences of first-year students to try to capture their social development and to what extent it has an impact on their University achievement. The concept of social support is used to investigate the processes through which social integration (or the lack of it) influenced students' decisions to stay and engage with their studies at this regional University.

The primary areas under investigation were the effects which social and academic choices and practices had on a students' success at University (Rowntree, 1993; Krause, 2010; Lizzio, 2009; Tinto, 2014; Kift, 2016). Most research on the first-year student experience has focused on social support within the academic environment (Kantanis, 2000); the specific link to AEW writing was investigated in this study. Consequently, the data were explored and analysed through the theoretical lens of Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1987), discussed in more detail later in this chapter, relating to academic and social support. Particular attention was given to the types and sources of support that students receive, including the roles and relationships with various support personnel – again explored through Activity Theory – and the influence these have on a student's success in the FYE.

Much of the literature that has investigated aspects of students' lives and their course has found that the students' social experience plays a significant role in their decisions about staying at University or leaving (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 2002; Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2016; Kift, 2016). This research project will also look at the specific social practices that foster academic engagement and success with AEW in the FYE. For example, as mentioned, leaving in the early part of the course frequently resulted from a failure in social integration, such as difficulties in making friends or homesickness (Tinto, 2012). Kuh (2016) demonstrated that students' new social networks at University often provided support to overcome such difficulties. Therefore, the social aspects linked to the University's support personnel, and especially how these relationships help a student succeed and AEW, were emphasised within this study. From this literature review, key social areas are suggested as needing to be investigated, such as student-to-

tutor/lecturer help, student-to-student help PASS programs, Mentor programs, and academic skills developed in the FYE.

The social and academic capital aspect of student engagement with AEW supports the view of a constructive approach to learning. Constructivism focuses on the active engagement of the learner in *constructing* their own learning (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 2002) and this supported the research of this study as it involved students interacting on a social level with various personnel at this University. It does not take away the independence of the student but, rather, complements it, as the student constructed their own way through acquiring academic and AEW knowledge. Further to Chapter 1, Krause (2007) states that learners in a constructivist environment are responsible for their own learning, and this includes discovering, constructing, practising and validating this acquired knowledge. This is also supported by many Universities that are seeking to listen to the 'student voice' (Gibbons, 2007; Krause, 2007), as in the case of Griffith University's recent survey on student experiences and expectations of technology (SEET) capabilities (Griffith University, 2014). Students are encouraged to engage collaboratively through conversation, solving problems, connecting to the new knowledge with prior experiences, and self-assessment and reflection. All this can be facilitated by key University support personnel, including tutors/lecturers, PASS programs, Mentor programs, other University students, and various academic skills programs.

2.4.1 Class Tutors and Academic Support Personnel

A key aspect of academic and social capital of this study was that of class tutors and academic support personnel, and this section outlines key aspects from the literature to substantiate this area. A main aim is to investigate to what extent the various support personnel play a role in helping students engage and succeed with their learning. Most Australian Universities now have a department or division that specialises in providing academic assistance to students. These departments are of particular importance in the FYE. The support programs usually involve two principal areas: personnel who are on hand to help with such skills as time management and organisation, research, writing, analysing, synthesising and the like. The academic skills personnel are also available to

present academic skills via workshops, consultations, emails, telephone calls etc. The other area includes the implementation of the academic resources that support the students. These may be online resources or hard copy resources. Many researchers (Kuh, 2014; Krause, 2008; Tinto, 2012) have highlighted the need for such academic skills programs to be implemented at Universities. Others (Green & Robyn, 2005) argue that these academic skills should be located within the various disciplines and this is an approach many Universities are adopting (SCU, 2011; Griffith University, 2010).

The current consensus is that these generic skills, attributes and values are most effectively developed within disciplinary and/or academic skills departmental contexts. This shift from a deficit model to a more complex framework for understanding the relationship between knowledge and academic skills development, and the people who assist students, effectively requires the development of a new curriculum specialisation. Hence, it has significant implications for teaching advisers, who have traditionally provided academic skills programs from centralised Learning Centres (UNE, 2015).

As mentioned above, the skills developed in these specialisation materials are presented and explained by class tutors and academic support personnel who help students get a headstart in their University studies, and equip them with the tools needed to excel in the competitive University environment. The students work on developing skills essential to academic success – communication, information technology and digital literacy, critical thinking, problem solving and creativity – and put these into action through practical tasks (Coursera, 2017). In such projects, key academic personnel are on hand to help students to apply the academic knowledge and skills they have learnt via the materials, including early research methods and AEW skills that address complex, real-world problems related to the students' field of interest and/or current study. These are some, if not quite all, of the important academic skills that these key tutors and support staff present to students in the FYE. These include, but are not limited to, how to apply research strategies to search, collect, select, process, and cite information; use the research process to develop and critically analyse ideas; apply critical thinking skills to evaluate and analyse ideas and evidence; use problem-solving skills to generate ideas, identify gaps in knowledge, and define issues; develop

creative and innovative solutions to real-world problems; use appropriate academic genres for written texts, and, especially, use written and oral skills to communicate ideas effectively for academic contexts (i.e. AEW).

The debate continues as to the most effective way of implementing these skills and perhaps a 'mix' of methods is the best way forward – that is, to make the academic materials available via first-year subjects (which in some Universities are called units or courses), a University website, and have key academic tutors available to explain the finer details of academic skills. What is known is that these methods are equipping the students with the necessary academic skills to facilitate AEW in the first year of study.

Another very significant area of this study explored the impact that 'Other Students' had on student academic success at University. Other Students are defined as students who are still at University and may be called upon by first-year students to assist with academic orientation, materials, research, time management and the like. PASS and Mentor programs are the more formalised representation of Other Students, although this study also investigated the more informal approach of first-year students being helped by other University students.

2.4.2 Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) Personnel

Another very important area of support examined in this literature review is that of Peer-Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). This is a type of supplemental instruction (SI) that provides students with out-of-class study review sessions with a group of peers. A student who has successfully completed the subject and acts as a Mentor, or Peer Leader, facilitates the voluntary sessions. The PASS program is being implemented in many Australian Universities since its beginnings at the University of Wollongong in 2002 (UoW, 2015). PASS is a peer facilitated, cooperative student support scheme for all students operating in most core units of study.

PASS attendance is voluntary but highly recommended. It is *not* a remedial program for 'struggling' students but, rather, a program for all students who want to improve their academic performance (University of Sydney, 2016). PASS involves weekly timetabled sessions wherein PASS facilitators model different

study techniques, assist with study guides and provide timely feedback. As in many Universities, including the one in this study, the focus of PASS is on increasing student understanding and deeper learning (UoW, 2016; SCU, 2016; GU, 2016). The facilitators are students who have taken the subject before and are trained to foster student learning and active engagement with their course content. The facilitator is not there to re-teach lecture material but, rather, to facilitate discussion and active learning (UoW, 2016), another important fact that is supported by the literature (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2012) as well as the AT model (Engestrom, 1987).

According to The University of Sydney (2016), the recipient of the 2016 Australasian Peer Educator Team Award, 'PASS sessions are facilitated by experienced students (PASS leaders) and offer a relaxed peer environment, where students can consolidate their understanding of the course content and develop their study skills' (University of Sydney, 2016). Griffith University, on its Gold Coast campus, also states that, 'PASS is usually attached to courses that can be challenging for students. Many of these courses are core first-year courses that students encounter in the first and second semester of their transition to University life' (para.1). These facts are very important to this research study as they directly relate to the importance of the socio-academic aspect that key personnel have on student engagement and success at University as all members work together to achieve the goal and outcome (Engestrom, 1987).

Furthermore, in PASS programs, students can expect to gain important assistance from personnel who are committed to assisting them with their studies; some of the forms of this assistance include:

- Be a valued member of your PASS group.
- Learn from a student who has been through the course before.
- Work with a group of fellow students to improve understanding of course material.
- Have the chance to ask questions that may seem silly, in a relaxed environment.

- Have access to more study materials, such as past exams or mock exam questions.
- Make friends and have fun! (University of Sydney, 2016).

Furthermore, the PASS leader has many academic tips and qualities that relate specifically to the unit of work being presented; for example, the leader:

- is an experienced student
- relays tips on their effective study skills for the particular discipline
- assists students in working out what to learn as well as how to learn it
- plans and facilitates activities that aim to encourage collaborative learning
- models relevant critical thinking and problem-solving techniques, and
- will empower the student to become an independent learner.

It should also be noted, however, that previous research has been unable to adequately control for selection bias – that is, better or more confident students may be more likely to attend PASS. Consequently, attendance may identify diligent students but not enhance performance. On the other hand, weaker students may attend PASS more, in which case the benefits of the PASS program will be underestimated. In addition, even if the PASS program improves student performance, it may be the case that resources could be allocated even more productively, for example by reducing tutorial class sizes (Lewis, O'Brien, Rogan & Shorten, 2005). Regardless of this, a ten-year study by the University of Wollongong shows a strong correlation between increased academic results and PASS attendance (UoW, 2017).

Student Instructional (SI) programs, from which PASS is derived, are frequently credited for improving pass rates as well as retention rates (Blanc et al., 1983; Bidgood, 1994; Loviscek & Cloutier, 1997; McCarthy et al., 1997) and this is an important aspect of this investigation of student engagement and success. Southern Cross University (2016), University of Western Sydney (2012), and Griffith University (2014) have all implemented PASS programs for first-year students and the results are looking favourable (UoW, 2017).

What exactly happens in PASS is quite straightforward. The PASS Leader provides study activities and facilitates the sharing of ideas and study techniques

among a group of students studying a particular unit; this is available for any student enrolled in a unit that offers PASS. All things being equal, a study program that involves PASS implementation is most likely to improve student engagement and success, especially with AEW (UoW, 2017). This is closely related to this thesis as it investigated student perceptions about the benefits of support personnel and who, according to the students, were most helpful in assisting with acquiring and applying academic and AEW skills. This study investigated student engagement at University and the relationship various personnel, including PASS tutors, had on student engagement and success.

2.4.3 Mentor and Other Student Support Personnel

The literature exploring students' experiences once they arrive at University frequently employs the concepts of social integration to describe the extent to which students gain meaningful membership of the academic and social worlds of the University (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2014). The social aspect of connecting with peers also plays a significant role in helping students with the transition to University life and this study delves into the key area of Mentor personnel as vital support agents in the students' first-year engagement and success at University. Furthermore, it is thought that successful integration in this sphere reduces the likelihood of student withdrawal (Tinto, 2014; Kift, 2016). A key aspect of this research project, and directly pertaining to the literature, is the students' responses regarding academic practices related to mentoring. However, the literature suggests these concepts are rarely discussed in detail, and analysis of how social practices take place through mentoring are lacking. Therefore, a goal of this thesis was to close this gap in the literature by investigating important academic practices that were linked to mentoring, to determine the extent to which these have on keeping students engaged and successful with their study regime.

A general mentoring program is aimed at connecting first-year students to a person who can come alongside (Vygotsky, 1978) and help with the FYE (Naylor, Baik, & Arkoudis, 2017). Academic practices and connecting to the right support personnel – for example, Mentors – are too important to be left to chance (Ganser, 1996; Tinto, 2012, Kuh, 2014). The expertise of Mentors varies widely,

which may present inequities for developing first-year student practices. At one University, the 'UniMentor' program (SCU, 2014) connects new students with a second- or third-year Mentor studying the same course. UniMentors are in touch with the academic and social challenges of University life, as they have been through many of the obstacles University students face in the FYE. Regular meetings with a UniMentor can help new students make friends and gain positive, empowering advice and support from someone who has 'been there' and done that' (SCU, 2014). UniMentor can advise on a wide range of student issues, from the best way to navigate an online study environment to where to buy the best organic coffee! Although not an academic tutor, a UniMentor can share their study tips, and help new students settle in to an academic routine with knowledge and confidence.

New students and their Mentors meet face-to-face, communicate online via email, or catch up on Facebook and other social media sites. SCU has a keen sense of community, and students who volunteer as UniMentor have a keen desire to help other students settle in and belong (Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Kift, 2016). The UniMentor program is available to all new undergraduate students studying on campus or via distance education in any award course. This is convincing evidence in support of this research investigation into the importance and success of socio-academic practices (Engestrom, 1987) and, in particular, mentoring programs.

Whether students are looking for a study partner, a stepping-stone into University, or leverage into a chosen career, many Universities are offering mentoring opportunities at all levels of the student community (SCU, 2015; The University of Sydney, 2016). It is a great way to help students in the FYE to 'hit the ground running' with peer support. If a student has just arrived at University, a mentoring program may encourage them to sign up to be matched with a peer mentor and become immediately connected (Kuh, 2014; The University of Sydney, 2016). Relating to some key ideas posited by Lizzio (2006) and Kuh (2012), joining a mentoring program is a great way for students to meet other students and tap into many beneficial on-campus facilities and activities that have been proven to enhance attendance and success (University of Sydney, 2016). Most faculties offer peer-based mentoring for first-year students as part of the orientation

process, and the students are matched with a senior-year student who will show them around campus and give them information needed to start the FYE confidently.

Another key benefit of a formalised mentoring program, and closely related to this research study, is that faculties often have close industry ties to leaders in their field, and offer industry networking events and mentoring programs for University students (University of Sydney, 2016). Many specific mentoring programs match undergraduates with senior managers in the private and public sector. Right from the start, if this program is available, it is a very effective way for students to make contacts and learn from a prospective employer, thus adding to the students' sense of connectedness and sense of belonging. Formalised mentoring programs (University of Sydney, 2016) are generally structured with agreed objectives and outcomes from the beginning, to help ensure the students get the most out of the relationship. A key investigative aspect of this research was to ascertain to what extent this University utilises mentoring programs and if these programs were beneficial to student engagement in academic and AEW skills.

As mentioned earlier, this study also explored the lived experiences of these first-year University students and their connection with other students who were called upon to assist them with academic study regimes in their FYE at University. Therefore, the literature clearly states that mentors are seen as important personnel when it comes to helping students with study and AEW skills; this research project investigated this aspect of social and academic capital at this University

2.4.4 Learning Theories and Pedagogical Approaches

The change in teaching style in recent years has placed more focus on learner and learner-centred instruction even at the tertiary level in education. This is confirmed by the principles of social constructivism (McLeod, 2007; Neuman, 2011). The review of this literature sought to articulate how learning at University is a social phenomenon (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 2000; Wacquant, 2014) and can be enhanced through the skills of AEW. The gap in the literature is to investigate student perceptions of how important AEW is, and how important the support personnel (Bourdieu, 1996) were in helping the students acquire and

implement AEW skills. In other words, guided by the literature, this study attempted to investigate to what extent the various support personnel at University influenced a student's success with academic writing in the FYE and beyond.

Another key area for students related to developing their own personal study regime is the way in which they construct this aspect of their learning. Constructivism presents learning as a social process and therefore in that sense constructivism informs learning at the tertiary level. This fact was very important to this study, as one of the central themes was the relationship between the learner and the educator. Furthermore, Nunan (1999, p. 304) defines constructivism as 'a philosophical approach that argues that knowledge is socially constructed rather than having its own independent existence, thus placing more emphasis on the critical thinking processes of learning rather than on memorising a set of formula. This critical aspect of learning is prevalent and expected at the tertiary level and it is often demonstrated via AEW.

This AEW method is distinct from traditional writing forms that simply regurgitate information, requiring a more active, discerning and critical analysis of the knowledge being sought and then presented in the form of an essay. Such social constructivism, it is argued, is to most likely happen when the learning is within the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1997). This means that skills can be better developed when learners are within an optimal condition, such as ZPD. Further, according to Wacquant (2014) and linking to Bourdieu (1999), this aspect is particularly important as first-year University students face the volume and difficulty of this new culture of learning. This new culture, or new *country*, where the experience of AEW inspired by social constructivism places importance on the process of learning, critical thinking and social and communicative skills, has led to recent calls for more active student engagement in the FYE at University (Krause, 2005; Kuh, 2006 Tinto, 2011; Lizzio, 2007; Kift, 2010). The need for providing better support for first-year University students has seen an expansion of learning support mechanisms including PASS, Mentor programs, academic skills support centres, first-year units that incorporate foundational academic writing skills and first-year academic advisors.

Furthermore, this acquisition and application of AEW skills is better performed within the context of an academic community. A community is what Engestrom refers to as the socio-cultural hub of an organisation (Engestrom, 1987) that operates by objective social rules, division of labour, mediating tools and the interplay of subjects (University students) and objects (academic and AEW skills) in reaching an outcome. The organisation or community – and, in this case, the University – is a social space constituted and regulated by positions and these social positions command access to power available. Therefore, this study, once more guided by the literature, highlighted specific concepts heralded by Engestrom that related to University students and their acquisition of and success in using academic and AEW skills via social connections.

Relating to this thesis, the influence of social constructivism pertaining to the AT model on learning theory was important for several reasons. First, the underlying philosophy places emphasis on learner-constructed knowledge through social interaction – Engestrom highlights the importance of the interactions between the subjects and the objects in arriving at a suitable outcome. This social interaction at University facilitates and encourages the use of new academic and AEW skills to create meaning and builds understanding through the communicative processes, i.e. ‘the who’ and ‘the what’ of the students’ study regime. Vygotsky (1997) stated an important learning principle when he said that ‘what a child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow’ (p. 188). This idea is also echoed in the works of Freire (1970) in his thesis on empowering the individual. Similarly, adults can be influenced by the quality and nature of the learning environment, where more opportunities to hear and practise the language of University will affect the future development of higher-order thinking and writing skills. A ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1999) is essential for those who would like to play and win. Therefore, social and academic capital, related to learning theories and pedagogical approaches, are seen to be paramount when considering student engagement with academic and AEW skills at University, and were thoroughly explored throughout this study.

2.5 Activity Theory

As outlined earlier in this thesis, Engestrom's AT model was used in this study to conceptualise the dynamic interactions between students and support personnel at the University being studied. Vygotsky's main work was in developmental psychology, and he proposed a theory of the development of higher cognitive functions in children that saw reasoning as emerging through practical activity in a social environment. During the earlier period of his career, he argued that the development of reasoning was mediated by signs and symbols (Vygotsky, 1978) and, therefore, contingent on cultural practices and language as well as on universal cognitive processes. This is outlined in a simplified model of mediated action in Figure 2.2, below (Lantolf, 2006).

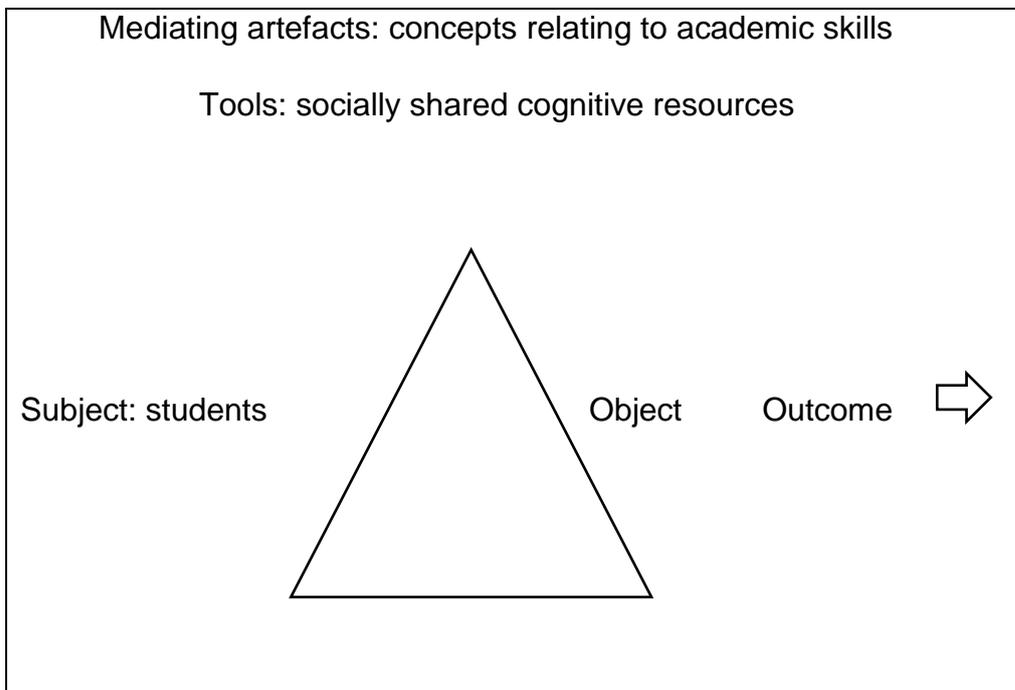


Figure 2.2 Vygotsky's Model of Mediated Action (1978)

This system, later developed further by Engestrom (1987), includes the object (or objective), subject, mediating artefacts (signs and tools), rules, community and division of labour. The motive for the activity in AT is created through the tensions and contradictions within the elements of the system. According to Nardi (2012), a leading theorist in AT, Activity Theory 'focuses on practice, which obviates the need to distinguish "applied" from "pure" science—understanding everyday

practice in the real world is the very objective of scientific practice. The object of Activity Theory is to understand the unity of consciousness and activity.’ Sometimes called Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, this study referred to Activity Theory (AT) as it was particularly useful for studying a group or community at this University that existed to produce expected outcomes individually and/or corporately. Figure 2.3, below, gives a summary of the key facets of the AT system and depicts the interplay of the key aspects of each part of this community.

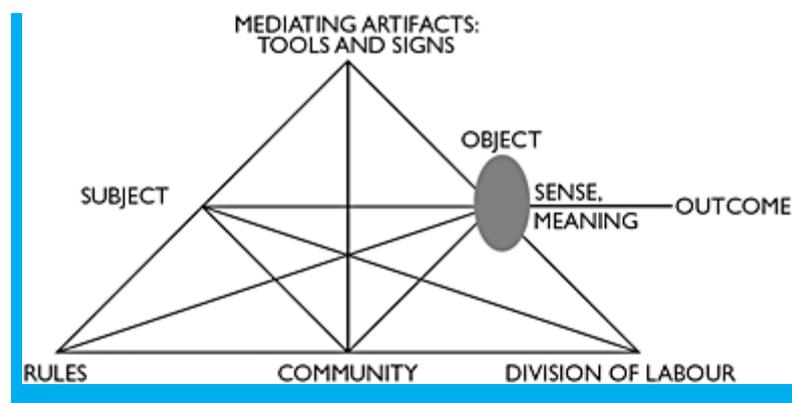


Figure 2.3 The Structure of a Human Activity System in Second-Generation Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1987)

Activity Theory is an umbrella term for a line of social sciences theories and research with its roots in the Soviet Psychological Activity Theory pioneered by Alexei Leontiev and Sergei Rubinstein (Lantolf, 2006). These scholars sought to understand human activities as complex, socially situated phenomena and to go beyond paradigms of reflexivity. Activity Theory is more of a descriptive meta-theory or framework than a predictive theory. It considers an entire work/activity system (including teams, organisations, etc.) beyond just one actor or user. It accounts for environment, history of the person, culture, role of the artefact, motivations, and complexity of real life activity (Lantoff, 2006). One of the strengths of AT is that it bridges the gap between the individual subject and the social reality, as it studies both through the mediating activity. The unit of analysis in AT is the concept of object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity, or *activity system*, that is used as the theoretical framework for this research project (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006, p.36).

This study incorporated three key aspects of AT: First generation AT introduces Vygotsky's concept of mediation – the idea that humans' interactions with their environment cannot be direct, but are always mediated using tools and signs. The notion of mediated action became formalised in the triangular model of the instrumental act, as shown in Figure 2.3. In mediated action, the *subject* (individual) transforms an *object* (the raw materials or problem space at which the activity is directed) into an *outcome* using various *tools* (cultural artefacts), which are created and/or transformed during an activity (Engestrom, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). In first generation AT, the unit of analysis centres on an individual activity or practice.

Second generation AT was developed following the work of Leontiev (1981) who recognised the limitations of the unit of analysis remaining focused on an individual or practice. Leontiev (1981) provided a distinction between 'individual action' and 'collective activity', making the activity the unit of analysis. Leontiev's view focused on individuals being understood as social creatures acting in social contexts. Engestrom's work (1987, 2001) is predominantly concerned with collective activities carried out by groups and organisations and implemented through the contributions (actions) of individual subjects.

Third generation AT theorists recognised that activities are not isolated units and are influenced by other activities and changes in their environment (Kuutti, 1996). They expanded the unit of analysis from one activity system to at least two interacting activity systems as the minimum unit of analysis (Engestrom, 2001). In principle, shared activity or practice is the focus of third generation activity and considers the social transformations taking place and the tensions within the social practice. The three generations of AT were relevant to this study of University students in the FYE in higher education, although, as mentioned, Engestrom's third generation AT model was highlighted, as it reinforced the important concepts of social–cultural interactions at this University.

2.6 Synthesis of the Literature Review

The synthesis of the Literature Review, as shown in Table 2.1, and a conceptualisation of the Student Lifecycle Approach relating to FYE, as shown in Table 2.2, informed the research design and methodology, outlined in the

following chapter. Specifically, the issues and findings from other FYE studies informed Phase One and Phase Two of the data collection through the design and conduct of the student survey and case study data collection.

Table 2.1 A Synthesis of the Literature Review

<i>The First-Year Experience at University</i>	<i>Text types, Academic Writing and Argumentative Essay Writing</i>	<i>Social and Academic Capital and Support Personnel</i>
Transition to University – McInnis, 2000; Lizzio, 2006, Krause, 2009, Kuh, 2012; Kift, 2016 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the learner • sense of connecting • community 	Text types in Australian schools – Swales, 2007; Hyon, 1996; NSW BOS, 2012; ACARA, 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • primary • secondary • links to tertiary 	Social and academic capital relating to lecturers – Tinto, 2011; Kuh, 2003; Krause, 2004 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • staff to student • connecting early • Engestrom, 1987 • Bourdieu, 1996 • Wacquant, 2014 • COURSERA, 2017
First in the family at University – Lizzio, 2007; Kuh, 2008; Nelson, 2009; Tinto, 2012	The text types of Discussion and Exposition – NSW BOS, 2017; Kuh, 2012; Krause, 2009 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • academic writing • essays • AEW 	Social and academic capital relating to the PASS program – UoW, 2017; SCU, 2016; Journal of Studies in International Education, 2009 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First-year units • Engestrom, 1987 • Bourdieu, 1996 • Wacquant, 2014
Lizzio’s 5 Senses Model – Lizzio, 2006; Wilson, 2007; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability • Connectedness • Resourcefulness • Purpose • Culture 	Academic writing at University – Cottrell, 2008; Summers & Smith, 2010; Grellier & Goerke, 2010 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structural • methodical • evidence – linked 	Social and academic capital relating to Mentor programs – Wilson, Lizzio & Ramsden, 1993; Marginson, 1997; Lizzio, 2007; Ramsden, 2003; Wilson, 2007; SCU, 2016; Bourdieu, 1996; Wacquant, 2014 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • first year and beyond
	Critical thinking skills related to academic writing – Tinto, 2011; Wignell, 2007 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • argument • referencing 	Social and academic capital and other University students – Vygotsky, 1997; Fry, 2005; Lizzio, 2009; Engestrom, 1987 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bourdieu, 1996 • Wacquant, 2014 • student to student
	The incorporation of evidence in academic writing – Wignell, 2007; Cottrell, 2008	Academic skills – Kuh, 2016; Kift, 2016; COURSERA, 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online help • academic skills staff • academic resources
	Argumentative essay writing – Chanock, 2004; Wignell, 2007; Grellier & Goerke, 2010	

Table 2.2 Student Lifecycle, AEW and Social Capital

←STUDENT LIFECYCLE APPROACH→

Student recruitment →	First-Year Experience →	Continuing students →	Graduate students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior knowledge of critical thinking and academic writing, including AEW • Understanding of present and future academic requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of critical thinking and academic writing, including AEW • Transition to University • The learner • Connection • Community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstration of critical thinking and academic writing, including AEW • The learner • Connection • Community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application of critical thinking and academic writing, including AEW in career context • Future prospects from applying these University networking graduate capabilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence of social capital on prior academic learning 	5 senses model (Lizzio) Social capital <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecturers/tutors • PASS personnel • Mentors • Academic skills personnel 	5 senses model (Lizzio) Social capital <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lecturers/tutors • PASS personnel • Mentors • Academic skills personnel 	Five senses assist in graduate capabilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School • Parents • Siblings • Tertiary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive student identity • Attendance • Work – life – study balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive student identity • Attendance • Work – life – study balance 	Alumni and graduate identity

2.7 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter, in presenting a review of relevant literature, has positioned itself within three broad fields of research; namely, the problem and challenges associated with student attrition, with the personnel/social aspects of learning, and drawing upon Activity Theory. Thus, this chapter has provided a conceptual review of the theoretical aspects underpinning the current study, to provide a critical overview of the literature to identify issues and gaps, and to show how this study draws upon AT to be able to investigate the lived experiences of the FY students by identifying the activity systems of those students.

In relation to student retention and attrition, it was suggested that a sense of uncertainty and apprehension is often present in University students in their FYE. It was also suggested that social factors can interact in complex ways to support students in this crucial first year in higher education. A sense of connectedness with key personnel is vital for students as they transition into University life and

hence for combatting attrition. Further, it was proposed that these interactions with various personnel are more effectively understood using a research approach capable of engaging with the inherent complexity. Activity Theory was advanced as a theoretical model to help understand the changing nature of learning in the FYE at University from the perspective of the learner's interactions with academic-mediated activities.

The personnel and social aspects of learning review of the literature on the various academic social interactions of students in the FYE included PASS, Mentoring programs, tutors and other students. It was established that these social interactions are vital for the engagement and success of first-year students. The notion of a student's personal practical theory of learning, and their deliberate connection to specific University personnel, was introduced as a representation of student cognition to describe the interplay of the acquisition of knowledge used to guide students' decisions and actions in the FYE.

The Activity Theory section introduced and described the principles of AT as a conceptual framework underpinning the study. The AT section also served to provide a link between AT as a conceptual framework and its application as an interpretive framework in Chapter 3 of this study. The lens of AT is particularly useful for the current study in its capacity as a theoretical framework to provide insights into how University students negotiate the challenges of grasping academic skills, including AEW. AT moves the focus from the academic tools of critical thinking, research and writing themselves to the way those tools are intentionally acquired by the students via the various University personnel. In doing so, AT affords insights into the dynamic nexus of people, purpose of study and academic skills, including academic and AEW skills, in the FYE of University students.

In the Chapter 3, the research design and methodology are discussed.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used in this study. Thus, this chapter discusses the research approach adopted, considers important insights into paradigms, and outlines the research methodology in terms of the Phase One survey and analysis of Faculty of Education students and Phase Two of the data collection via four student case studies and analysis. Ethics approval and implementation are also discussed.

3.2 Research Design

As outlined in Chapter 1, the aim of this study was to identify implications for informing the improvement of the FYE, by examining the effectiveness of the relatively new roles of the personnel who help students in building academic capital through AEW capabilities. To illuminate these implications and perceptions of effectiveness, the research explored the lived experiences of University students through an Activity Theory lens (Engestrom, 1987).

Therefore, the research approach was required to collect and analyse data to answer the key research question: By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?

Locating the study within the theoretical and conceptual framework of cultural Activity Theory (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 1993) provided a means to describe the dynamic interactions of the various personnel, including lecturers and students, in teaching and learning, as well to capture the social and academic factors influencing their decision making in the local and broader context.

There are many topics within the social sciences that are deeply imbued with personal meaning. The term 'epistemology' comes from the Greek word *epistēmē*, meaning knowledge (Krause, 2005). In simple terms, epistemology is

the philosophy of knowledge or how reality is known (Trochim, 2000). Epistemology is intimately related to ontology and methodology; while ontology involves the philosophy of reality, epistemology addresses how that reality can be known, while methodology identifies the particular practices used to attain knowledge of it (Krause, 2005).

Three important definitions related to knowledge, and pertaining to this project, are:

1. *Ontological* questions revolve around the form and nature of reality. Can facts be known? Thus, how do these University students acquire the knowledge they need to engage and succeed in their first year of University study (Creswell, 2005)?
2. *Epistemological* questions revolve around the relationship between what can be known and the person who knows. Thus, for example, how might first-year University students access knowledge required to succeed at University through negotiating effective relationships with support personnel who are able to assist them?
3. *Methodological* questions revolve around the ways/tools/instruments that can be used to know. An Activity Theory lens (Engestrom, 1987) can be applied to support the methodological questions. Thus, how might data be collected to investigate the activity systems of students to explore the relationships between themselves as students and the personnel who assist them with academic and AEW skills in their FYE?

The discussion of the relationship of the above definitions is intended to help emphasise that they were entwined in the investigation and that the research methodologies were informed by ontological and epistemological considerations directly related to the review of relevant literature. Hence, this project used a combination of interpretive and critical paradigms in its methodological approach.

3.3 Research Methodology

The research used a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2010; Neuman, 2011) conducted in two phases. In Phase One, survey data were collected from Education students at the University being studied. In Phase Two, data were

collected involving four first-year students to provide rich insights into their lived experiences in relation to the FYE, including AEW. The four students in the case studies included one student defined as being **first in family** to study at University; one student defined as **not being first in family** to study at University; one student defined as being **a school leaver**; and one student defined as being **a mature age, non-school leaver and Fail grade**.

Through investigating the activity systems of those students, a cross-case analysis of the four students was subsequently undertaken to identify tensions, contradictions and similarities, as well as implications for institutions, relevant staff and students.

Therefore, this study used a combination of exploratory and descriptive research methodologies to investigate student perceptions about interactions between key University support personnel and the students, that related to acquiring and applying academic skills, including AEW. This research methodology enabled the key and supporting research questions to be addressed through a quantitative and qualitative approach to enable the AT lens to illuminate the rich, deep and meaningful student responses about the lived experiences of first-year University students.

3.3.1 Important Considerations about Paradigms

Within the critical framework of this study, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are appropriate (Healy & Perry, 2000) for researching the underlying mechanisms that are seen within this regional University and the interplay between its participants. Therefore, a mixed-methods approach was important in capturing the intricate world of first-year University students and their beliefs – not just because it allowed triangulation of data, but because a mixed-methods approach illuminated important aspects of learning (Kagan, 1990). The researcher's methods in this study, such as student case study interviews and student surveys, were acceptable and appropriate within a paradigm that sought to adopt an unbiased, objective stance in data collection and analyses (Bisman, 2002; Perry, Alizadeh, & Riege, 1997).

The most obvious difference between a conventional objective belief system and that of the constructive system, in terms of epistemology, is that the former is

essentially an objectivist system, reflecting the belief that it is possible for an observer to exteriorise the reality studied, remaining detached from it and uninvolved with it (Al Zeera, 2001). On the other hand, the constructive or naturalistic posture contends that epistemologically, the inquirer, and the inquired are interlocked in such a way that the findings of the investigation are the literal creation of the inquiry process (Al Zeera, 2001). The constructivist, therefore, takes the position that the knower and the known are co-created during the inquiry. Therefore, the researcher in this study remained distant, and took on a conventional positivist approach throughout the investigation into student perceptions about their FYE and academic skills. This is crucial, as the whole concept of Activity Theory involved the researcher becoming immersed within the community under investigation and a conventional, objective paradigm promoted and validated this research process (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Thus, the methodology employed in this study of student perceptions about the support personnel who assisted them with academic and AEW skills, matched the phenomenon of interest. Different phenomena may require the use of different methodologies but, by focusing on the phenomenon of socio-cultural practices under examination rather than the methodology, the researcher has chosen the appropriate quantitative and qualitative methodology for this enquiry (Falconer & Mackay, 1999).

Several points about paradigms are considered.

- Paradigms are not inherent in a person, they have been taught to them.
- Paradigms are presented as 'wholes' to believe in.
- Paradigms make everything appear to be continuous, stable, and predictable.
- The world is experienced in terms of personal paradigms.
- The fact that paradigms are created is often ignored in the wider community.
- Paradigm aspects are often argued ad nauseam.

The points above illustrate the idea that, in education, learning is seen to be a constructive mode. Therefore, AT was selected as a theoretical lens, as it demonstrated rigour in the research processes.

3.3.2 Phase One – Survey of Faculty of Education Students

Phase One of the data collection was the administration of a student survey.

The student survey (see Appendix A) involved a sample (Neuman, 2011) of undergraduate students (N=218) from the Faculty of Education, although some may have completed cross-over units in other faculties at the regional University where the study was conducted. The students needed to have completed at least one session/semester of University study. The researcher was confident that the method of sampling of students for this project accurately reflected the population of students who had experienced at least their first semester of their first year of study within the Faculty of Education.

A Likert-type survey was used as it is an effective means of obtaining a large, broad sample of students over a relatively quick timeframe (Creswell, 2016). The survey comprised fifty-one Likert-type questions and two short-answer optional written responses (see Appendix A). The survey was organised according to headings that reflected the data being sought:

Section A – About You [This section asks you questions about yourself];

Section B – Orientation [This section asks you for your thoughts about your orientation experience at the University];

Section C – Academic Skills [This section asks you for your thoughts about academic skill];

Section D – Argumentative Essay Writing (AEW) [This section asks you for your thoughts, more specifically, about AEW]; and

Section E – Your thoughts

[What aspects of University have assisted you to succeed? (optional)]

[What aspects of University have provided barriers/obstacles to you being successful? (optional)].

The survey instrument used to collect data in this project was converted to an online survey using a commercial survey product called SurveyMonkey, although the students were given the choice of completing an online or hard copy version of the survey. It was an instrument designed for this research, as it included a

Likert Scale as well as a section for accommodating short answer responses from the students.

SurveyMonkey is an online survey that provides customised surveys, as well as data analysis, sample selection, bias elimination, and data representation tools. As of 2015, SurveyMonkey had twenty-five million users and received ninety million survey responses a month (Konrad, 2016). In addition, instruments are being increasingly designed through online survey products (Sue & Ritter, 2012). Using an online survey instrument from SurveyMonkey enabled the researcher to create the personalised survey efficiently using a customised template that was given to the students to complete. The software program generated results and these were reported back to the researcher as descriptive statistics and graphed information. The results were downloaded into a spreadsheet/database for analysis and data analysis used the Principal Component Analysis process to make sense of the raw data. The raw scores of the key components that included student perceptions about the support personnel were converted to percentage scores that were then presented as support personnel rankings (1–5). A ranking of 1 indicated the highest rating from the students of who helped them the most in their FYE. Support personnel were ranked in the two principal components relating to both academic skills and AEW skills. The results of these student-preferred support personnel are presented in Chapter 4 of this study.

The survey was used in this project as it was considered a very effective means of collecting much data in a short amount of time (Creswell, 2014) and it also supported the advantages of using triangulation, and a mixed-methods approach (Shank, 2006; Neuman, 2011; Creswell, 2014). Some specific advantages of using surveys include:

- Practicality
- Substantial amounts of information can be collected from a large number of people in a short period of time and in a relatively cost-effective way
- Can be carried out by the researcher or by any number of people with limited impact on its validity and reliability
- Results can usually be quickly and easily quantified by either a researcher or through the use of a software package

- Can be analysed more 'scientifically' and objectively than other forms of research
- When data has been quantified, it can be used to compare other research and may be used to measure change.

Positivists believe that quantitative data can be used to create new theories and/or test existing hypotheses. The researcher took a critical view of using the survey instrument and, although it did offer these advantages, also considered potential problems that could arise using such an instrument, as outlined below (Shank, 2006; Neuman, 2011; Creswell, 2014).

- Is argued to be inadequate to understanding some forms of information e.g. changes of emotions, behaviour, feelings etc.
- Phenomenologists state that quantitative research is simply an artificial creation by the researcher, as it is asking only a limited amount of information without explanation
- Lacks validity
- There is no way to tell how truthful a respondent is being
- There is no way of telling how much thought a respondent has put in
- The respondent may be forgetful or not thinking within the full context of the situation
- People may read differently into each question and therefore reply based on their own interpretation of the question, e.g. what is 'good' to someone may be 'poor' to someone else – therefore there is a level of subjectivity that is not acknowledged
- There is a level of researcher imposition, meaning that, when developing the questionnaire, the researcher is making their own decisions and assumptions as to what is and is not important – therefore potentially missing something of importance.

The disadvantages and advantages were considered in the design and administration of the survey, and it was determined that a survey was an efficient means of collecting data. The process of coding in the case of open-ended questions creates the possibility of subjectivity by the researcher; this was

carefully noted in the process of this research thesis, as the researcher presented strong, accurate and unbiased results.

3.3.3 Pilot Study and Survey Development

The survey items were informed by the literature review and, in particular, issues identified in the synthesis of that literature review (refer to Table 2.1). A pilot study of the survey and focus group questions was given to six independent persons not associated with the School of Education at this regional University. The pilot study was completed several weeks before the actual student survey and focus group was conducted. Changes were made to reflect the results of the pilot study and in both the survey and the interviews, the length of time for completion was extended by five minutes. As mentioned in the literature, the idea of the pilot study was to check the main aspects of the survey questions and distribution (Lancaster, Dodd & Williamson, 2004) before the time of data collection. For this research project, the pilot study included aspects of the actual design of the survey and interview questions as well as checking that it was manageable regarding the time constraints (Creswell, 2014).

As noted by researchers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Creswell, 2014), triangulation is a powerful technique that facilitates validation of data through cross-verification from more than two sources. In particular, it refers to the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. The researcher combined multiple observations, theories, methods, and empirical materials to overcome weaknesses and intrinsic biases and the problems that arise from single-method, single-observer and single-theory studies (Creswell, 2014). Through the application of a survey and case study interviews, it was hoped the research results would provide a true and accurate account of the phenomenon of the interactions of students and support personnel on developing academic and AEW skills in the FYE in higher education at this University.

3.3.4 Phase Two – Case Studies of Four Students and Cross-Case Analysis

Phase Two involved four participants recruited from the Phase One survey who were then involved in further data collection, including individual semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B). The four participants for the case studies were selected according to the following criteria:

- currently enrolled in the regional University being studied;
- have completed at least one session/semester of University study;
- meet one of the following criteria (the participants were asked to select **one** if they were willing to participate, and met at least one of the following characteristics):
 - 1 One student defined as being **first in family** to study at University;
 - 2 One student defined as **not being first in family** to study at University;
 - 3 One student defined as being **a school leaver**; and
 - 4 One student defined as being a **mature age, non-school leaver and Fail grade**.

To construct the case studies, including the activity systems of each student, the data collection involved student participation in both a survey followed by case study interviews. The identity of the participants was not disclosed, and the names used in this thesis are not the students' real names. In accordance with the ethics protocols all four participants were provided with a Consent Package prior to the interview and were bound not to discuss any of the issues that arose during and after the interview with any third party. The case study interviews were moderated by the principal researcher and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes each. The dialogue in the interviews mainly reflected the subjects' 'lived experiences' during their first year of University studies.

The interviews were recorded on a laptop computer and/or iPhone/iPad device using a recording program and converted to an MP3 file. This was used for transcription purposes as per Chapter 4 of this thesis and was destroyed upon completion of the analysis.

The data collection included a series of questions aimed at identifying key aspects of academic writing, including defining AEW, and listed key personnel

who might help the students to develop these skills. The focus was on using the guiding research question (By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?) to ask *what* and *how*, to convey an open and emerging design; the word *why* implies that the researcher is trying to manipulate a cause-and-effect answer from the respondent (Creswell, 2009). This type of questioning is very much part of a phenomenological study as used in this project (Appendix B).

3.4 The Interviews

At the most basic level, interviews are conversations (Kvale, 1996). Kvale defines qualitative research interviews as attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. Interviews for research or evaluation purposes differ in some important ways from other familiar kinds of interviews or conversations. Unlike conversations in daily life, which are usually reciprocal exchanges, professional interviews involve an interviewer who oversees the structure and direction of the questioning. Hence, the interview questions used for this study were carefully chosen and developed from the original questions of the thesis. In some professional interview situations, such as job interviews or legal interrogations, the power of the questioner is much greater than the power of the one being questioned. Therapeutic or clinical interviews are another special kind of professional interview, in which the purpose is to increase understanding and produce change in the person being interviewed. While interviews for research or evaluation purposes may also promote understanding and change, the emphasis for this project was on intellectual understanding rather than on producing personal change, although from the respondents' comments, this was likely to happen (Kvale, 1996).

Therefore, for the four case studies, this project used face-to-face interviews, whereby the student being interviewed provided information during the initial questions in an *About me* section and included details such as gender, age, or socio-economic, that the interviewer could check immediately. It is important to note that such screening questions in online and mobile surveys provide self-report, and there is no way of immediately testing the validity of the answers. This

is another reason for the triangulation of this research project by implementing a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2014). Indeed, online and mobile surveys that offer incentives may encourage answer falsification, as students may enter incorrect information so they can complete the survey quickly and gain the incentive (Creswell, 2014). The use of an interview *and* survey for this research was thus justified.

The face-to-face interviews captured important verbal cues, but the researcher also discovered this method captured vital non-verbal cues including body language, laughter and gasps, all of which indicated a level of discomfort or, in most cases in these interviews, excitement at certain questions. Capturing non-verbal cues is not possible in online or mobile surveys.

Although the interviewer was the one in control of the interview and kept the respondents focused and on track (Kavale, 1996), latitude was still afforded to the respondents to simply *talk* about their FYE. It should also be noted that although online and mobile surveys are often completed during times that are convenient for the respondent, they are often in the midst of other distractions, such as texting, reading and answering emails, video streaming, web surfing, social sharing, and more. Face-to-face interviews are in-the-moment and free from technological distractions, and this was very evident in this series of case study interviews.

In this qualitative section of the research project, the open-ended responses to questions provided the researcher with quotations, which were the main source of raw data. Patton notes that quotations in an interview

reveal the respondents' levels of emotion, the way in which they have organized the world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions. The task for the qualitative evaluator is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their point of view about the program. (Patton, 1987, p.15)

This was evident in the interview responses of these students, as the various quotations in the case studies in Chapter 4 clearly show.

In practice, open-ended, qualitative interview questions are often combined with more closed, structured interview formats – although for this thesis, as

mentioned, a student survey was also used to gain a richer evaluative aspect. Qualitative interviews may be used as an exploratory step before designing more quantitative, structured surveys to help determine the appropriate questions and categories. Conversely, interviews may be used after results of more standardised measures are analysed to gain insight into interesting or unexpected findings. While quantitative results are sometimes dismissed on political or methodological grounds (Patton, 1990) by those who disagree with the findings, it can be harder to dismiss the actual words of participants, which convey their powerful emotions. Patton (1990) gives an example of a school Board that dismissed a survey showing teacher dissatisfaction as being just the complaints of lazy teachers who did not want to be held accountable in their work. However, when confronted with actual quotations from teachers, reflecting both commitment to their jobs and deep concerns about problems in this system, the Board was more willing to hear and respond to their concerns. Therefore, the mixed-methods approach has enabled the researcher of this study to gain accurate informative and invaluable responses from the students from whom the data were collected.

Another important advantage for the researcher was that the interview allowed the participants to describe what was meaningful in their own words rather than being restricted to predetermined categories. This was evident in the way the students seemed quite relaxed and somewhat candid at times, as per the transcripts – they freely *talked* about their *lived* experiences at University.

In addition, the interviews allowed the researcher to probe further for more details and ensure that the students were interpreting questions the way they were intended. This was evident in the response transcripts, as the students would often ask for the question to be repeated or clarified. This was supported by the fact that the researcher had this flexibility of delivery to use personal knowledge, expertise and interpersonal skills to explore interesting or incidental (but still relevant) ideas or themes raised by the students – as mentioned, the respondents were given the opportunity to *talk* and tell their story. This was a very effective approach when using interviews, as sometimes no existing standardised survey is available that completely taps into what the researcher is trying to accomplish

(Creswell, 2014). The mixed-methods approach of this study allowed for this consideration.

3.5 Summary of the Conduct of the Interview Process

As mentioned, the data collection method for the case studies in Phase Two involved a short student survey as well as a case study interview. The students were reminded that the study was primarily related to student engagement in the FYE, and, more specifically, with the personnel who assist the students with academic and AEW skills at University. Student engagement was defined as when students feel that they are active participants in campus life and when students feel that they are strongly connected to and involved in their own learning (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012), as well as a connection to the academic and socio-cultural life of the University community (Engestrom, 1987). The researcher also addressed the specific student practices of orientation, academic skills, time management skills, and social and cultural considerations. The students were assured that, once data were collected, information that might link this information to them would be destroyed, that their responses were totally confidential, and their names would not be used to identify the case studies.

The practical considerations and steps for the case study interview data collection are set out below:

- I. Set up laptop with audio program installed and ensure that the room is booked/ready for a confidential session. Label the MP3 file with date, time, random id, pseudonym, and interviewer's name.
- II. Firstly, introduce myself, thank them and inform them as to what the research is about. It should be noted that the students already had prior knowledge of this in a personal letter sent to each one before the interview. The list of questions for the interview was also sent prior to the day, to familiarise the students with the content - spare copies were also taken to the interview room.
- III. Introduce material to the students.
- IV. Check each signed consent form.
 - a. One copy for student to keep, one to sign and return to me.

b. Ask if they have any questions.

c. Assure them of confidentiality – any identifying information will be destroyed.

V. Pseudonym selection

VI. Call them by this throughout the interview to ensure confidentiality.

VII. Offer to email the transcript and/or audio to each student – I will ask them to review it for accuracy and if they want to add something.

VIII. Start the recording – double check that it is recording properly.

IX. Check volumes to ensure an accurate recording is progressing as planned.

X. Introductory comments and another opportunity for questions

XI. Commence interview

XII. At the conclusion, ask if they have other questions. Remind them that if they have more questions in the future, they have my details and may contact me via email or telephone.

XIII. Thank them.

XIV. At the completion of the interview, save the MP3 file onto the laptop as well as onto a USB. Collect consent forms and information sheets (with pseudonym) and place them in an envelope. Write the pseudonym and random ID on the envelope. Remind the participants that general results of the study will be available via the researcher at the end of 2017.

The above considerations proved to be invaluable and saved a lot of time and anxiety on the part of the researcher, which, in turn, produced a smooth flowing interview that also benefited the students.

3.5.1 Sample of the Interview Questions

It must be noted that ample time was given to prepare and obtain ethics approval and the students were selected from the Faculty of Education from this University. The managerial and organisational aspects of the interview method were crucial and enabled the researcher to save time as well as collect accurate unbiased

information through an effective qualitative and quantitative methodology (Shank, 2006).

The use of the key questions via surveys and interviews again supports the premise that a mixed-methods approach was used to validate and triangulate the data findings. For the list of full questions, see Appendix B. Sample questions for the students were:

- What is your definition of academic skills?
- How would you define AEW skills?
- To what extent has the University helped you with AEW skills in the FYE?
- Can you list the University personnel who have contributed to your AEW skills?
- Are you aware of the following personnel who are available to help you with AEW?
 - Mentors
 - Tutors/lecturers
 - PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions)
 - Academic Skills Department staff
 - Other students
- Can you explain how each of the personnel listed above have helped you with AEW?
- Are there any other personnel who have helped you with AEW in your FYE?

Further questions were added where necessary as a basis of retrieving information using question samples from the survey, as well as incidental questions in response to the students' comments. The research data collection process was implemented at the beginning of Semester 2, 2016, and the interviews (approximately 20–30 minutes long) involved a sample of four students taken from the main group of 218 students who undertook the survey outlined in Phase One of the data collection.

Once the data were collected, they were examined and analysed to extract the key specific information from these findings (Creswell, 2016). The data were coded (See Section 3.5.2 and Table 3.1), and this was completed on or close to the day of the interview or survey by indicating the date, which students participated, and the number of completed surveys and interviews (Creswell, 2016). The interviews were also categorised according to aspects such as gender, age, origin etc. Much of the categorising was completed leading up to the interview, but also needed coding post-collection (Creswell, 2016). For the open-ended interviews, the researcher read through them carefully and coded most of them immediately after the event. This ensured that the coding related to the kinds of answers, themes and issues, and categories of response expected from the research questions. Creswell (2005) also points out the need to annotate thematically on the side of the transcribed interviews and labelling the important themes or issues as they appear helped the researcher to draw different responses together, and to draw different responses from the various sources (Creswell, 2007).

Guided by Creswell's data collection considerations (2007), the researcher could draw some relative generalisations rather than conclusions. These considerations included aspects of repetitive responses as well as deviations from expected responses and if any themes and/or contradictions were emerging. Therefore, managing mixed-methods data accurately was essential for the overall success of this research project.

3.5.2 Constructing the Activity Systems for the Case Studies

The construction of an activity system for each student was the basic unit of analysis, to recognise that an artefact-mediated and object-mediated activity, such as learning and student study regimes, and applying academic skills including AEW, does not occur in isolation. Rather, it is influenced by cultural, social and historical factors in the participants' local context (Engestrom, 1987).

Therefore, the case study data collection methods were guided by AT, as well as compelling evidence from the review of relevant FYE literature. That is, in contrast to conventional approaches that may use a person, group, or institution as the unit of analysis, this study used an activity system as the unit of analysis

(Engestrom, 1987). This activity system was directed towards an *object* (for example, developing AEW skills and writing essays), and the *subjects* can be defined as the students engaged in this activity. Many tools mediate the process of transforming the object, including physical tools (for example, essay samples, computers, pdf handouts) and cognitive tools (for example, the use of simulated academic writing as a teaching strategy).

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between student practices and social capital and their engagement with the first-year experience at University, including AEW, through an Activity Theory lens (Engestrom, 1987). In particular, the study explored specific student practices or activities, including academic and AEW skills and the University personnel who helped students to develop these skills.

Phase Two of data interpretation drew upon the AT theoretical framework to ascertain the social and cultural impacts University personnel have had on the engagement and success of first-year University students in the field of academic skills, including AEW. Decision guidelines are given below in Table 3.1; these assisted in giving a complete picture of what was most important in terms of AT elements for the mapping and interpretation of student responses.

Table 3.1 Decision Guidelines for Coding Data to Activity Theory Concepts

Activity System Element	Guiding Question	Decision Indicators
Subject	Who is involved in this activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student • Support personnel
Tool	How are the subjects implementing this activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis support programs • Cognitive elements such as study strategies • Explanation of learning tools as per Blackboard; UIGs; AEW samples • Impact of the mediating tools on the object (learning academic/AEW skills in terms of tensions and affordances)
Object	Why is this activity occurring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students approach to study • How the respondent engages in the activity of learning
Outcome	What are the expected outcomes of the activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intended study outcomes such as assessment success • Graduate
Community	What is the environment of this activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main participants of the activity • Other lesser - involved personnel
Rules	Are there regulatory norms and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic conditions such as entry to

	rules that govern this community?	study levels <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course requirements once study commences • Support personnel regulations • Students' own rules
Division of labour	Who is responsible for each individual activity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The learning task organisation responsibilities such as student/staff • Support personnel implementations • Involvement of other stake holders such as University Body; Government agents

The coding guidelines used in the data interpretation elaborated in Table 3.1 show the Activity System Elements, in column 1, against which the data were mapped. The guiding questions, shown in column 2, provided broad, open-ended Guided Questions to help draw attention to context units that align with the activity system element. In the third column are Decision Indicators, which provide more specific indicators of traits used to code a unit of data to the appropriate conceptual category. These indicators allow for the creation of coding subcategories as needed.

Once data had been placed within an AT domain, it was analysed to compare a unit of data with other units in the same category; this was completed via a Principal Component Analysis as well as a Cross-Case Analysis. An explanation of the key elements derived from Engestrom's AT model is given as follows.

Subject, for example, is a broad conceptual category focusing on the attributes of the individual participant and includes aspects such as personal beliefs, qualities and attitudes. Past experiences, beliefs, and expectations are carried by the participant into the activity of planning and implementing key aspects of their study regime. These beliefs shape the nature of participation, particularly in relation to how the object is perceived by and acted upon by the first-year University students. Data grouped under this category refer to how the study object is described and understood by the students, particularly how objectives, intentions, beliefs, values, and past experiences shape how the participants ascribe meaning to the activity. For example, the following data extract was coded as *Subject* as the participant states her involvement and interpretation of what is important in the FYE at University:

For me... many things... but what I think was most important in my first year was staying there! [laughter] I wanted to quit... I really did... but... connecting... connecting to students to tutors... PASS tutors were great for me! (Jasmine, Interview response)

Another participant explained that what really worked well for him was using the Blackboard site and the also adjusting to the new way of writing academically. Therefore, the tool of AEW samples helped Dave adjust to this new way of researching and writing. As a first-year student, and self-described novice, and being first in his family to attend University, Dave iterated its importance:

Using the Blackboard was essential for me... but also quite daunting because I hadn't studied for ages let alone used computer technology much... and this was all new... but I got the hang of it... and of course the essay samples... academic skills they were great... they gave me essays... examples... there were other things too you know sheets on referencing... they really helped! (Dave, Interview response)

This data segment was coded as *Tools* in reference to the essay samples and referencing tools. It was also coded as *Subject* because it was indicative of how Dave gave meaning to the inclusion of the study activity in the study unit, in terms of his past education experiences and, subsequently, his current objective to complete effective essays and succeed in the study unit.

The *Tools* category is very broad and can also include references to cognitive tools, such as study/learning strategies applied by the student and/or support person (subject) to the task of learning and implementing academic and AEW skills (object). For example, one participant articulated her first-year study strategy of completing a University bridging course that she believed set her up for study success. This bridging course enabled Kaz to learn the necessary academic skills because, as she mentioned, she had not been to school for thirty years. In Kaz's example, the acquisition of learning skills such as critical thinking, research and academic writing via the bridging course, and then via the Mentor personnel, was crucial to her success. Acquiring these necessary University skills was used to facilitate Kaz's preferred learning strategy so was coded *Tools – critical thinking and essay writing* and the strategy it enabled, *Tools – cognitive*.

I still use the skills that I acquired in those early and scary days of when I came to uni... that was really scary at first but the bridging course, and then Jill [Kaz's Mentor] gave me just so much direction and help... she was great... I would recommend her... for sure... for thinking skills... thinking like a University student [laughter]... and of course help with essays and writing and stuff... (Kaz, Interview response)

An example, where the AT element was used as a unit of data coded to the *Rules* was how instructions via the course materials, such as UIGs, were given to students on how to use and apply critical thinking skills to study. The rules for this particular forum were explained by the student who stated them as:

The great thing about University is that it teaches you how to think. We were given great tips about how to think better... and instructions on how to write an essay...I never had this before...maybe I did but I forgot them! [laughter] actual instructions on how to write an essay... the intro and paragraphs and the whole thing really...sort of a formula but it works. (Dane, Interview response)

In this example, the whole outline was coded as *Rules* to give a sense of what was exactly expected of the first-year University students, and how they could implement these Rules as a means for successful study.

Once the data segments were appropriately mapped to the three elements in Table 3.1, the AT principle of contradictions (Engestrom, 2001) was used to identify potential tensions within and between the elements, and the activity systems of the four case study students were constructed and finally analysed.

3.5.3 Beliefs about University Learning and Perceptions of the Interdependent Roles of Support Personnel and Students

In addition, after data were collected from the case study interviews, some of the key findings were analysed and were able to be displayed on a set of *Beliefs about University Learning* continua that made the results interpretable through visual representations adapted from Bradey (2014). The summaries of these findings from the case study interviews are presented for each of the four case studies in Chapter 4 of this study on a set of continua, similar to those in Figure 3.1 below.

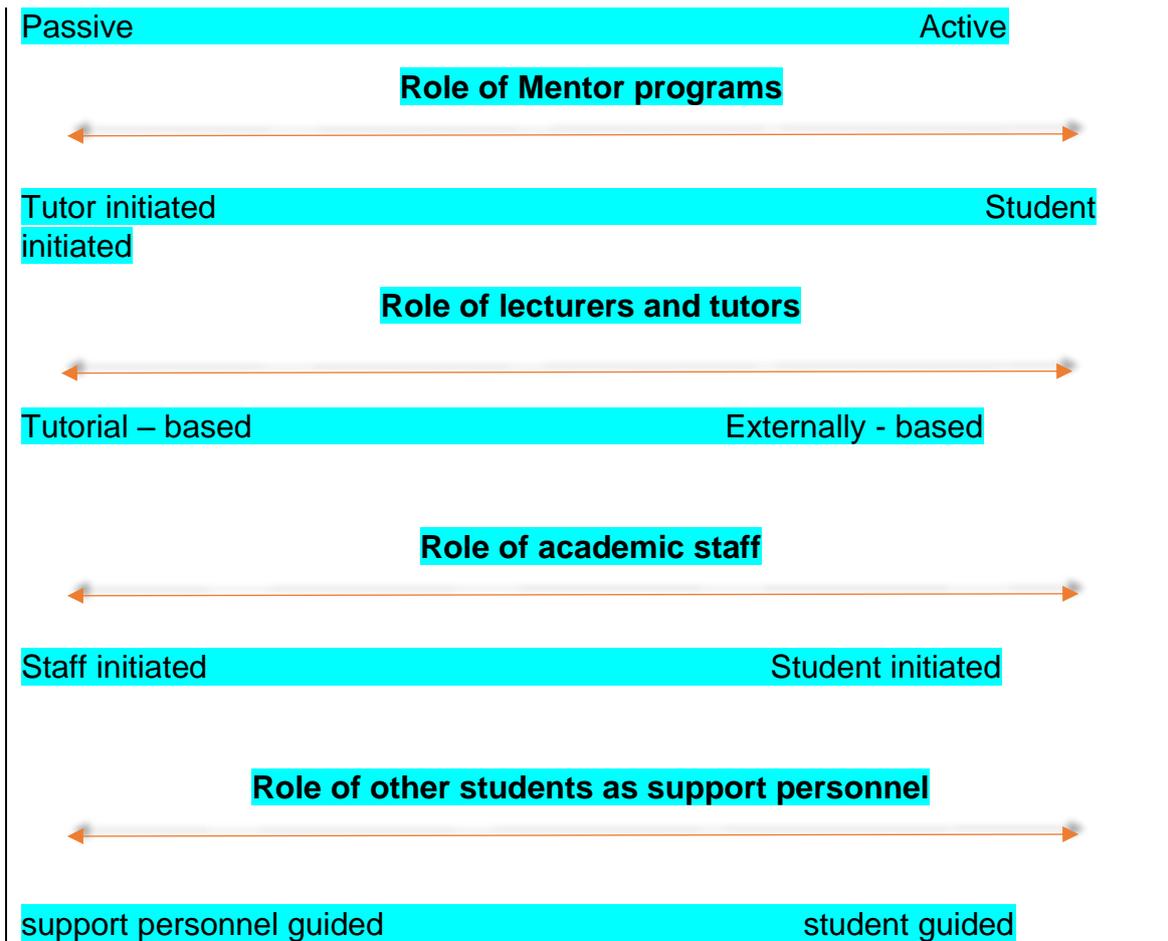


Figure 3.2 Interdependent Roles of Support Personnel

3.6 Ethics Approval

The appropriate ethics application was made at Griffith University and this was obtained (GU Ref No: 2016/717). As the data collection was being conducted at a University other than the researcher’s host institution, this also required ethics clearance from that regional University. This additional ethics clearance was also obtained. In consultation with the supervisor, it was decided that the most efficient method of data collection was to approach the Faculty of Education Head of School, who was extremely supportive of this study. This proved to be helpful in gaining support and recruitment of students for the data collection process.

3.6.1 Ethical Conduct of the Study

In accordance with ethics requirements, care was taken to ensure that ethics considerations were carefully followed from the initial conception of this project through until its completion. The fact that the key researcher was a staff member

of the University where the data were being collected made it even more crucial that all aspects of the ethics approval were strictly adhered to.

Upon gaining ethics approval from the regional University, the researcher began the process of contacting students and lecturers for the purpose of survey distribution and administration. This was relatively easy, as the researcher had contact with these lecturers, and arranging a suitable day and time for the data collection was arranged. The surveys were distributed to the students via classes and a web link that was sent to the students' email inbox, and the researcher was able to collect the data on the same day as the survey was completed.

The interviews for the four case studies were arranged by way of letter to each of the students who had also completed a survey. A suitable time and day was arranged for each of the four students. All students were informed that this research project was voluntary, that their participation would not pose any threats to them as students, and that all data will be handled in a confidential manner. The key elements of this research project were explained by way of an Information Sheet (see Appendix B) as part of an Informed Consent Package required for ethics approval, and subjects were taken through the key steps in data collection. The prospective respondents were then able to decide, in a non-threatening manner, if they would like to proceed with the data collection processes. The emphasis here was on being non-threatening in compliance with ethical considerations.

As Creswell (2009) points out, 'research involves collecting data from people, about people... the researcher must guard their subjects, develop a trust with them and promote research integrity...' (p.5). It is also important to note that ethical issues were considered and implemented throughout the whole research process and not just in the actual data collection process. Some of these considerations included ethical issues in the framing of the research problem, the purpose and design of the interview questions, the data collection process, the analysis of the interview responses, the data analysis, the writing of the thesis, and in disseminating the study (Creswell, 2009).

Key aspects related to ethics included (see Appendix A and Appendix B for specific details):

- An official consent form to be completed by each student
- An official ethical clearance was sought from the participating institution
- Consent to participate, as each student's participation was voluntary and each student was under no obligation to consent to participate in the research.
- No risks, as the project asked that each student identify their perceptions of personnel who have helped them with AEW in FYE at University.
- Confidentiality, as both the interviews and surveys did not require students to disclose their name or to be identified at any time.

3.6.2 Health and Personal Risks

There were no immediate health or personal risks for the participants of this study. However, subjects were advised that they could elect not to answer a question or questions or decide to discontinue the interview or survey and withdraw their participation at any time. In that case, their participation immediately ceased and any prior information obtained from the participant was deleted and not used in any part of the study. This study was not part of any third-party research grant nor has any direct commercial/financial interests, for the principal researcher. There were also no financial and/or other commercial benefits to be obtained for the students participating in this study. Participation in this study was totally voluntary. If the student chose to participate, they could decide to withdraw at any time. There were no negative consequences if the student decided not to take part in this study. Should any concerns or queries arise during the student's involvement with this study, they had the right to contact the Ethics officer of either University.

The information gathered during the case study interviews and survey was considered as the data for this study. The interviews were transcribed in order for the researcher to thematically analyse the results and relate these findings to the literature and other studies. Responses were kept completely anonymous and no identifying information was revealed to any third party. Transcripts of the MP3 also provided each participant with an alias.

All research materials and data collected were secured in a locked office, to which only the principal researcher had access. Anyone who assisted the principal

researcher with the interpretation of the data was required to sign a confidentiality statement. Data were not be made public in any form that could ever reveal the identity of any of the participants. However, the anonymous, aggregated data may be used for further research and/or publications in journals, academic publications, e.g., books and manuscripts. Moreover, full anonymity of participants was maintained on every occasion. The students were thanked for making their time available and for their expression of interest to participate in this study. The students were told that their knowledge, personal experiences and insights were extremely valuable in making this study a success. The results of this research are available via the principal researcher. Participants were asked to email or telephone the principal researcher, Alan Fenn-Lavington, to arrange for an appointment to access an appropriate summary of the results of the research.

3.7 Data Analysis Considerations

Several analytical strategies were employed for this mixed-methods study. As mentioned in the previous section, the data collection involved two phases. This provided a progressively more layered and complex picture of each participant's history of the FYE in academic skills including AEW. Prior to the commencement of Phase One and the administration of the student survey, the synthesis of the literature informed the survey design and information being sought. Phase Two drew upon AT and, through interviews, data were collected from the four case study students.

Rank Orders for student responses relating to their preference of support personnel were calculated. For example, the support personnel preferences related to academic skills was evident and depicted in Rank Order from 1 to 5. The same was conducted for student support preferences for AEW skills, and these were also ranked 1–5 to display the respondents' choices. Elsewhere, Lizzio (2007), Kuh (2012) and Tinto (2012) agree that these components are crucial for student success in University, and especially in the FYE (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012). Therefore, these components were used to help define the who the students preferred as support personnel in their FYE, and the results are depicted in Chapter 4 of this thesis (Tables 4.4 and 4.7).

The early analysis of the respondents' answers condensed the data to three main components: support personnel; academic skills; and AEW skills. Principal component analysis (PCA) confirmed the existence of the already-defined constructs of personal connection and academic writing, including AEW, and the relationship to the main personnel linked to academic writing and AEW. These personnel were class tutors, academic skills tutors, other students, PASS tutors, and Mentor personnel. What was hoped to be discovered in the overall analysis of the data was the students' perceptions about how helpful specific support personnel were to the students' FYE at University and this was linked to Lizzio's 5 Senses Model (2007). The analysis of the data was used to enable the researcher to identify key elements in order to give added strength and reliability to the overall analytical process and subsequent results.

It was hoped that the aspects of support personnel – such as class and academic skills tutors, other students, PASS tutors, and Mentor personnel – and their relationship to the first-year students' study habits, would help to investigate important understandings that students perceived in interacting with people, not merely study materials such as textbooks, Unit Information Guides (UIGs), Study Guides and the like. Therefore, the terms relating to socio-cultural and academic aspects used in this study bear a strong connection to AT, and thus, define the variable elements of the activity systems of each of the four case study students.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research design and methodology used in this study. It provided a summary of Phase One and Phase Two of the study, including the data collection and analysis approaches. Importantly, the choice of Activity Theory (AT) as a theoretical lens was discussed with specific justification of this approach to investigate the lived first-year University experiences of four students by examining their activity systems.

In addition, the chapter clarified the data collection and data analysis actions required in constructing the four case studies. That is, it detailed the set of dimensions used for profiling the participants' beliefs about learning at University, the actions for charting the participants' activity systems, and for identifying contradictions and tensions to interpret potential changes in belief and practice

relating to academic and AEW skills. The chapter concluded with a description of the ethical considerations and successful conduct of the study.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

As outlined earlier in this thesis, the aim of this study was to identify implications for informing the improvement of the FYE, through examining the effectiveness of the relatively new roles of the personnel who help students in building academic capital through AEW capabilities. To illuminate these implications and perceptions of effectiveness, the research explored the lived experiences of four University students through an Activity Theory lens (Engestrom, 1987). Therefore, the key research question guiding this thesis was: By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of this study and is organised in three main sections, which align with the research design and methodology that enabled collected data to answer the research question.

Section 1 presents the data findings from Phase One of this research, which involved the administration of the Student Survey (see Appendix A) that resulted in responses from a wider student sample (N=218 students) from seven Faculty of Education classes at the regional University where the study was conducted.

Section 2 presents the findings of four University student case studies to investigate their activity systems. Data from these case studies were obtained from individual interviews to construct the case studies which are structured according to details (*About the Student; The Student's Activity System; The Student's Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel*) and conclude with *The Student's Case Study Commentary and Summary*. The important aspect of these case studies for the researcher was to explore the lived experiences of these four students, to gain the students' perceptions about *who* and *what* worked best for them in their first-year study at University. According to Murphy and Rodriguez (2008), for investigations involving contradictions within activity systems, case studies are a viable method of obtaining valuable

information from the respondents. This thoughtful discourse between the researcher and the four students in the case study interviews was then analysed to further ascertain the extent of the students' perceptions about *what* and *who* might have been beneficial to them in their first year at University.

Section Three of this chapter presents a cross-case analysis of those four case studies to discuss similar themes and nuances that emerged across the case studies – identification of student differences was also a key factor in this section.

For the data collection method of the case study interviews, four principal areas of the student study regime experiences were examined and formed the structure for the cross-case analysis:

1. **About the Student** – including age, gender, education experience.
2. **Student Activity Systems** – including academic background, University academic and AEW skills, perceptions about University support personnel and academic success relating to Activity Theory.
3. **Student Beliefs** about University learning.
4. **Student Summary and Commentary.**

4.2 Phase One - Student Survey Findings

The student survey was administered to gain a large, general surface picture (Creswell, 2016) and wider context of the first-year experience of Faculty of Education students, within which the subsequent four case studies could be situated and understood. The survey methodology was guided by the Literature Review in Chapter 2 as well as the key questions from this thesis.

The first information sought by the survey included demographic details about the students, such as age, gender, previous study at University or TAFE, grade average, AEW proficiency and the like (see Appendix A). The second key aspect of the survey was about the students' orientation to University and included their responses on how easy University commencement was to them and how useful the University's orientation information was. The third and fourth sections included specific questions about the students' perceptions of academic and AEW skills and the University support personnel who had assisted them with these skills. The concluding section of the survey included two optional questions

that allowed the students to write about other aspects that had contributed to their success or failure in their FYE at University.

The survey was conducted with seven classes and a total of 218 respondents from the Faculty of Education at a regional University located in Australia. The demographics of the students surveyed were important to the quantitative overview of this study. The main details of the respondents are set out below.

Table 4.1 Student Survey - Summary of Student Survey Demographics (N=218)

Demographic Aspects		(N=218) %*
Gender	Female	72%
	Male	28%
Age of respondents	18-29 yrs	47%
	30-39 yrs	23%
	40-49 yrs	20%
	50+yrs	10%
Faculty in which respondents are students	School of Education	100%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Yes	0%
	No	100%
	Choose not to disclose	0%
Current Session/Semester when surveyed [Note that at this regional University a session refers to a semester]	1 st Session	4%
	2 nd Session	9%
	3 rd Session	27%
	4 th Session	46%
	5 th Session	14%
First in family to attend University	Yes	34%
	No	66%
Socio-economic status	Low	29%
	Medium	64%
	High	7%
Enrolment status	Full-Time	61%
	Part-Time	39%
Average grade for Assessments	Fail	0%
	Pass	5%
	Credit	45%
	Distinction	45%
	High Distinction	5%

*All % are rounded to the nearest whole number

This section highlights the key demographic details displayed in Table 4.1 pertaining to the student responses in the survey that investigated student

support personnel and success in academic and AEW skills in the first year of University study. The table above shows that the group of students has some distinct similarities and differences regarding the demographic indicators, including gender, age, current study session and first-in-family characteristics.

As indicated in Table 4, the majority of students were female (72%) with only 28% being male. The gender figures are consistent with various data on teacher education students in Australia, such as the *Gender Analysis of School Teachers* (ABS, 2011) and could possibly lead to further research considerations by the principal researcher. Almost two out of every three students (61%) were full-time students, and the highest percentage age group was 18–29 years (47%), followed by the 30–39 years group (23%), and 40–49 years group (20%), the age group with the least number of students being 50+ years (10%). The Faculty of Education accounted for 100 per cent of the respondents; this was in line with the initial plan of the principal researcher.

Of the respondents sampled in this survey, the largest percentage was students in their fourth session/semester of study (46%), followed by third session (27%), and fifth session (14%) students. First and second session students accounted for only 13%. These figures are beneficial in tracking the continued progress of these University students, and, hopefully, detecting where problems may arise throughout the student lifecycle. Approximately one-third (34%) of the respondents indicated that they were first in the family to attend University, and 66% stated that they had other family members who had attended University. This is also a significant finding in light of recent studies that show a strong relationship between being first in the family at University, and student engagement and success (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2012).

Socio-economic status revealed that 64% of respondents were in the medium socio-economic category, and the low and high groups were at 29% and 7% respectively. The key aspect here might be the affordability of higher education, which might contribute to the small percentage of low socio-economic students represented in this survey, another finding that may warrant further investigation. The findings on the average assessment grade indicated that most respondents were achieving Credit (45%) and Distinction (45%) grades, with Fail and High Distinction grades at 5% each. These average assessment grade findings are

very important, in that they show that there is much room for improvement in relation to failing students by the University, as even a 5% rate of Fail grades is not desirable. The literature indicates that Fail grades may lead to students feeling less confident in the FYE and beyond, possibly adding to attrition rates (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

Table 4.2, below, displays important survey findings relating to the students' orientation to University. Importantly, it shows that even though 37% of students found starting at University relatively easy, the majority (63%) either disagreed or were undecided. This could be interpreted as these students having a poor first-year experience, which aligns with the literature that flags this fact as a potential danger for student engagement and success (Tinto, 2017). For the second statement, 63% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that Orientation sessions were very helpful, although 37% disagreed, strongly disagreed or were undecided. Similarly, relating to Orientation information, 74% agreed/strongly agreed that they read the Orientation information and 26% of students disagreed/strongly disagreed or were undecided. These data were also reflected in the student responses to Statement 4 (the usefulness of the Orientation information), with 22% stating it was not useful or they were undecided and 78% stating it was useful. It should be noted that a relatively high percentage of these students did not utilise Orientation information, or did not find Orientation sessions to be useful.

Table 4.2 Level of agreement with statements about Orientation.

Statement	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Undecided %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
1. I have found starting at University relatively easy.	6	42	15	31	6
2. Orientation sessions at University were very helpful.	3	9	25	47	16
3. I read most of the orientation information that was sent to me.	2	10	9	58	16
4. I found the orientation information useful and easy to read.	4	9	10	62	16

This leads to the sections of the survey that investigated student academic skills, including AEW, and the student preferences for personnel who were both

supportive and knowledgeable of first-year study requirements that were present in their FYE at University.

As shown in Table 4.3, all students either agreed or strongly agreed that proficiency in academic skills is needed to succeed at University, while 90% stated they did not have proficient academic skills before commencing University. In Statement 3, the results show that almost all the students (92%) agreed or strongly agreed that their academic skills had improved since commencing University. However, as shown in the students' responses to Statement 4, 97% of students agreed or strongly agreed that their academic skills still needed improving. Similarly, almost all students indicated that they knew where to get help with academic skills, had accessed help for academic skills, and that their proficiency in academic skills had enabled them to succeed in assessment tasks.

Table 4.3 Level of Agreement about Academic Skills.

Statement	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Undecided %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
1. Proficiency in academic skills is needed to succeed at University.	0	0	0	14	86
2. Before commencing University studies, I had proficiency in academic skills.	72	18	0	5	5
3. Since commencing University studies, my proficiency in academic skills has improved.	0	3	2	22	73
4. My proficiency in academic skills needs further development.	0	1	2	9	88
5. I know where I can find help with academic skills at University.	2	2	3	7	86
6. I have accessed support at University for developing my academic skills	0	0	8	2	90
7. My proficiency in academic skills has enabled me to succeed in assessment tasks.	2	3	2	11	82

Table 4.4 Student Perceptions about how helpful Support Personnel are in relation to Academic Skills

Personnel	Not Applicable %	Very unhelpful %	Unhelpful %	Undecided %	Helpful %	Very helpful %
1.Tutors/Lecturers	0	4	9	0	73	14
2.Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)	0	3	37	0	60	0
3.Mentors	22	5	37	0	23	13

4.Other Students	0	0	20	0	80	0
5.Academic Skills Unit (ASU)	0	4	28	0	60	9

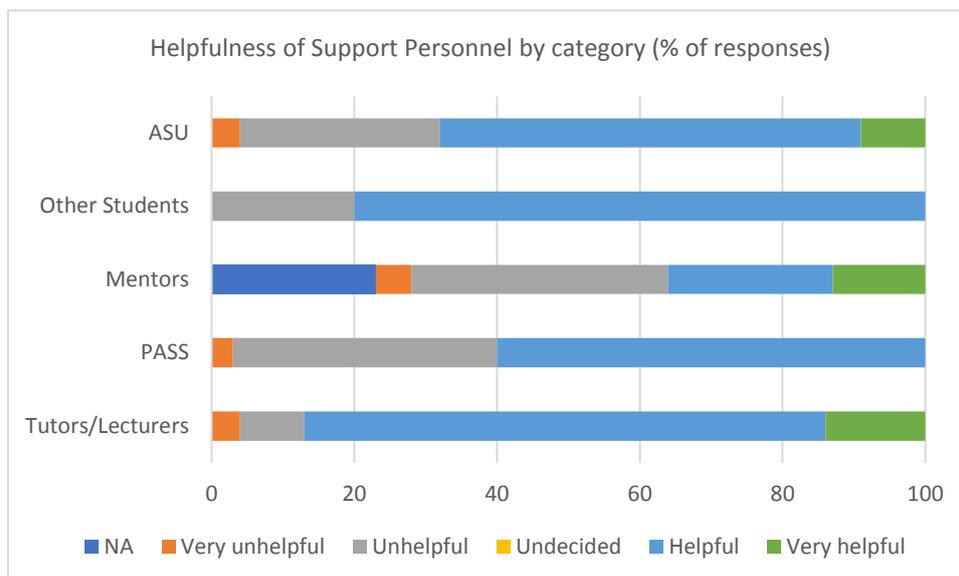
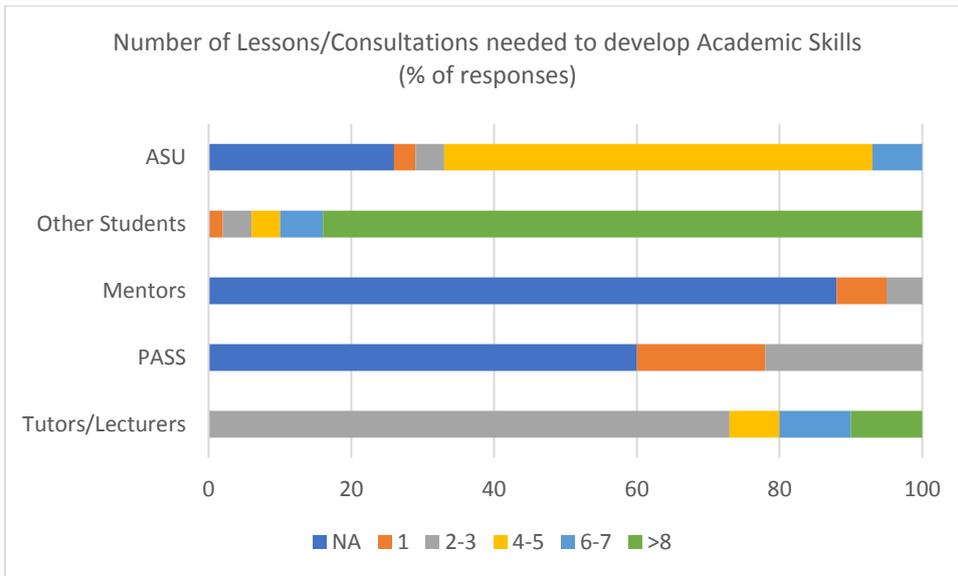


Table 4.5 Student Perceptions of the Number of Lessons/consultations needed to develop Academic Skills

Personnel	Not Applicable %	Only 1 session %	Only 2-3 sessions %	Only 4-5 sessions %	Only 6-7 sessions %	8 or more sessions %
1.Tutors/Lecturers	0	0	73	7	10	10
2.Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)	60	18	22	0	0	0
3.Mentors	88	7	5	0	0	0
4.Other Students	0	2	4	4	6	84
5.Academic Skills Unit	26	3	4	60	7	0



While it would be negligent to rely on ordinal survey data as a correct representation of student choices in their FYE, it would also be unwise to ignore the general implications of such data when they support other findings of the study. The summed scores of students' perceptions indicate a preference for relationship-building communication traits over possible traits of course materials, Blackboard facilities and the like. It is interesting to note that Mentor personnel, who might be presumed to support the building of communication and relationships, earned the lowest scores in this particular section of the survey.

Table 4.6 Level of Agreement with Statements about AEW skills.

Statement	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Undecided %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
1. Proficiency in AEW skills is needed to succeed at University.	0	0	0	28	72
2. Before commencing University studies, I had proficiency in AEW skills.	62	18	0	15	5
3. Since commencing University studies, my proficiency in AEW skills has improved.	2	8	2	20	68
4. My proficiency in AEW skills needs further development.	0	1	6	10	83
5. I know where I can find help with AEW skills at University.	2	2	3	7	86
6. I have accessed support at University for developing my AEW skills	0	0	8	2	90
7. My proficiency in AEW skills has enabled me to succeed in assessment tasks.	2	3	2	11	82

Students were asked to indicate their perceptions of support personnel who had been helpful in their developing AEW skills. As shown in Table 4.7 below, the support personnel linked to student success with AEW skills at the University studied indicates a similar trend to that of Table 4.4, which showed students' perceptions of support personnel who were helpful in their development of academic skills. However, there are a few stark differences that highlight some interesting findings in this section. The first difference is that, unlike the findings shown in Table 4.4, the data in Table 4.7 show that students highly ranked 'other students', with 83% indicating that other students were helpful or very helpful for assisting them in developing AEW skills. When it came to accessing help for writing essays that required an argumentative element, the top score ranking of 83% shows that students preferred other students for help with these AEW skills, closely followed by academic skills personnel (80%) and, considerably further behind, class tutors (59%). In fourth and fifth positions were PASS (30%) and Mentor personnel (19%) respectively. Previous studies have highlighted the support aspects of academic staff; however, the literature lacks depth in investigating the supportive impacts of other students, PASS and Mentors on student success in the FYE at University. The data above in tables 4.3–4.7 highlight some key aspects that could possibly be investigated in a future study.

Table 4.7 Student Perceptions of Support Personnel who assist Students' to develop AEW Skills

Personnel	Not Applicable %	Very unhelpful %	Unhelpful %	Undecided %	Helpful %	Very helpful %
1. Tutors/Lecturers	0	6	12	23	46	13
2. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)	0	0	22	0	70	8
3. Mentors	48	0	23	0	16	13
4. Other Students	0	0	17	0	46	37
5. Academic Skills Unit	0	0	20	0	52	28

Table 4.8 Student Perceptions of the Number of Lessons/Consultations needed to develop AEW Skills

Personnel	Not Applicable %	Only 1 session %	Only 2-3 sessions %	Only 4-5 sessions %	Only 6-7 sessions %	8 or more sessions %

1. Tutors/Lecturers	0	0	95	0	0	5
2. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)	70	14	16	0	0	0
3. Mentors	92	5	3	0	0	0
4. Other Students	0	1	2	4	9	84
5. Academic Skills Unit	23	2	2	69	4	0

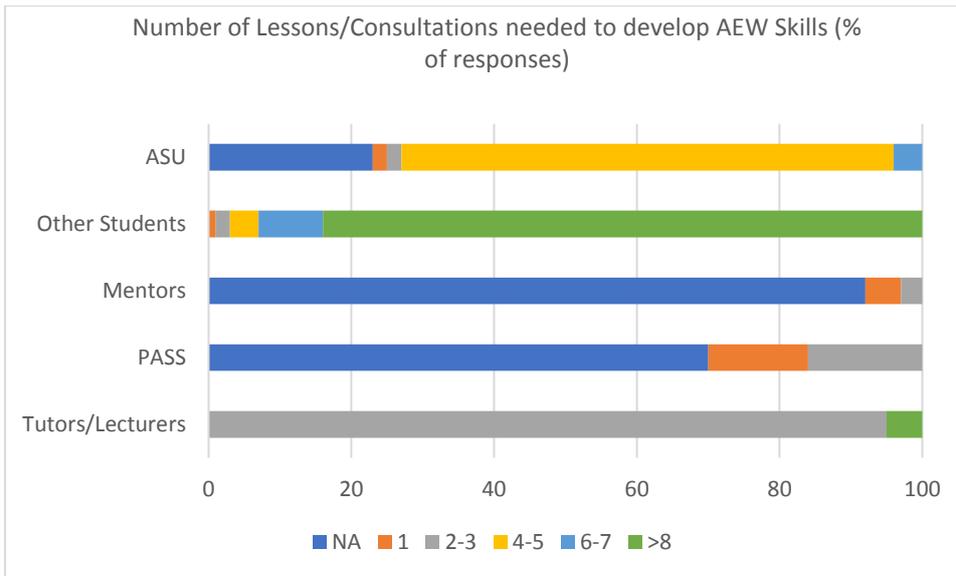


Table 4.8 displays the results the respondents indicated were important regarding AEW skills in their first-year experience at University. In Statement 1 regarding proficiency and AEW, none of the students chose strongly disagree, disagree, or undecided options in the survey. This indicated that, of the total number of respondents, about 23% agreed and a very high 77% strongly agreed that proficiency in AEW skills is needed in helping them with their first-year experience at SCU. It is also interesting to note that statements 2, 3, 4 and 7 about proficiency in AEW also garnered high scores regarding before, since and future study/assessment. The results show that a majority of these students indicated that AEW skills at University were very important. Another result worth noting is that for statements 5 and 6, most students indicated that they knew where to find help with AEW skills and that they accessed this support. However, there were still about 11% of the respondents not knowing or undecided about where to access help for AEW skills. Further, for Statement 6, there were approximately 7% of students who had not accessed help or were undecided. These data, although not alarming, still indicate that many students were not concerned or did

not know how to access support personnel for AEW skills – a point worth noting for this particular University. However, the results indicate the importance this cohort of students placed on obtaining help with AEW skills.

Table 4.8 follows on from Table 4.7 in that it presents results that specify *who* helped the students with AEW skills in their FYE at University. Approximately 44% of the respondents indicated that class tutors/lecturers were helpful and 18% indicated very helpful, for a total of 62%. However beneficial these results are, it must be highlighted that 20% were undecided and 18% stated that class tutors/lecturers were unhelpful/very unhelpful. This could indicate that the students did not understand the tutor's instructions about AEW skills, or that the students were given very little instruction about AEW skills.

Another important finding was that a very high percentage (88%) of students stated that Mentor help with AEW skills was not applicable, although this was not that surprising given that Mentors usually help with more generalised aspects of University life. The academic skills unit had very similar scores to that of class tutors/lecturers, although 27% of students deemed the academic skills unit to be unhelpful; this, like the class tutor/lecturer results, may indicate that the students did not understand the academic skills unit instructions about AEW skills, or, that the students were given very little instruction about AEW skills via this support unit.

A result from Table 4.8 shows that many students used the help of other students regarding assistance with AEW skills. 31% of respondents stated that other students were helpful and over half (53%) indicated that other students were very helpful with AEW skills, for a total of 84%. PASS results regarding AEW also scored very high, at 84% for helpful/very helpful. These are very significant facts and should be considered closely by the University in perhaps initiating student-led support programs and extending and/or modifying PASS programs.

The concluding section of the survey asked students to give some final thoughts to two questions. The responses were summarised in Table 4.9 below. In relation to the first optional question, which asked *What aspects of University have assisted you to succeed?*, these responses indicated a variety of strategies and support that students used to succeed in their first-year study experience. Some

of these responses – for example, highlighting other students, engaging tutors, and family support – relate directly to the study’s central theme of ‘relationships matter’ at the University studied. Other responses – time management, hard work and determination – highlight what these students see as being important to their study success in the FYE at University.

In relation to the second optional question (*What aspects of University have provided barriers/obstacles to you being successful?*),¹⁵ key themes were identified. These responses are also very important, as they indicated a variety of obstacles that could add to student disengagement and potentially contribute to attrition from study in the FYE at University. Further, the results for this question also align with studies that highlighted key areas that affect students’ ability to succeed in their first-year studies at University (Lizzio, 2008; Kuh, 2014; Tinto, 2017). The comments are important as they can inform the institution of study regime aspects that may need modifying or implementing in order to increase the engagement and success rates of all students.

Table 4.9 Student Responses to the Optional Questions in the Survey

Identified Key Aspects to Success	Identified Obstacles to Success
1. Family support	1. Lack of time
2. Time management	2. Not asking for help
3. The course of my choice	3. Too much work
4. Staff in general	4. Family commitment/my kids
5. Written communication/essay structure units	5. Not connecting with others
6. Belief in self – belief I can do it	6. Return to study after more than ten years/twenty years
7. Engaging tutors who deliver content	7. Computer hassles
8. Academic skills tutors	8. Online learning was difficult
9. UniMentor with online help	9. Lost enthusiasm
10. Focused determination	10. Tired/exhausted
11. Hard work	11. Money
	12. Boring tutors
	13. Challenging work/too much work
	14. Bored.

For the survey, the analysed data were utilised to help confirm the existence of the theorised constructs of student perceptions regarding support personnel and academic skills, including AEW skills. Elsewhere, Lizzio (2007), Kuh (2012) and Tinto (2012) agree that these two components are crucial for student success in University, and especially in the FYE (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012).

As mentioned in Chapter 3 of this thesis, the analysis of the data was used to help verify the respondents' answers to the various questions. This enabled the multi-variable data to be condensed to the important and more manageable key components confirming the existence of the already-defined constructs of support personnel and their connection to the students' academic writing, including AEW. The main components related to academic writing and AEW included class tutors/lecturers, academic skills tutors, other students, PASS tutors and Mentor personnel and are displayed in Tables 4.1–4.9 above. The results from the Likert-scale scores of the student choices of whom they believed to be most helpful with academic skills, as well as with AEW skills, were collated and then ranked 1–5, with 1 being the highest ranking. Table 4.4 displayed the percentage results of the students' preferred support personnel for academic skills and was based on the students *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing*. The top ranking was tutors/lecturers (87%), followed at ranking 2 by other students (80%), and academic skills tutors at ranking 3 (69%). PASS personnel (60%) and Mentors (36%) ranked at 4 and 5 respectively. Student preferences for AEW skills were investigated, after the students were asked what support personnel helped them the most with AEW skills, and was based on the students *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing*. These results, as per Table 4.7, also displayed a clear ranking for tutors/lecturers, academic skills tutors, other students, PASS tutors and Mentor personnel. This ranking showed PASS tutors (88%) at number 1, other students (83%) at number 2 and academic skills tutors (80%) at number 3 ranking. Class tutors (59%) and Mentors (29%) came in at 4 and 5 respectively. What was apparent in the overall analysis of the principal components was the importance of the students 'knowing someone' in that crucial first-year experience at University, as this is consistent

with *connectedness* as per Lizzio's model (2007) and Tinto's (2011) research on student engagement at University.

The aspects of support personnel such as class and academic skills tutors, other students, PASS tutors, and Mentor personnel, and their relationship to the first-year students' study habits, helped to create the idea that students were interacting with people, not merely study materials of textbooks, Unit Information Guides, textbooks and the like. Therefore, the terms relating to social interaction aspects that were used in this study, and which bear a strong connection with Activity Theory, helped present the PCA elements and, thus, define the essential components that were analysed.

In summary, the survey results showed student preferences for support personnel being class tutors followed closely by other students, and then academic skills tutors as student preferences for support personnel enabling students to gain skills in academic and AEW skills in their FYE. After these top three ranked preferences, PASS Tutors and Mentor personnel were seen as important to the students' first-year experience of acquiring and implementing academic and AEW skills. From the findings and subsequent analysis of the student survey, five major themes emerged that related to student perceptions about who were the most important support personnel to them, in their first year of University study. Those five themes were:

Theme 1: The acquisition and implementation of academic skills was very important to all students in their first year of University, regardless of previous study or of being first in the family to attend University.

Theme 2: The acquisition and implementation of Argumentative Essay Writing (AEW) skills was crucial to student success in the early days of University study.

Theme 3: Connecting with support personnel in the first year of study was very beneficial in contributing to a positive, engaging and successful outcome for University students.

Theme 4: Particular support personnel were instrumental in helping these first-year University students to acquire and implement academic, and especially AEW, skills.

Theme 5: The choice of specific support personnel was a personal student preference and what worked for one student did not necessarily work for others. Therefore, the choice of class and academic skills tutors, other students, PASS personnel and Mentor personnel, could play a vital role in a positive first-year University experience and possibly lead to ongoing engagement and success.

In conclusion, the research design and methodology involved the administration of a student survey that provided some baseline understandings prior to the following findings and analysis of the four case studies and the cross-case analysis presented in the following sections of the chapter.

4.3 Phase Two – Constructing the Case Studies

An important aspect of this study was to draw upon AT to explore the activity systems of the four students selected for the case studies. The conduct of interviews with those four students enabled the collection of data that was richer than the quantitative data obtained from the wider student survey. As Creswell has suggested, there are stories to tell, and qualitative research focuses on such detail (Creswell, 2016). The interviews allowed the researcher to gain important data from the students by way of the tone of their voice, body language and exhibited emotion about their experience. These are all rich details and although the quantitative method was also crucial, it did not allow for this deeper, personal, qualified information.

In addition, and drawing upon the AT framework, the four case studies of Jasmine, Dave, Kaz and Dane (not their real names) were investigated and analysed to examine and determine these deeper and richer responses from each of the four students. For the case study interview findings and analysis, each contained a description, data, and explanatory comment. The case studies are structured to provide findings and analysis in terms of the categories *About*

the Student, The Student's Activity System, The Student's Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel, and The Student's Case Study Commentary and Summary.

Therefore, the case studies present findings and discussion about each student and their experience with academic skills. In this study, examples of academic skills needed for successful study at University included, but were not limited to, preparing for and completing different forms of study and assessment tasks such as assignments, examinations, effective reading; taking notes at lectures and tutorials; and independent and collaborative study. Therefore, interview questions related specifically to these areas of study. Information was sought about the students' experience with argumentative essay writing (AEW) skills and the support personnel who had assisted them in their FYE. The interview also sought responses about the students' experience with academic skills, including AEW skills, before, as well as after their commencement of University study.

The discourse in these case studies is drawn from transcripts of the interviews and, therefore, includes interview responses from those students. Consistent with AT, the case studies attempted to illuminate any tensions and contradictions, relating to their FYE, with a specific focus on support personnel who assisted them. In the interviews, each student highlighted several institutional, academic, personnel and individual tensions, many of which related to issues faced by them during the FYE. These contradictions and student pressures are explained in the commentary and summary provided at the completion of each of the four case studies. This concluding commentary section is considered vital, as it accomplishes some important purposes and positions the data within an AT framework.

4.4 Case Study One Findings: Jasmine

4.4.1 About the Student

Jasmine was single and in her mid-twenties, studying full time with no other commitments, and was not first in her family to attend University. She had completed one year at University and had also studied at TAFE prior to coming to University. She had a solid foundation of writing, including informative essay

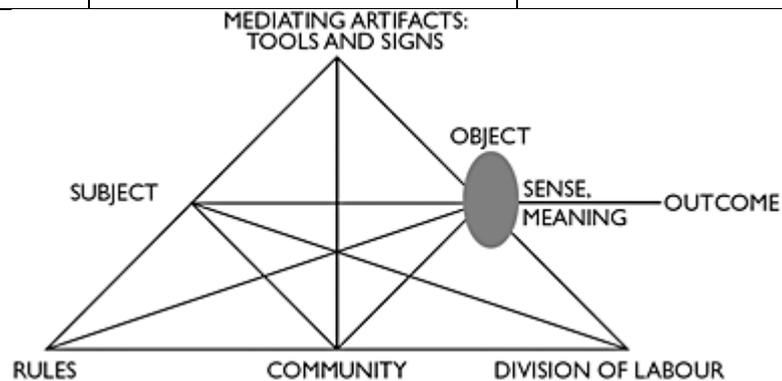
writing, from secondary school as well as TAFE. Jasmine had many years' experience in secondary and TAFE institutions and felt quite confident as a student. However, Jasmine had no formal training in referencing or writing argumentative essays, and she found this to be quite difficult in the initial stages of University study. The course in this interview was a first-year one and Jasmine indicated that essay writing was the main form of assessment tasks. She was studying full-time and this included completing four units of work per session with an approximate weekly workload of forty hours, including face-to-face classes and study time. Assessment tasks were presented in the form of questions set out in the Unit Information Guide, which was made available via the unit's Blackboard site. Jasmine frequently consulted other students and tutors for clarification of the correct essay format and she found that an AEW format was required.

4.4.2 Jasmine's Activity System

An overview of Jasmine's activity system (AS) is presented in Figure 4.1. The Subject part of Jasmine's AS captured her distinct characteristics, such as beliefs about AEW, learning and research and writing; individual abilities, thoughts and previous education practices, and is also outlined in her beliefs about AEW and learning section. The section that describes Jasmine's use of academic and AEW skills incorporates Mediating tools to explain the intellectual and material tools active in each stage of Jasmine's activity. The Object section outlines the purpose of the activity, and the Outcome section is presented to designate the proposed result of her activity. The outline of related essentials prompting the planning of AEW stages of the activity, are highlighted by elements presented in the Division of Labour, Community and Rules sections as shown in Figure 4.1 below.

The summary includes the key elements of an AT model relating to Jasmine and her academic and AEW study interactions with the University community. It highlights AT elements of subject, mediating tools, object, outcome, rules community and division of labour according to Engestrom's AT (1987).

SUBJECT	MEDIATING TOOLS	OBJECT
<p>Student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs (study/learning) • Personal qualities • Attitudes • Past experiences in learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning environment • Critical thinking • Unit Information Guide • AEW examples • Study strategies: pedagogical approach, study regime, assessment protocols, presentation of information in an AEW format 	<p>Planning a study regime to incorporate academic and AEW skills – essay writing.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OUTCOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stated course requirements • Students apply AEW skills • Sense of student responsibility for their own learning • Completed essay



RULES	COMMUNITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University culture and policies • Student ethical standards • Course rules and expectations of students • Unit expectations and guidelines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS personnel very significant • Mentor personnel less significant • Academic support staff and class tutors moderately significant • Other students very significant <p style="text-align: center;">DIVISION OF LABOUR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students – planner, researcher, writer, evaluator • University staff – course designer, facilitator, assessor

Figure 4.1 Activity Theory Model of Jasmine’s Study Activity System

4.4.3 Jasmine’s Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel

Jasmine acknowledged that she was a very competent student and noted how crucial the planning and implementing of academic skills were to her study regime. She was very aware of the difference between TAFE and University and the realities and responsibilities required of a successful University student. Jasmine was an example of a first student who was not first in the family to attend

University. She came from a family where her two sisters had already graduated with law degrees from University. Therefore, learning was about bringing her past academic experiences to the new arena of University study with the support of family members. She believed in steadfast application and immersing herself in situations where she had to develop and implement the academic and AEW knowledge and skills required to succeed in the first year at University. In her response, Jasmine identified a range of formal graduate characteristics to be accomplished by herself, and indeed all students completing the course. It was evident that Jasmine's designated characteristics were like those expected of a first-year University student. These characteristics included many academic skills, such as critical thinking, research, analysis and evaluation of the information, research and arguments and a steady progress of an articulate and controlled body of AEW skills. Jasmine's stated learning outcomes for her first year of study focused on the application of AEW skills, requiring that she establish and implement a robust range of research skills to empower her to produce extremely effective results in all assessment tasks related to research and essay writing.

In relation to her primary pedagogical/study beliefs, Jasmine's choice of student graduate qualities and learning outcomes showed a strong desire to be self-initiated in her study regime and, hence, achieve her educational goals as shown in Figure 4.2.

Jasmine placed immense value on using her past academic experiences from secondary education and TAFE and saw this as a very important foundation for University study. Individual stories were used to create connections for her between what she had previously learned about essay writing and the 'new' expectations placed on her for her first-year assessment tasks in AEW. Jasmine explained how she viewed the connection between past essay writing tasks and the current University practices using AEW:

I've had some past experience with essay writing... so that's very important to me although now at University, the requirements are quite different and AEW does have some new, and somewhat difficult protocols to follow – so I suppose learning is being able to use the previous experiences (of essay writing) and yet not be so set in my ways as to not allow new methods of writing to extend my

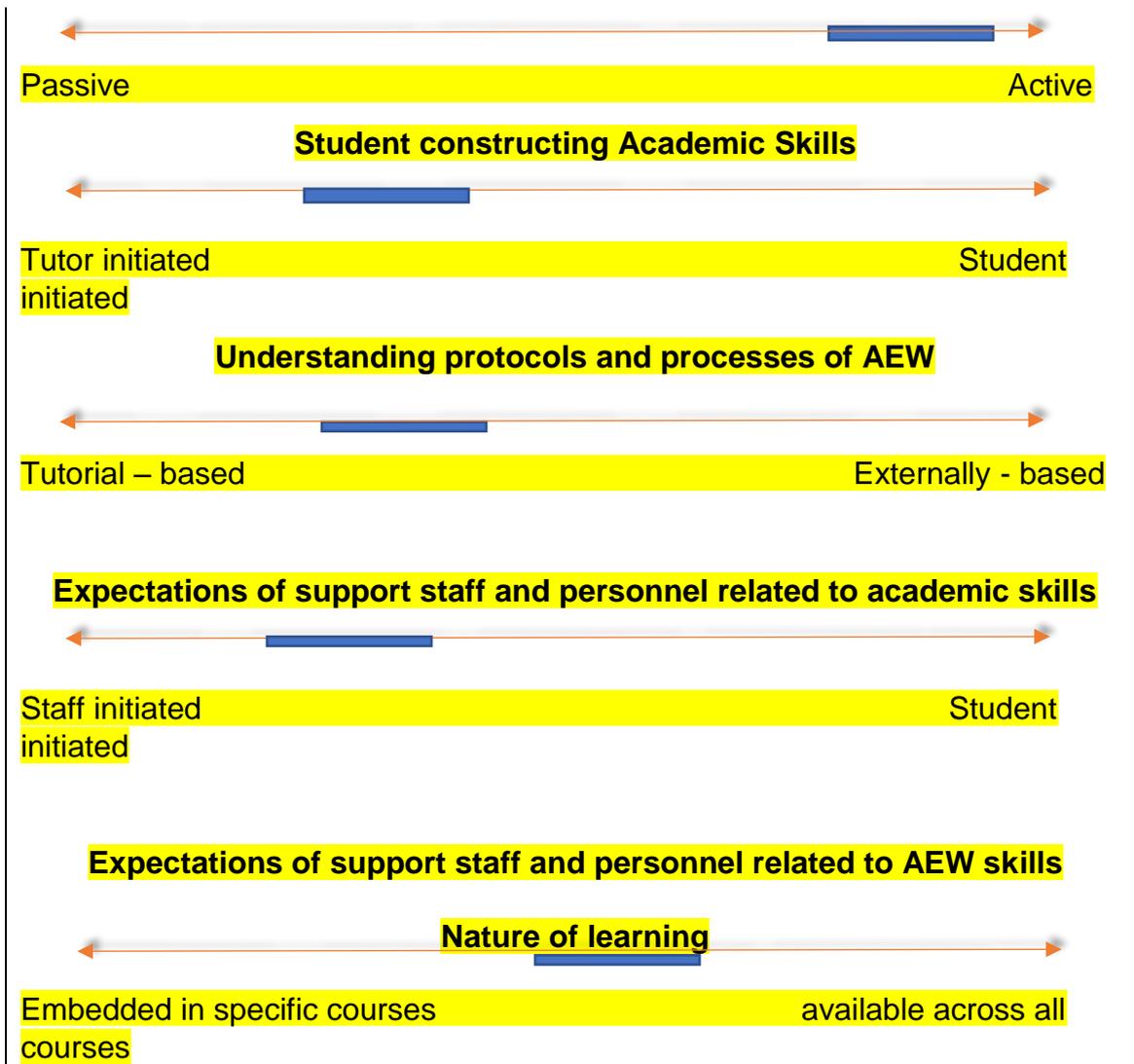
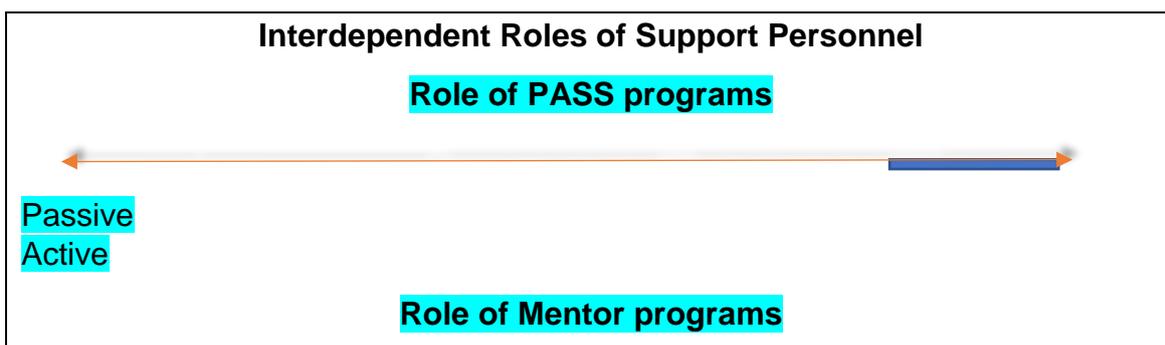


Figure 4.2 Jasmine's Beliefs about University Learning

Figure 4.3 below shows Jasmine's responses about who assisted her the most regarding the interdependent roles of support personnel. It clearly shows that Jasmine benefited most from PASS personnel, followed by other students and academic skills staff – although these were all mainly student-initiated.



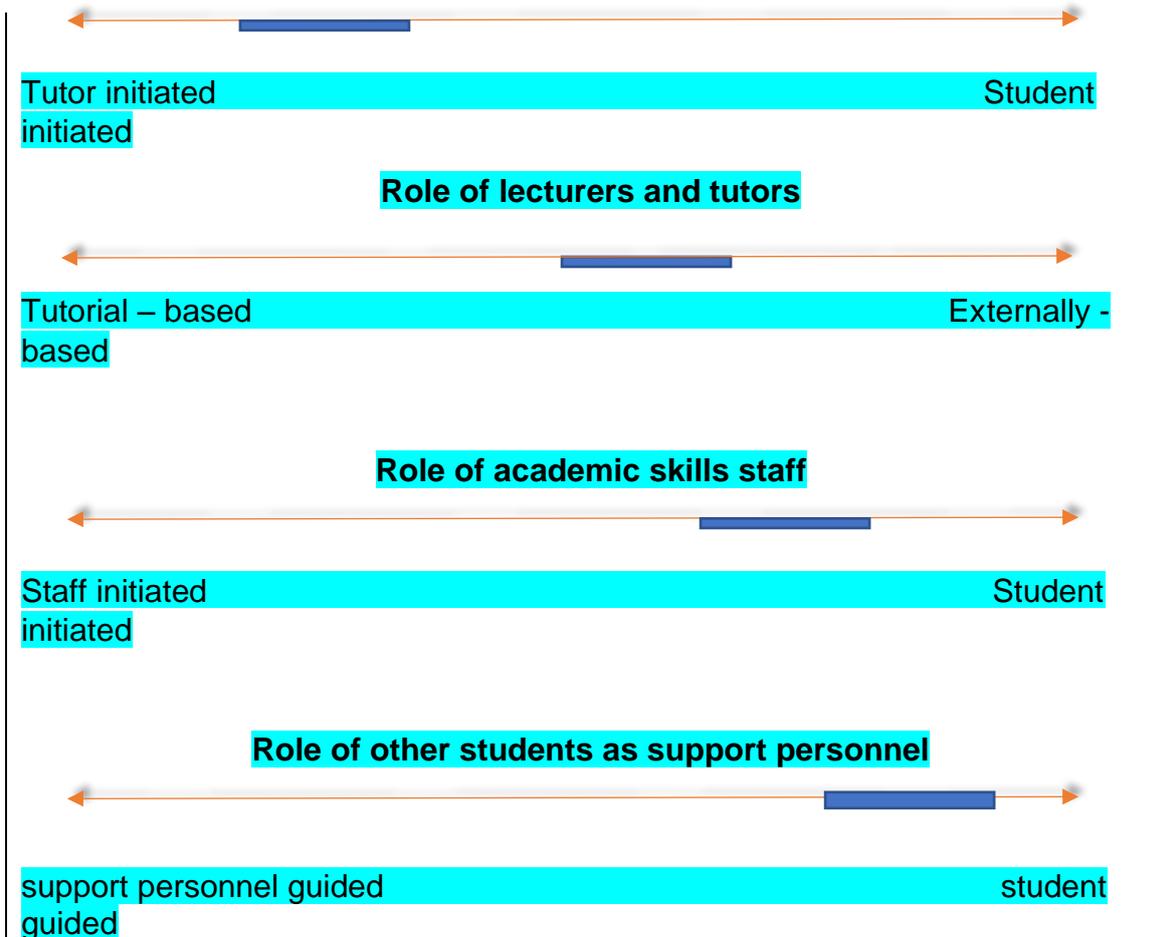


Figure 4.3 Jasmine’s Perceptions of the Interdependent Roles of Support Personnel

From Jasmine’s viewpoint, education appears to be essentially an intellectual constructivist process whereby the student, herself, initiates events that lead to theoretical and skill changes. It was evident that she was not expecting staff to track her down and come alongside her to help her reproduce the practical information of argumentative essay writing, but rather, found comfort in knowing that these support personnel were available if she needed the assistance.

Jasmine’s perspective on the nature of learning *and* the role of student responsibility and learning is suggestive of a belief that students learn dynamically, using the elements of a constructivist approach to learning, display behaviours of initiating and developing their own learning, as shown in Figure 4.2. Jasmine’s explanations and her declaration about student engagement, promoted a belief that University students should develop their own first-year study processes, such as sourcing materials (including the Unit Information Guide and course Readings), as well as the support personnel, including tutors,

PASS, Mentors or other students if needed. Jasmine's viewpoint specifies a belief that University students in the FYE should be accountable for altering their method of learning and are, therefore, dynamic managers in creating their own knowledge. Jasmine's perspective on learning and study is, therefore, suitably designated on the part of her belief profile as student-initiated. However, Jasmine was adamant that in the areas of students constructing academic skills and understanding protocols and processes of AEW, the University staff played a more active role in helping to construct this knowledge (see Figure 4.3).

Jasmine was specific in what she understood by the terms 'learning and education' as processes whereby first-year University students developed a profound understanding of developing academic and AEW skills on an interpersonal level and from a self-initiated perspective. Jasmine expanded on this idea:

Learning for me was to engage with academic and AEW skills and to have a better idea of applying these skills to all areas of study... learning procedures... or formulas... is more than what the tutor is saying... more about 'how can I go away and apply these concepts and skills... and... can PASS or academic skills staff help me?... and... um... how *much* can they help me? [laughs]. (Jasmine, Interview response)

Jasmine also distinguished her secondary studies from University. She noted that, although there are similar aspects of secondary study, at University much more is expected of the student and, therefore, having a support person was crucial to her success.

As a student in the FYE at University, you're learning things like you learned at school or TAFE, however, there is much more depth here at uni... and much more is expected of you... pity about that! [laughter]. Often, I feel how inspired I am and wow... the difference between school is amazing and sometimes a bit scary! I'm willing now to continue to learn more so I think having support personnel like PASS, or academic skills or other students as Study Buddies, is VERY [Jasmine's emphasis] important and this builds confidence in me! Motivation... I gain encouragement and help from these personnel... my learning was linked to this community of teachers and learners. (Jasmine, Interview response)

Jasmine stated that learning, for her, was more than just information from a teacher or tutor. She held a learning/study conception whereby University students discovered ways of knowing their own learning by initiating and developing their capabilities and skills. Therefore, in Jasmine's case, learning is apparent when she is driven and encouraged to learn more of her own accord. This viewpoint strengthens Jasmine's opinion that students are dynamic managers in their own learning process and supports the characteristics stated in her belief system on the active role University students should take with their coursework and consulting support personnel if needed. This interpretation is suggestive of a belief exhibited in the expectations of support staff and personnel related to academic and AEW skills; that it is balanced between student and support personnel, as shown on Jasmine's belief profile in Figure 4.3.

Jasmine was a robust advocate of academic learning and compared her prior involvement in using academic learning responsibilities at school and now at University:

I think academic learning skills, and especially AEW are some of the most important skills to learn at University – they teach you how to think and write critically and not just copy information from a textbook (like I did in high school) [laughs]. I've found I have been more motivated by this type of learning as it is not just rote learning but we have to really think about our response and academic skills and AEW forces you to do that. (Jasmine, Interview response)

Jasmine also commented that, at University, the type of learning is different to that of secondary studies. She intimated that learning at University was much more beneficial; similarly, Dane had also mentioned that 'the great thing about University, is that it teaches you how to think' (Dane, Interview Response). Jasmine also mentioned that she is motivated by this type of learning at University:

I have been much more motivated by that kind of learning. It also helps in knowing that we will take these skills into our own classrooms when we graduate – this is great because it is not just learning skills to 'get by' and pass an assignment (although that's great too) [laughs]. These are skills that will benefit our own teaching career in real learning experiences like approaching our

teaching from a critical thinking perspective and passing that on to our students – that’s rewarding! (Jasmine, Interview response)

In particular, Jasmine saw academic tasks, including critical thinking, as a chance for University students to develop the anticipated learning characteristics and qualities of pre-service teachers that can be taken into the professional field upon graduation from University. Further to her example above, Jasmine also stated an example of how she felt in the FYE at University relating to academic skills:

Teaching is very much a job about helping others to learn most efficiently – it is much about teaching students to become interdependent. When I came to University, I thought I had to do it all myself (and I was prepared to do that!). Then I discovered some wonderful support programs that would help me with my studies... help me... not do it for me!... I wish [laughs]. (Jasmine, Interview response)

Jasmine indicated her reliance on support personnel even though at first, she believed that learning at University was entirely up to the student – she understood the interdependence of working together with support personnel. Jasmine continues:

I used Mentors and academic skills staff (I even applied to become a PASS tutor – I didn’t get it!) and of course having a class Study Buddy or two was very helpful – just to bounce things off for support you know... And if you don’t have that... you know, that community of support personnel, I think it is much harder to navigate through the ocean of learning in the FYE at University – much harder than at TAFE or school. Resilience and tenacity, are big ones... not till they begin these academic and AEW learning skills... really... they have no idea of how to *really* approach an assignment task. (Jasmine, Interview response)

Jasmine quickly understood the need to access academic help was not an admission of defeat, but a clearer understanding of her working with the University community in her own activity system:

...especially with essay writing, yes, that was my defining moment... hey, I can do this! And... my average grade has been Distinction since I learned these AEW skills. Before that, I struggled greatly! (Jasmine, Interview response)

In Jasmine's study practices, qualities including confidence and resilience were best learned through the various support interactions with other University students. Jasmine's perspective suggested she valued engagement and close relationships in the learning activities themselves and in the comments and interactions from other students in the FYE. Further, her beliefs about study suggested an idea that the orientation process, and ongoing engagement relationships for Jasmine with PASS, subject and academic skills tutors, and other students, were crucial to her success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE at University.

Jasmine was also convinced that she became a vital and active University student through having the opportunity to interact with support personnel as well as navigate many of the coursework idiosyncrasies, and by producing argumentative essays that depicted a strong critical thinking element. Even though Jasmine agreed about the importance of lectures, tutorials and support staff, she was convinced that a student-initiated response to study was a number one priority for her. She stated:

They can assist me and guide me and tell me about critical thinking and writing but ultimately, it's me who produces the final essay for my course assessment task – the support personnel are appreciated, however, the responsibility and the hard part is still on the student... on me! (Jasmine, Interview response)

After Jasmine accessed support staff, she was excited to know that they could be called upon at different times within the session. However, she quickly discovered that the responsibility of completing assessment tasks was still with her.

I originally thought 'this is great, extra staff who will kind of do my assignments' [Jasmine laughs] but it wasn't like that at all – the staff were more like 'life coaches' who were there to support, direct and encourage. I personally found academic skills to be very helpful – although I only went there a few times... but that was enough to get me on the right track academically. (Jasmine, Interview response)

From a student perspective, Jasmine's beliefs were clearly concerned with 'student guided' applications to study, with the view that student engagement in University studies should be sourced by students, which leads to professionalism in the discipline of learning and ways forward. Jasmine's disposition is depicted in the importance of the roles of support personnel (see Figure 4.3).

Jasmine indicated that early and effective communication with the support staff and continuous engagement with the course materials was an essential FYE skill that should be learned and implemented by all first-year students. In her study specialisation of Secondary English, Jasmine explicitly identified academic and AEW University student attributes she expected to build on in her future career as a teacher. These FYE student attributes included demonstration of critical thinking protocols; ability to research information; the ability to plan an essay including using a mind map, introduction, body and conclusion; ability to find and incorporate credible sources to support her essay argument; and the ability to draft, edit and submit a completed argumentative essay that follows the requirements of the education course as per the Unit Information Guide. In terms of reinforcing robust student practices and professional performance related to AEW skills, Jasmine expected students to engage with the course materials and support personnel and use the many study aids at their disposal. Jasmine's high expectations and desire for FYE professionalism sustained her in this crucial first-year University experience and enabled her to go from a Pass/Credit average to Distinction in assessment tasks. To Jasmine, student expectations and the actual practice of support staff at University were important, indeed, paramount to her success in the FYE with academic and AEW skills as depicted on her role expectations of support staff and personnel related to academic and AEW skills; this was an implicit and central element of Jasmine's perception of student expectations at University and this is replicated in her profile (Figure 4.2).

In an atmosphere where the refined application of academic and AEW skills was esteemed and expected, Jasmine regarded assessment as a means by which students and tutors alike can judge the correctness of any given task 'so I can know for sure my level of achievement, and hopefully use the results of the assessment to help me maintain a high standard of engagement and success' (Jasmine, Interview). One of Jasmine's key expectations was that, regardless of

help from supportive personnel, she should be able to produce a work of high standard and sophistication'. Jasmine explained this:

Learning outcomes are evaluated via assessment tasks... it is a way of seeing if I've got it or not – it sort of puts the theory of teaching into practice whenever I produce an argumentative essay – or any other assessment task. I obtain the feedback and make adjustments accordingly on the next assignments...and that's exactly what I've done... and it works! [laughs]. (Jasmine, Interview response)

Although Jasmine admitted she initially found it difficult to navigate this new world of University assessment tasks, for her, it was clear that the assessable items required students to initiate engagement from the onset of study and employ the skills and attributes of a first-year University student. Jasmine explained that to be successful in these assessment tasks, she had to combine her knowledge of academic requirements given via the UIGs in the Bachelor of Education course, with information in lectures, as well as the advice given by the support personnel. As these assessment tasks were a prerequisite to advancement in the course, it was evident that Jasmine tacitly believed that she must integrate, transform, engage with supportive personnel, and use this AEW assessment information decisively, as is presented in her belief profile (Figure 4.2).

In her responses, Jasmine stated that more planned support should be given to all students in the FYE about the types of support personnel who are available on campus. She admitted that she found out too late that these services were advertised during Orientation Week but quipped 'not all students go to all O Week sessions... I obviously didn't [laughs]' (Jasmine, Interview response). Jasmine also indicated that it would be beneficial for the students if the University were to advertise these support services via bulk emails, in the first tutorial/lecture, or even distributed as a text message – 'everyone's got an iPhone these days! Why not?' (Jasmine, Interview response).

Nevertheless, Jasmine was of the opinion that once students are at University, the onus is on them to navigate all the areas of the FYE, including academic and AEW skills. She added that students need to know that understanding the expectations and roles of a student in the FYE will equip the students for the

necessary assessment production processes needed for the second-year course. In her discourse, Jasmine specified in some detail the responsibility in the various tasks (critical thinking, research, referencing, editing and final essay) that students would be required to achieve in their assessment tasks. She also stated that these skills would carry over to every year of study at University: 'I'm in my third year of study and I still use these academic skills that I learned in the FYE' (Jasmine, Interview response).

Jasmine indicated very strongly the importance of all students being knowledgeable about the way academic and AEW requirements would be applied over the course of study at University, reinforcing the importance of the support personnel in the FYE. She posits that students need to check and monitor their own knowledge of the course protocols and their own involvement in the first-year study tasks. Jasmine did not anticipate the knowledge gap that she experienced coming from school to University, and the support personnel helped fill this gap early in her learning cycle. This was clearly expressed in her interview, and her response displays a firm belief in the interdependent roles of support personnel (Figure 4.2) that is also reflected in Activity Theory.

The next parts of the study detail Jasmine's involvement in her orientation to study phases of her course. Student and support personnel influences on the object of learning academic and AEW skills in the FYE are presented as student learning beliefs, individual education abilities, attitudes and previous practices relating to the present activity of first-year University study. The tools mediating this activity include both academic skills and practices specifically related to argumentative essays, physical tools (Readings, UIG and course instructions) and cognitive tools (critical thinking and writing). Relative impacts are considered in the form of institutional limitations and problems linked to the characteristics of the students in the FYE.

4.4.4 Jasmine's Case Study Commentary and Summary

In Jasmine's case study, the interview responses indicated that the main concern, at first, was building resilience and determination into her study regime and integrating the relatively new aspects of academic and AEW skills and practices wherever possible. She encountered significant academic and educational

changes compared to her time at school and TAFE and, during this FYE phase, faced the predicament of how to apply her intended development of study within a first-year culture that included vital relationship interactions with her tutors, PASS, academic skills and other student support personnel. Jasmine's actions in reply to this tension are viewed as per her learning beliefs and how she altered her study regime with the fact that her average grades became Distinction as a direct result of these socio-cultural interactions with support personnel.

Being single and studying full-time with no other commitments enabled her to completely focus on doing well in the FYE. Jasmine's already solid foundation of writing, including informative essay writing, was a help, although she soon discovered that AEW was a very different assessment task. She indicated that she had no formal training in referencing or writing argumentative essays, and she found this to be quite difficult in the preliminary stages of University study. Her first-year assessment tasks required essay writing presented in the form of questions set out in the UIG, which was made available via the unit's Blackboard site. Although reluctant at first, as she wanted to be totally independent in her study regime, Jasmine quickly realised the importance of socio-cultural relationships in the FYE at University. Further, she utilised the support personnel of PASS, academic skills and other students for clarification of the correct essay format and she found these steps to be most beneficial and resulted in her ongoing success of achieving Distinction average for all assessment tasks by the end of the FYE.

Jasmine's activity system (AS), presented in Figure 4.1, captured her distinct characteristics (including beliefs about AEW, learning, reading, research and writing), individual assets, attitudes and previous education practices, and is described in her beliefs about AEW and learning section. The preparation and procurement of academic and AEW skills for an Education course in the FYE at University incorporated the AT element of Mediating tools to illuminate the intellectual and physical elements active in each stage of the activity; the Object part to explain the goal, or objective, of the activity, and the Outcomes to designate the planned outcomes of the activity. The contextual components prompting the preparation, attainment and implementation of AEW parts were

guided by these components as presented in the Division of Labour, Community and Rules as displayed in Figure 4.1.

The activity system for Jasmine helped articulate what was important for her in her study regime and includes the key elements of an AT model relating to her academic and AEW study interactions with the University community, and particularly support personnel. It highlights AT elements of subject, mediating tools, object, outcome, rules community and division of labour according to Engestrom's AT (1987).

4.5 Case Study Two Findings: Dave

4.5.1 About the Student

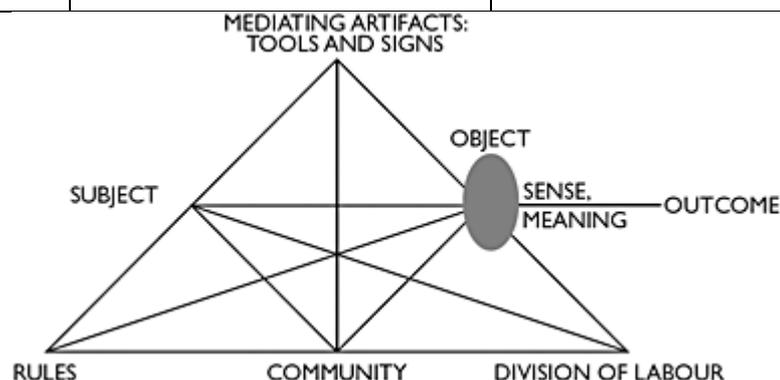
Dave was married with no children and in his late-thirties. He was studying part-time and was the first in his family to attend University. He worked part-time with a local airline, which involved overnight shift work. He had completed three years at University and had not studied for over eighteen years prior to coming to University. He had a developing foundation of writing – including reports, journals and informative essay writing – from secondary school as well as some workplace activities. At the time of Dave's FYE at University, he had many years' experience in the workplace but felt that his confidence as a student of academia needed a lot of work. Having had little to no formal training in academic writing, critical thinking, research, referencing or writing argumentative essays, he found this very difficult in the initial stages of University study. The course referred to in Dave's interview was a first-year one and he indicated that essay writing was the main form of assessment tasks, which he initially knew very little about. He was completing two to three units of work per session, with an approximate weekly workload of twenty to thirty hours including face-to-face classes and study time. Assessment tasks were presented in the form of questions set out in the Unit Information Guide, which was made available via the unit's Blackboard site. Dave frequently consulted academic skills and subject tutors for clarification of the correct assessment (and especially essay) format, and he found that an AEW format was required.

4.5.2 Dave's Activity System

Figure 4.4 below outlines Dave's activity system. Similar to the other respondents, the Subject part of Dave's activity captures his distinct features, including beliefs about AEW, University study and research and writing; individual abilities, attitudes and prior educational practices and beliefs about University and learning. The preparation for a course using AEW and Learning AEW skills parts include the Mediating tools element to illuminate the intellectual and physical tools active throughout all sections of his activity; the Object part explains the goal of the activity, and the Outcomes specify the proposed outcomes of the activity. The Division of Labour, Community and Rules parts, give support to the related elements about the planning and AEW stages of the activity.

The summary includes the key elements of an AT model relating to his academic and AEW study interactions with the University community. It highlights AT elements of subject, mediating tools, object, outcome, rules community and division of labour according to Engestrom's AT (1987).

SUBJECT	MEDIATING TOOLS	OBJECT
<p>Student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs (study/learning) • Personal qualities • Attitudes • Past experiences at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning environment • Critical thinking, journals, reports • Unit Information Guide • Academic skills, AEW examples • Study strategies: pedagogical approach, study regime, assessment protocols, presentation of information in an AEW format 	<p>Planning a study regime to incorporate academic skills and AEW – research skills and essay writing</p> <p>OUTCOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stated course requirements • Students apply AEW skills • Sense of student responsibility for their own learning • Completed essay



RULES	COMMUNITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University culture and policies • Student ethical standards • Course rules and expectations of students • Unit expectations and guidelines • Time constraints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Skills and class tutors very significant • PASS personnel very significant • Mentor personnel less significant • Other students less significant <p style="text-align: center;">DIVISION OF LABOUR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students – planner, researcher, writer, evaluator • University staff – course designer, facilitator, assessor, support

Figure 4.4 Activity Theory Model of Dave’s Study Activity System

4.5.3 Dave’s Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel

Dave stated that he saw himself as a novice student who knew that planning and implementing his own study regime in an effective and strategic manner was extremely important. He was very aware that he had not studied for many years and was looking for effective ways of developing the impetus to begin well. He was also very conscious of the tensions that his new study regime would place on him, his wife and his part-time job and was realistic about the requirements of the FYE at University and the responsibilities of a successful University student. None of Dave’s family members had attended University, nor did they offer much support or encouragement to Dave in his new venture in higher education. However, although his wife had not gone to University, she was supportive and encouraging and believed in Dave’s goal. Therefore, Dave entered the FYE experience with mixed emotions, but knew that dedicated application and immersing himself into University study would require him to develop and demonstrate the cognitive and academic responses and AEW skills crucial to his academic success.

In his responses, Dave recognised many first-year student qualities that were required of him, and this at first seemed quite daunting – similar to the other students in this study, time constraints, as depicted in his activity system model, were an initial concern for Dave upon entering University. It was clear that the study expectations expected of first-year University students, and especially for pre-service teachers completing a degree in Education, would need to be acquired and implemented by Dave if he were to succeed in the FYE. Like the

other students, these first-year study skills included critical thinking, analysis and evaluation of claims, evidence and arguments, and the ability to communicate efficiently with a range of audiences. For Dave and the other students, other essential skills involved the ability to write logically and the development of a clear and well-organised body of AEW skills. Dave's stated learning outcomes for the first year of study, were centred on the implementation of AEW skills, requiring him to create a solid range of research and writing skills to enable him to produce effective results in assessment tasks related to reading, research and writing. Pertaining to his beliefs about study, Dave's choice of first-year student characteristics and learning outcomes showed a very clear connection to support personnel.

Dave stated the importance of using his past workplace experiences, including journal writing and public speaking, and he saw this as an essential foundation for University study. Individual narratives were used to generate links for him between what he had previously learned about essay writing and the 'new' expectations placed on him for his first-year assessment tasks in the area of AEW. Dave explained how he viewed the connection between past essay writing tasks and the current University practices using AEW:

Here's a good point... I had relatively no past experiences with essay writing – that I can remember! [laughs] ... the requirements are different and AEW does have some new, and very difficult protocols to follow. I was quite scared and overwhelmed in the first session especially. I had not made many friends because of commitments to my wife and my job. I had to learn all these new academic things... there were too many... really, there were too many, I had to call on tutors (who didn't help a lot) [laughs] but also yeah... academic skills personnel were great for me... a life saver really! They showed me new methods of writing to extend my skills further – and hopefully succeed even more in all academic areas... I think I have... [laughs] yes, I have! (Dave, Interview response)

Dave saw that it was his responsibility to initiate learning but also felt that some traditional support personnel were simply not available due to his own time constraints of working overnight shifts and then feeling very tired at times on campus. Dave mentioned several times that often the class tutors were not available, and that, 'sometimes they never replied to my emails' (Dave, Interview

response), and the connection with other students was often non-existent, as Dave had to race off to work after tutorials. However, Dave saw that it was still his responsibility, and his wife encouraged him to identify other sources of help at University that could accommodate his busy study/family/work regime. This proved a beneficial step as Dave made connections with Academic Skills personnel and eventually PASS tutors in Session 2 of his FYE. Dave mirrored the other participants' views and stated emphatically that, at times, the stimulus and opportunity for students to learn may come from the staff, but the ultimate responsibility to learn academic and AEW skills at tertiary levels is with the student. The transforming of theory to practice and then implementation of the related AEW skills can also be an interdependent aspect when the various personnel are called upon to assist (an AT community is at work). Dave added:

After starting University, my belief about learning has changed greatly as I originally thought that tutors would chase you up to assist with structure, content, assessments etc... but I found out early that it doesn't happen at University – my wife quipped 'you're not at school now Dave' [laughs] – and that helped me a lot although initially it was a shock. Learning is my responsibility... I know that now... tutors don't chase me up, and rightly so. I construct my own learning with the help of other personnel to assist an independent approach to my own learning has helped a lot. (Dave, Interview response)

Figure 4.5 below displays results from Dave's interview questions regarding his beliefs about University learning. The various parts of the continuum for Dave display, similar to Jasmine, what he believed to be important concerning the nature of learning and depicts a mid-range score for the first continuum and then a strong student active response for the second section regarding student responsibility in learning. The next three sections depict a solid tutor/staff involvement for attaining academic and AEW skills and who should initiate this involvement. Dave was concerned about being initially active in his own learning regime, although he clearly shows a need for staff/tutorials to play a role in the acquisition of academic and AEW skills. Figure 4.5 also depicts his beliefs about personnel related to AEW; these were located between being embedded in specific courses and being available across all courses.

Beliefs about University Learning

These responses were informed by the responses to the interview questions.

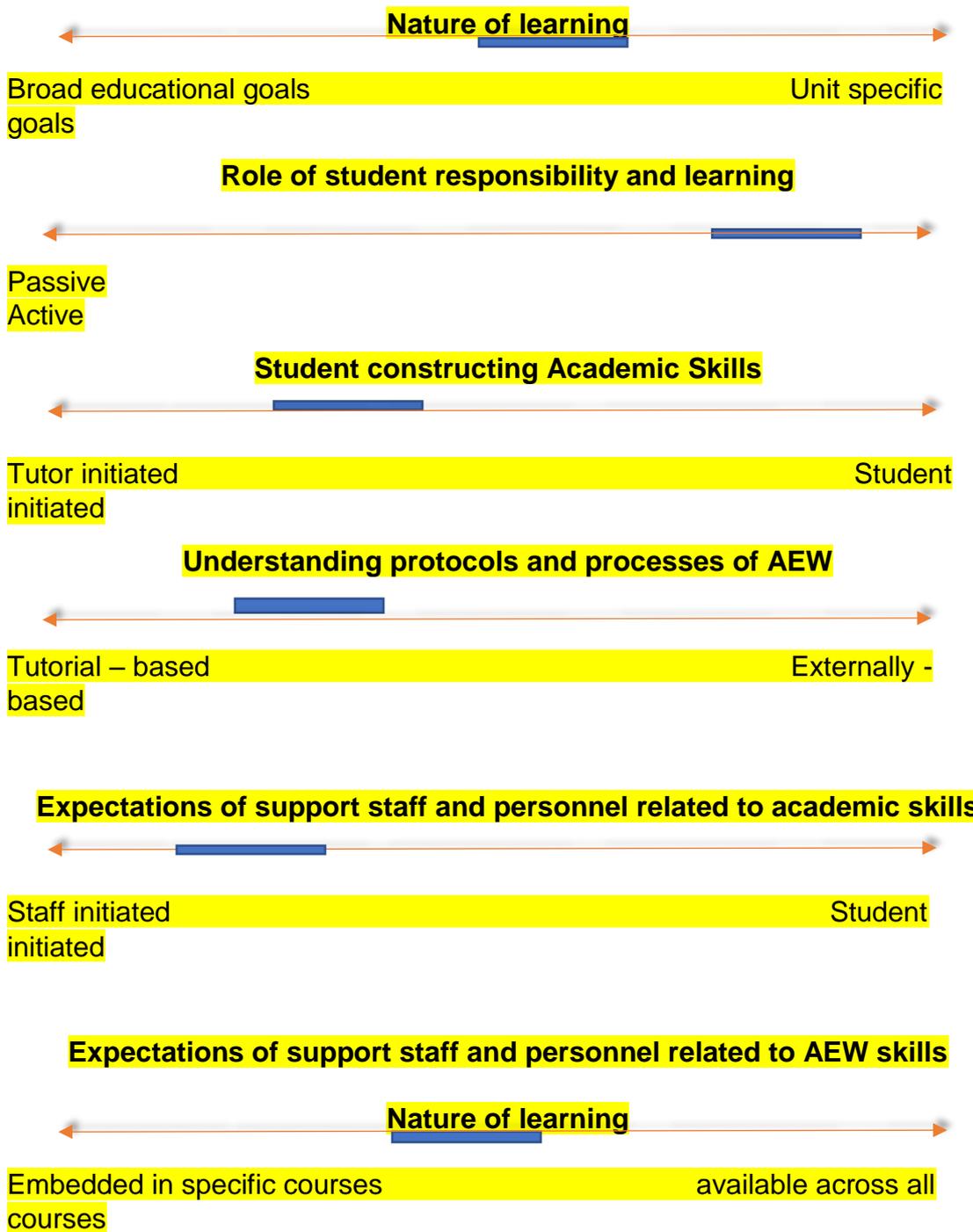


Figure 4.5 Dave's Beliefs about University Learning

Dave's results in Figure 4.6 below show responses about who assisted him the most regarding the interdependent roles of support personnel. It clearly shows that Dave benefited most from PASS personnel, followed by tutors and academic

study. This was evident in his application of skills pertaining to argumentative essay writing.

Dave's perception of the nature of learning and the role of student responsibility and learning supports the belief that students learn actively and, via the elements of a constructivist approach to study, display behaviours of initiating and developing their own learning (see Figure 4.5). Dave's remarks, and his account of student engagement, clearly suggest that University students should develop their own learning processes, e.g. by sourcing materials, as well as sourcing support personnel (including, for him, PASS personnel, tutors and academic skills staff) if needed. This perspective indicates a belief that University students in the FYE, should be responsible for changing their way of knowing and learning study skills, and should develop and implement their own knowledge and skills within an activity system. Dave's stance is, therefore, suitably specified on the dimension of his belief profile as student-initiated. However, Dave explained that in the areas of student constructing academic skills and understanding protocols and processes of AEW, the University academic skills staff played an active role in helping him to construct this knowledge, especially in the early part of his FYE (Figure 4.6).

Dave understood the term 'learning', although his definition of the term changed greatly from the one he said that he held in secondary school. He saw it as a progression whereby first-year University students develop a strong knowledge of the requirements and expectations of AEW on a level that incorporates support personnel as well as his own self-initiated activities. He described his notion:

I feel equipped and motivated now... I didn't feel like this at first... I wanted to give up because the distance between my secondary schooling days and University seemed too great – I have a great wife... she pushed me and said, 'you're not giving up Dave!' [laughs] she's encouraging... So, for me, the difference between school is mind-boggling and very scary at first! I'm willing now to continue to learn more so I think having support personnel like academic skills staff and tutors and PASS... and then eventually many other students, has helped me greatly! I would have given up... really, I would have... (Dave, Interview response)

Dave at first found himself in despair because he thought that he would never be able to regain his years of study since high school – he initially thought that it was impossible. His activity system involved substantial help from support personnel and this encouraged him greatly to continue:

[N]ow I'm preparing for my Masters – how cool's that! Learning is engaging with as many personnel who can help you with academic and AEW skills – or any other skills... and to have a better understanding of applying these skills. I've learned that the stakes are high – I'm paying for this learning [laughs]... but there is much more depth here at uni... and I will become a teacher... I will! [laughs]. (Dave, Interview response)

Dave's interview responses above suggest that he adopted a study perspective that involved support from many personnel, including his wife, tutors and, eventually, other University students. His perspective reinforces his view that although it is often very difficult to begin studies at University, students who are active agents in their own learning processes, and call upon support personnel to assist them with these new academic skills, are more likely to stay engaged and succeed with their studies (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012). As with Jasmine's responses, Dave's account also aligns with the attributes specified in his belief system requiring the engagement of University students with the coursework and then consulting various support personnel if needed. This understanding is suggestive of a belief displayed in the expectations of support staff and personnel related to academic and AEW skills, that it is balanced between the University student and the University support personnel and is presented as such on Dave's belief profile (Figure 4.5).

Of the case study interviews, Dave displayed a strong propensity to acquire academic knowledge and skills in his FYE, and recalled that his previous, less-confident experiences in using academic learning tasks at school had changed for the better now he was at University:

I struggled at first but with much perseverance and help from the support personnel (and my wife!) [laughs], I know that I now possess the academic skills to complete my undergraduate degree and go on to my Masters. I will use these learned skills in my teaching...I already have on my Pracs. (Dave, Interview response)

Dave was very clear about how University study had transformed his entire attitude to learning and that the support personnel were a direct driver of his new positive approach to education:

I've gone from just getting by in assessment tasks and going for a Pass grade to now wanting, and gaining, Ds and HDs in most of my assignments. Academic and AEW skills have helped me so much... and of course the people who have guided me in this journey... mainly academic skills staff and PASS tutors... yes very helpful... can I recommend them? [laughs]. It helped to motivate me in the early stages of my FYE at University... it's great! (Dave, Interview response)

In particular, Dave saw academic tasks, including critical thinking, as a chance for him to advance the behavioural characteristics and traits of a pre-service teacher, which he can now take into the professional field upon graduation from University. Further to his example above, Dave also stated how he felt in the FYE at University in relation to academic skills:

Due to not studying for close to twenty years, I felt very much behind in the skills required for University engagement and success. That is probably why I did not enter University earlier – I felt under-educated and the learning curve just seemed too steep. The impetus came from two sources: my wife and my job as a part-time flight attendant. I love the job but did not see myself as doing it forever... the unusual working hours as a flight attendant also caused some angst with socialising with family and friends... often my wife had to go to the events on her own and that's not good. (Dave, Interview response)

Dave, like Jasmine also had a preconceived idea that University study was all about the student doing everything. But he, too, soon learned that University was a community designed to help students connect and succeed. His activity system soon became one that involved the interdependence aspect and this led to his engagement and success:

So, I thought, 'that's it, I got to get educated!' and here I am... [laughs]. Teaching is about helping others and I love on my Pracs when I help students to become interdependent. I am a walking example of this interdependence at University. I am so glad I didn't have to do it all myself because quite frankly, without the various support personnel, I know I would have joined the University attrition list. The support programs that have helped me were academic skills staff (I

really pestered them I think) [laughs]) and PASS tutors...yes... very helpful.
(Dave, Interview response)

As in Jasmine's interview, traits such as confidence, resilience and self, were behavioural traits Dave believed were best learned through engagement with other University personnel in the early stages of study in higher education. Dave's perspective suggested that he valued engagement and close relationships and guidance from the support staff in the FYE learning activities. Further, in relation to his now-entrenched ideas about learning and study at University, Dave held a conception that the beginning processes, and the ongoing engagement relationships with support from tutors, PASS, academic skills tutors, were vital to his success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE at University.

Although Dave was very appreciative of the interactions with lecturers, tutorials and other students over the course of his study, he saw that without his own initiative he would not have succeeded to this extent. Dave added that support personnel had helped him navigate the many and varied academic tensions and contradictions of University study, and especially with writing argumentative essays. Dave saw that his interactions with the wider academic community of the University were essential to his engagement and success in his FYE; and this belief supports Activity Theory's focus on the need for socio-cultural interactions within communities and organisations. Dave stated:

I personally found myself floundering in the first few weeks and wanted to bail there and then... I really did no joke [laughs]. I am not sure if this was because of my already entrenched negative mindset about my inability to succeed in study, or because the work was just full on! [laughs] It really was... then academic reading and writing... I'm thinking 'what is that!' [laughs]. (Dave, Interview response)

Dave had previous negative self-talk about study, which had some basis in fact as he had not performed well in secondary school. However, he now approached University with a new zeal for learning and a positive attitude overall.

So finding academic skills tutors and helps – they gave us academic brochures too... I went there many times... especially the first session! But then, I slowly started to get it... very slowly [laughs] but that was enough to get me on the

right track academically. They can assist me and guide me and that was a real joy...ask my wife! [laughs]. (Dave, Interview response)

From a student perspective, Dave's beliefs were clearly oriented towards 'academic skills tutor-guidance' with the view that, although student engagement in University studies should be sourced by students, which leads to professionalism in the discipline of learning, it is still important to know that the support personnel are available. Dave's disposition is depicted in the importance of roles of support personnel as per the survey/interview section (Figure 4.6).

Dave, as with the other students, indicated that early and effective communication with the support staff and continuous engagement with the course materials was important in the FYE. In his course specialisation of Secondary Science, Dave explicitly identified academic and AEW University student attributes he expected to build on in his future career as a teacher. These FYE student attributes included demonstration of critical thinking skills; skills in researching pertinent information; the ability to plan an essay, including using a mind map, introduction, body and conclusion; ability to find and incorporate credible sources to support his essay; and the ability to draft, edit and submit a completed argumentative essay that followed the requirements of the education course as per the Unit Information Guide. Dave stated on a number of occasions that students should engage with the course materials, and with the support personnel, as well as use the tools, academic writing skills and the various Blackboard links that were available. His desire for FYE competence, and thus high self-expectations, sustained him in this crucial first-year University experience and enabled him to develop and maintain a D/HD average in assessment tasks. To Dave, student expectations and the accessing of support staff at University were very important to his success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE, as depicted in his role expectations of support staff and personnel related to academic and AEW skills and was an implicit and central element of his perception of student expectations at University, as mirrored in his belief profile (Figure 4.5).

One of Dave's key expectations was that he would continue to access support staff when he needed it. He did indicate that his interaction with support personnel decreased in the subsequent years of his FYE, as he developed the necessary academic skills. He described this as going from a dependent state of learning to

a more interdependent state of learning. Dave discovered that his dedication to academic tasks, as well as the very effective guidance from the support personnel, enabled him to develop work of a very high standard at University. He knew that he had entered an environment that revered the polished performance of academic and AEW skills, and Dave viewed assessment tasks as a necessary means by which students and tutors alike can judge the correctness of any given assignment. He explained:

Rather than let the fear of failure take hold of me in my early weeks of study, I decided to do something about it... my wife was a great help here as she 'pushed' me to seek help... rather than drop out. Otherwise I think I would have left uni... but you know, I took on a positive mindset... totally different to the one I had at school [laughs]... and I was determined to succeed... so, yes, the will to succeed and the help from support people, really made all the difference... to me... Now I can produce an argumentative essay...and I think it's helped with my speaking too... you know, to present a spoken argument is much the same as presenting a written argument – so, that's got to be good for teaching! (Dave, Interview response)

Although Dave admitted he found it very difficult to initially navigate his way through the maze of academia, it was evident that he realised early that engagement with the course materials and the support personnel, including the class tutors, was crucial. The nature and frequency of the assessment tasks required Dave to initiate engagement from the onset of his study, and employ the skills and attributes of a University student. He wanted to not just pass, but excel in all his assessment tasks, and upon receiving, and then implementing, the course requirements he found that he could actually perform very well. In addition, Dave knew that these assessment tasks were a prerequisite for advancement in the course, and therefore that he must integrate, transform, engage with supportive personnel, and use this AEW assessment knowledge purposefully, all of which is reflected in his belief profile (Figure 4.5).

In his interview, Dave believed that the structured guidance given to students in the FYE about the types of support personnel available on campus was most helpful and increased his likelihood of committing to his studies. He added that he found out about the various support personnel – PASS, Mentors, academic skills tutors – during Orientation Week and stated, 'I'm so glad I attended most of

the Orientation sessions... otherwise, who knows what would have happened to me [laughs]' (Dave, Interview response). Dave also indicated that he has given advice to many first-year students about attending Orientation Week sessions stating that, 'it is great to see that the University is now advertising these O Week information sessions via bulk emails to students' (Dave, Interview response).

Like Jasmine, Dave was adamant about the importance of University students sourcing the many forms of help that are available and that the onus is on the student to navigate through all the areas of the FYE, including academic and AEW skills. He added that students need to know that although the FYE is not the 'be all and end all' (Dave, Interview response) it will help them establish patterns of engagement and success, sentiments mirrored in the literature (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2012; Kift, 2016). As with the other students, he also stated that these early academic skills would carry over to every year of study at University" 'I'm nearly finished my study and I still use these academic skills that I learned in the FYE – and they will definitely help me with my Masters!' (Dave, Interview response). Dave indicated very strongly the importance of all students accessing the support personnel in the FYE as a means of clarifying particular course requirements. As with Jasmine's response, Dave stated that students need to check and monitor their own knowledge of study expectations and keep checks on their overall progress in the FYE. Dave was aware of the knowledge gap that he experienced coming from high school nearly twenty years ago to University, and the support personnel helped fill this gap early in his learning transition. This was explicitly articulated in his interview, and his actions suggest a tacit belief in student and support personnel acting as firstly dependent, and then interdependent, roles of support (Figure 4.6), as is also reflected Activity Theory.

This section detailed Dave's participation in the orientation to study phases of his course. Student and support personnel influences on the object of learning academic and AEW skills in the FYE were well thought out in the form of student learning beliefs, individual abilities, attitudes and previous experiences contributing to the current activity of his first-year University study. As with the other students that were interviewed, the tools mediating this activity include both academic skills and practices specifically related to argumentative essay writing, physical tools (readings, UIGs and course instructions) and cognitive tools

(critical thinking and writing). Related influences were considered in the form of University constraints and contradictions linked to the characteristics of the students in the FYE.

4.5.4 Dave's Case Study Commentary and Summary

The findings of Dave's interview indicated the main concern at first was combatting his negative mindset about his own limitations in education. Therefore, building resilience and determination into his study regime early and integrating the relatively new aspects of academic and AEW skills and practices were crucial to his success. He was very aware of the difficulty that awaited him at University, but after early consultation with academic skills tutors, and then later with PASS personnel, still found the transition to University study quite difficult, although not impossible as his favourable grades later indicated. He noted that, for him, study within a first-year culture at University depended on vital relationship interactions with his PASS and academic skills tutors – without these first-year support systems, Dave indicated that he would have withdrawn from study. Dave's actions in response to these tensions and contradictions are considered in terms of his stated learning beliefs and the alteration of his learning practices, as evidenced by his average grades becoming Distinctions/High Distinctions as a direct result of these socio-cultural interactions.

Having not studied for many years, being married, working part-time, and studying part-time with many commitments, meant that Dave's time was divided and that to completely focus on doing well in the FYE, he had to put some stringent boundaries into place early. Dave's almost twenty-year absence from academic writing, except for journaling, was quite a hindrance in his early weeks of study. However, with guidance from the academic skills support personnel, he soon discovered that academic writing and AEW were tasks that he could perform quite well in the FYE. He indicated that he had no experience in referencing or writing argumentative essays and found this to be almost impossible in the early stages of his University study. His first-year assessment tasks required essay writing presented in the form of questions set out in the Unit Information Guide, which was made available via the unit's Blackboard site. Dave quickly realised the importance of socio-cultural relationships in the FYE at University. Further,

he utilised the support personnel (PASS and academic skills tutors), who were not only able to help him with interpreting assignment questions, but also gave much needed encouragement. He also gained clarification of the correct essay format and found these steps, with a little hard work, were easy to follow, resulting in a very positive academic mindset by the end of the FYE.

Dave's activity system (AS) in Figure 4.4 captured his specific student qualities, such as beliefs about academic AEW skills, research and writing, and personal qualities, attitudes and previous educational experiences; this is represented in the *Beliefs about AEW and learning* section. As with Jasmine's beliefs, the planning and acquisition of academic and AEW skills for Dave's Education course in his FYE at University incorporated mediating tools to explain the intellectual and practical tools employed in each part of Dave's activity. The Object aspect creates the goal and purpose of his activity, and the Outcomes segment indicates the proposed outcomes of his study activity within his AS. The discourse of related essentials prompting the planning, acquisition and implementation of AEW stages of the activity were displayed by these components, as presented in the Division of Labour, Community and Rules section in Figure 4.4.

The activity system for Dave helped articulate what was important for him in his study regime and includes the key elements of an AT model relating to his academic and AEW study interactions with the University community, particularly in relation to the academic skills and class tutors who helped him navigate successfully through his FYE. As with the other three respondents, Dave's AT elements highlight the specific areas of subject, mediating tools, object, outcome, rules community and division of labour according to AT.

4.6 Case Study Three Findings: Kaz

4.6.1 About the Student

Kaz was single with two teenage children, had just turned fifty and was studying full-time and had sustained a few Fail grades. She was also working full-time with home duties and being a mum, as she put it, 'basically working two jobs... what am I doing to myself! [laughs]' (Kaz, Interview response). Kaz had been employed in the media industry for over twenty years and had decided to come back to

education in her late forties. Kaz was in her last year of study as a Secondary English/History teacher. She also had many years' experience in music and had tutored in voice production for stage and singing. She had already completed three years at University and had not studied for almost thirty years prior to coming to University. Prior to commencing University studies, Kaz indicated that she had a solid foundation of writing, including reports and journal writing, and believed that this would be an advantage in taking on a Secondary English course at University. At the time of Kaz's first year at University, she had felt quite confident that her prior experiences in writing would be an advantage, although this was soon to be tested as a tertiary student. Kaz mentioned that although she was fairly confident with the writing skills that were related to her professional media job, the demands of AEW proved to be quite different and it took a couple of sessions for Kaz to really understand and implement the new concepts of academic writing, and particularly AEW. Therefore, although having formal training in many forms of professional writing, Kaz realised quickly that her skills in academic writing, including aspects of critical thinking, research, referencing or writing argumentative essays, needed a lot of work to achieve the standard expected in University assignments.

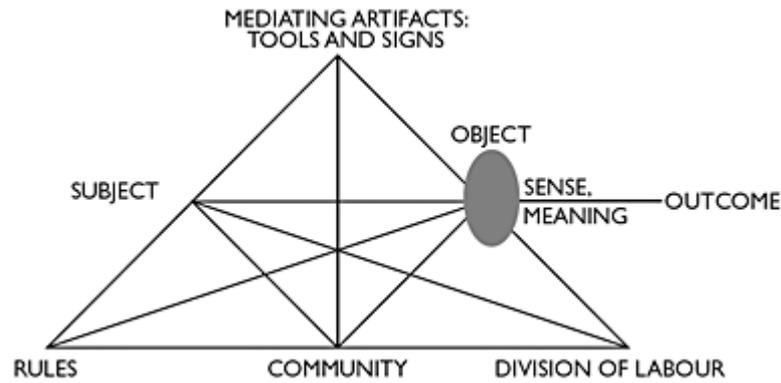
Kaz was studying full-time, which included completing four units of work per session with an approximate weekly workload of thirty to forty hours, including face-to-face classes and study time. Kaz explained that although this was a very heavy workload, this was necessary for her to complete her degree as quickly as possible; as she quipped, 'Alan, I'm fifty...I'm not getting any younger! [laughs] ... and also... I want to finish quickly to get back to normality for my kids' (Kaz, Interview response). As far as assessment tasks in the FYE were concerned, Kaz did not feel that these would pose much of a problem as she had already completed a 'back to study' bridging course prior to commencing her undergraduate program. Kaz explained that the bridging course had outlined to her in detail the expected requirements for University students. She did not, however, foresee the depth of knowledge, and assignment requirements, that were expected of her from day one of her University course. As with the other students in the case studies, for Kaz, the assessment tasks were clearly outlined in the form of questions set out in the Unit Information Guide for each unit and

made available via the University’s Blackboard site. Kaz found this new area, the Blackboard, quite foreign when she had first accessed the site and felt out of her depth; she would have considered withdrawing had it not been for the University’s Mentor program. Kaz frequently consulted her Mentor, who was pivotal in reversing her decision to withdraw in the early days of her FYE. Kaz found the Mentor to be very encouraging and helpful with initial aspects of University life, including accessing the Blackboard. Her Mentor also pointed Kaz in the direction of academic skills and subject tutors for clarification of the correct assessment protocols.

4.6.2 Kaz’s Activity System

Kaz’s activity system is summarised in Figure 4.7 and displays key aspects such as the Subject, which outlines distinct characteristics including beliefs about AEW, research, writing and her attitudes to learning as well as her previous experiences in education and study. These important aspects are presented in her beliefs about University learning section. The Preparation for a course using AEW and Learning AEW skills segments include the Mediating tools element to explicate the academic and practical tools active in all parts of Kaz’s activity system (AS). Further, the Object element establishes the main purpose of her activity, and the Outcomes section signifies the proposed outcomes of the action. The outline of related elements prompting the planning and AEW portion of the activity are governed by elements in the Division of Labour, Community and Rules nodes.

SUBJECT	MEDIATING TOOLS	OBJECT
<p>Student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs (study/learning) • Personal qualities • Attitudes • Past and present experiences with education, home and work experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning environment • Critical thinking, journals, reports • Unit Information Guide • Academic skills, AEW examples • Study strategies: pedagogical approach, study regime, assessment protocols, presentation of information in an AEW format 	<p>Planning a study regime to incorporate academic skills and AEW</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OUTCOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stated course requirements • Student applies AEW skills • Sense of student responsibility for their own learning • Completed essay



RULES	COMMUNITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University culture and policies • Student ethical standards • Course rules and expectations of students • Unit expectations and guidelines • Time constraints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS personnel less significant • Mentor support personnel very significant • Academic Skills and class tutors very significant • Other students low/moderately significant <p style="text-align: center;">DIVISION OF LABOUR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students – planner, researcher, writer, evaluator • University staff – course designer, facilitator, assessor, support

Figure 4.7 Activity Theory Model of Kaz's Study Activity System

4.6.3 Kaz's Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel

Kaz stated that she considered herself to be a very confident student who had played a vital role in the media industry for many years prior to commencing University study. She felt that this industry experience would help her with her engagement and implementation of the many skills needed to be a successful University student. Like Dave, Kaz believed in the importance of planning and implementing her own study regime in an effective and strategic manner. However, this almost led to her downfall as she did not think she needed much assistance in her FYE, nor did she think there was much assistance available, so she initially started off with an 'I can do it on my own' (Kaz, Interview response) attitude. This attitude was short-lived, as Kaz came up against major obstacles in accessing and navigating the Blackboard site. She was aware that she had not studied for almost thirty years, but initially thought that her industry experience was enough to prepare her for the FYE at University. She soon became very conscious of the tensions and contradictions of her new study regime and made

a determined effort to seek assistance. Her two teenage children were very supportive of their mother's new journey in academia and were also pivotal in Kaz continuing with her FYE. Kaz was realistic about her workload but found her home duties of running the household as a single mother almost overwhelming at times. Kaz was an example of a FYE student who had failed two units in her initial year at University. She came from a family where, although none of her family members had attended University, support and encouragement in education and a career were seen as very important. Kaz's two children also aspired to eventually attend University when they finished secondary education. This was very important to Kaz; she stated it 'was a driving force... a real motivator for me to engage and succeed at University... as we often say at home "this is our degree, not just mum's degree" and that's very encouraging' (Kaz, Interview response).

Therefore, like Dave, Kaz entered the FYE with mixed emotions, although for different reasons. She knew that dedicated engagement and application, and awareness of academic sensibilities and AEW skills, would be crucial to her academic success. In her responses, like the other participants Kaz acknowledged a variety of first-year student academic skills that she wished to acquire and display, and this was an initial concern for her upon entering University. These academic skills included critical thinking; analysing evidence, research and arguments; and the ability to write clearly. Kaz's study outcomes for her first year of study were concerned with academic and AEW skills to enable her to produce highly effective results in all assessment tasks related to reading, research and writing, in particular with essay writing. Her beliefs and focus on her study regime specified a clear and determined link to support personnel, as is shown in the interdependent roles of support personnel section.

Kaz placed a high value on using her past industry experience, including developing rosters, small team organisation and meetings, and email and telephone communication, seeing this as an important foundation for University study. Personal stories were used to create connections for her between what she had previously learned about study and academic skills, including essay writing, and the expectations placed on her with the FYE assessment tasks in the area of AEW. Kaz described her vital link to past study expectations and the

protocols and expectations of current University practices using academic and AEW skills:

I came into University study after about thirty years of no formal study – wow *%# hell (can I say that?) [laughs]. I was over-confident as I had been quite successful in my media job. I am a high achiever so I like to get good results – and I expect the same of my music students – I think I told you I tutor singing. So, when I was struggling at uni, boy what a shock, what a wakeup call. I didn't tell my music students... I didn't even tell my own kids... at first! [laughs]. Isn't that stupid? (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz worried that if she admitted to failure it would be an embarrassment to her music students and her own children. She was a high-achiever, which added to the pressure. However, once she realised it was actually a good idea to access academic help, her activity system began to include an interdependent element that ultimately led to her success.

I know I hadn't studied for years but I had much media industry experience – I was looked up to... for years I did a lot of writing and thinking on my feet... developing rosters, small team organisation and meetings and email and telephone communication... talking to clients... teaching music students... I was quite confident you know... but not over-confident...maybe a little [laughs]... the expectations are different and maybe that's why I really struggled initially... and writing essays... we didn't even do that back at school... I was quite confident coming into my first session. (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz found that that the transition from school to University was quite difficult. She found solace in the fact that gaining help from a support personnel was crucial to her FYE success:

I am outgoing and, despite my age, made many friends because of past experiences in the media industry... you have to communicate there... but you don't have to write essays! [laughs]... so... I had to swallow my pride and call for help... is there help at uni?... I didn't know... but I had heard of the Mentor program... so I thought that's what I need... I need a Mentor... and I found a Mentor...she was great! (Kaz, Interview response)

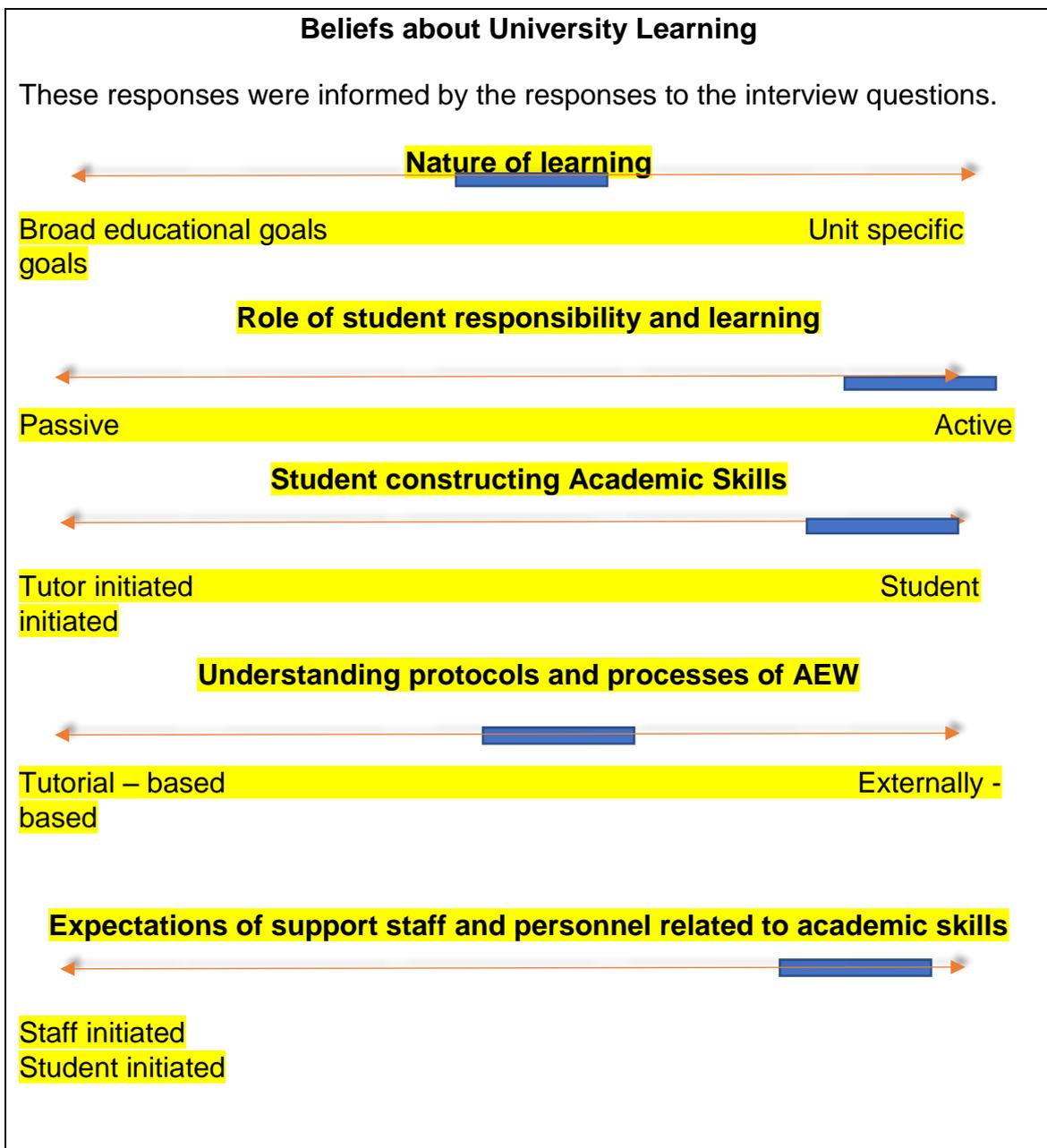
Kaz's Mentor was pivotal in helping her to engage and succeed with University study in her FYE. As mentioned, Kaz journeyed from being a very independent person, to one who readily accessed academic help:

She showed me new ways of accessing different things at uni... especially the *%# Blackboard site... that was crazy...for me it was... my Mentor was excellent... she helped with lots of things... and I'm very independent so she was very patient with me! [laughs]. (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz saw it as her responsibility to find help and despite, her own independence and self-will, was able to 'humble myself and admit I needed help' (Kaz, Interview response) and actually approach a Mentor, who guided Kaz through those initial first steps of the FYE. Kaz emphasised the importance of this support, although it was sometimes impossible to make contact due to her busy four-unit study schedule and attending to her full-time home duties. Kaz mentioned several times that Jill, her Mentor, was nearly always available and also directed Kaz to other support personnel, including academic skills and class tutors. Kaz still knew it was entirely her responsibility to engage and succeed at University and her children encouraged her to continue at times when she felt like giving up. Kaz also mentioned that her children were studying at secondary school, and they were all able to spur each other on, and often sat down and did their homework together. The on-campus support of a Mentor proved beneficial as Kaz was able to apply Jill's' advice about everything from accessing Bb sites to who to approach about how and when to complete the many and varied assessment tasks. Kaz stated emphatically that while at times the stimulus and opportunity for her to learn may come from the staff, the ultimate responsibility to learn, and especially to acquire academic and AEW skills at tertiary levels, should be hers and hers alone. As with the other students in the interviews, transforming theoretical knowledge and skills into the application of the associated AEW skill, can also be an interdependent process when the various personnel are called upon to assist – an AT community at work. Kaz added:

After starting University, my belief about learning has changed greatly as I originally thought that I would have to do it all myself... and I wanted to... I really did. I found out early that it doesn't matter if I swallow my pride a bit and seek help. I think if I didn't seek help, I probably would've dropped out... I would've for sure! Thank you, Jill! [laughs]. My kids and I still say, 'it's not your degree mum... it's our degree' and now in my fourth year that has worked wonders... it really has. (Kaz, Interview response)

Figure 4.8 below displays results from Kaz’s interview questions regarding her beliefs about University learning. The various parts of the continuum display what Kaz believed to be important concerning the nature of learning. The results indicate a very strong belief about learning being a student-initiated activity, as shown in three of her continuum results. The two sections that depict mid-range scores are for her beliefs about the nature of learning in understanding protocols and processes for AEW. In these two, Kaz clearly indicates a balance between these two aspects of her learning. According to Kaz’s continuum results, regarding her study regime and learning activities, being initially active in her own learning played a major role in her study success.



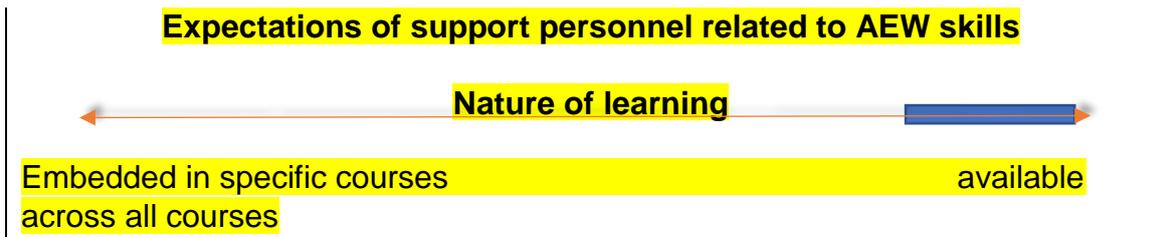


Figure 4.8 Kaz's Beliefs about University Learning

Kaz's results in Figure 4.9, below, show responses about who assisted her the most regarding the interdependent roles of support personnel. It clearly shows that Kaz benefited most from Mentor personnel, followed by tutors and then academic skills staff. Other students as a means of assistive personnel followed, and PASS personnel were next (last) on her list.

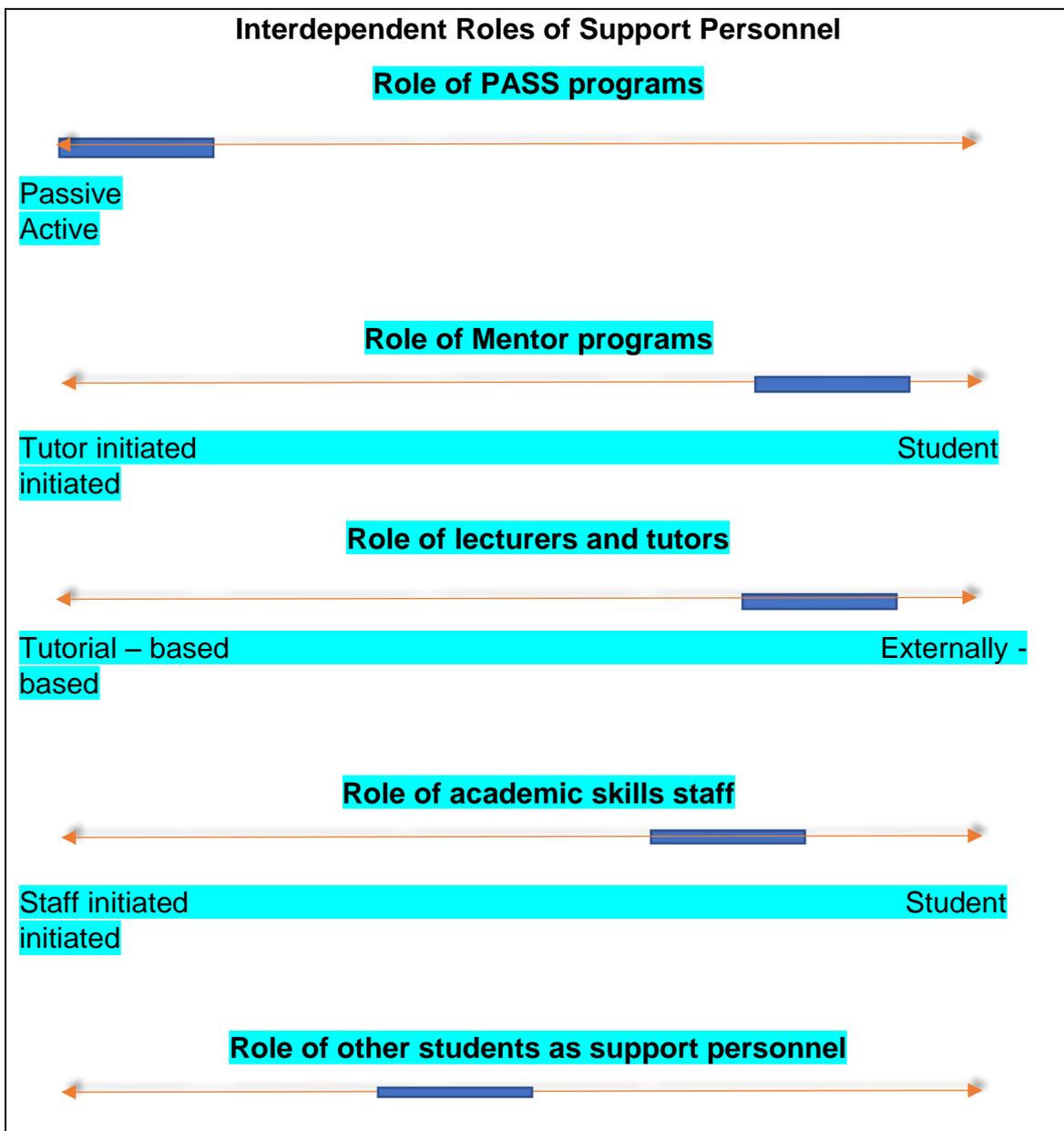


Figure 4.9 Kaz's Perceptions of the Interdependent Roles of Support Personnel

As with the other interviews, from Kaz's perspective learning is a process whereby the student initiates events that lead to academic and AEW skill changes. It was evident that she was not initially prepared to seek help in any way and wanted to navigate all the aspects of learning in the FYE by herself. She was very independent and initially thought that independence was expected of her in University studies. Kaz was relieved to know that support personnel, in the form of a Mentor, were on hand in the initial stages of her study and especially connecting with assessment tasks via the Bb site.

Kaz's perspective on the nature of learning and the role of student responsibility and learning shows a belief, like the other three respondents, in the importance of using the elements of a constructivist approach to learning, displaying behaviours of initiating and developing her own learning (see Figure 4.8). Kaz's response advocates a stance that University students, in conjunction with support personnel, should develop their own learning processes. Kaz explained that, for her, 'the student-initiated sourcing of the support personnel including Mentor personnel and later academic skills and class tutor staff was crucial to [her] survival and success in the FYE' (Kaz, Interview response). Her viewpoint highlights a belief that University students in the FYE should be responsible for acquiring and implementing the necessary knowledge and skills within an activity system. Kaz's stance is designated on the section of her belief profile as student-initiated. However, Kaz explained that, in the areas of student constructing academic skills and understanding protocols and processes of AEW, the University Mentor program played an active role in helping her to access needed information to help her construct this knowledge, especially in the early part of her FYE (see Figure 4.9).

Also, similar to the other three students interviewed, Kaz understood the terms learning and study as processes whereby first-year University students develop a strong knowledge and study ideology linked to the requirements and expectations of AEW, on a level that incorporated support personnel as well as

her own self-initiated activities and initially guided by the much-needed help of her Mentor. Kaz outlined her view:

I feel more confident now... I thought I was confident at first... well, I wanted to be confident...to do it on my own... to succeed as I had succeeded in my media profession... I nearly gave up because... I guess really my pride was hurt [laughs], it really was... I wanted to do it my way. My kids were great and we sort of worked at it together, you know, how can I tell them to 'engage with school work and do your homework' when I was planning to drop out myself [laughs]. (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz found that drawing on her previous industry experience was a great help in staying focused with her University studies. She developed a sense of interdependence in her FYE – and this proved very beneficial.

So, for me, industry and University study have some similarities but now I know through some hard lessons that's ok to ask for help... and I keep saying it, Jill was fantastic... I will continue to ask for help and learn more from others so I think having a Mentor was a life saver... and then academic skills staff and tutors... but now, even though I failed... [laughs], I still don't like saying it! (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz indicated that, although she was very confident as a professional, study at University required different approaches to learning. She had failed at first and even considered withdrawing completely from University studies:

Ok I failed a couple units but now I'm preparing to finish... I'm in my fourth and final year!! I am very confident now with academic and AEW skills... the proof is there I am a D average now [laughs], not bad for someone who failed at first and was going to drop out. I'm doing this for my kids, they been so good really, they have... and for me too! [laughs]. (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz's comments show the importance of connecting with support personnel in that vital FYE. She further explains that Jill, her Mentor, was a life saver to her. Kaz admits that she failed some units, but, with the assistance of her support person, was able to develop her own learning processes and gain success with these new academic skills and was thus able to stay engaged and succeed with her studies (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012). This aligns with the characteristics identified in her belief system and is displayed in the expectations of support staff and

personnel related to academic and AEW skills – that it is balanced between the University student and the University support personnel, as represented on Kaz’s belief profile.

As with the other students, Kaz explained the importance of academic learning and AEW, and described how her experiences in using written and communication skills in her professional role in the media had changed for the better now she was at University:

I was an ‘I can do it’ media personnel and I brought that mentality into my University life, but discovered very early that my professional skills would need some modification if I were to succeed at University. After being guided by Jill, [Kaz’s University Mentor] I now have a different attitude and attack to learning and believe I now have skills to complete my teaching degree. I am using these academic skills in every day in my studies... I’m even teaching my kids! [laughs]... and I have applied them in my Prac teaching. (Kaz, Interview response)

Once again, her sense of interdependence, of not having to do it all on her own, was a key to her continued academic success.

I’ve gone from initially thinking I could get by on my own in the first sessions, to asking people for help... that’s big for me... just ask my kids! [laughs]) Yes, I failed some at the start but now, with the help of others, I am going really good... so, with my Mentor and then academic and course tutors, I see this help as a key to my success with academic and AEW skills. Wow, those initial stages of my study at University... seems so long ago... I’ve come so far! (Kaz, interview response).

In particular, Kaz, like the other respondents, saw academic tasks, including critical thinking, as a way for her to implement the first-year characteristics of pre-service teachers. Kaz also stated an example of how she felt in the FYE regarding academic skills:

Due to not studying for close to thirty years, but being quite confident and happy in my career, I knew that I could take on whatever was needed for University engagement and success... academic skills or essays... I could do it. In fact, I was very happy with my career in the media and it also paid good money... the main reason I suppose... for a career change to teaching was, one, I already tutored students with singing, and two, I wanted that lifestyle for my kids... you

know... to be off when they were on holidays... that was important for me. My kids loved the idea when I told them and as I already said, we see this as 'our degree, not just mum's degree' and here I am nearly finished... it's so exciting! So, thanks to my Mentor... and other tutors... I can confidently say ... anyone can do this thing called uni [laughs]. (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz also learned the value of strategic engagement and close relationships and guidance from the support staff in the FYE learning activities. Further, Kaz stated that her ongoing relationships with her Mentor, and other tutors, were vital to her success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE (see Figure 4.9).

Although Kaz was very confident in her initial, self-motivated study regime, she saw that without the interactions and help from the various support personnel in her FYE, she would not have succeeded and, in all probability, would have withdrawn from University study. Kaz added that support personnel had helped her convert her media industry skills into study skills, and to navigate through the tensions and contradictions of University study. Kaz firmly believed that having the opportunity to interact with the wider academic community was great strength for all University students; her belief, as with the other respondents, supports Activity Theory's assertion of the need for positive socio-cultural interactions at University. She explained:

I found myself, from an attitude of self-pride, wanting to do it on my own... and no one was going to change my mind... self-willed, and I guess somewhat arrogant... no, very arrogant... and the harder it got the more stubborn I became [laughs]. Swimming against the current really... I was going to prove it to myself... and others! [laughs] that I could do this thing called University. I was successful in my job in the media, so now I would be successful in my studies... without any help! [laughs]. I had loved reading and writing and communicating with others in groups or one to one so I was well-equipped... so I thought... then I got one or two fails and wanted to cry... I think I did cry... a few times [laughs], ask my kids... thankfully, I found support through the MENTOR program... and they don't even do academic things really... but Jill was there and she directed me to others... (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz saw her Mentor as pivotal part of her activity system and credited a lot of her study success to the help she received from Jill:

I even had a study buddy or two... but mainly my Mentor helped... and then I applied the things Jill told me... Bb site... that was a *%# pain at first [laughs], it really was... I'm fifty I'm not a computer freak [laughs]. Jill led me to discovering materials and skills and helps to get me on the right track academically. In the end, I guess I still did it myself [laughs]... But no, the others were great. (Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz's beliefs were clearly focused on Mentor guidance and her view that, although student engagement in University studies should be sourced primarily by students, it is still important to know that support personnel are available. This is shown in the importance ascribed to the roles of support personnel as per the survey/interview aspect (Figure 4.9).

Kaz stated that this connection to support personnel was vital to her and that it is something to be encouraged for all students at every opportunity. In Kaz's degree specialisation of Secondary English/History, she explicitly identified academic and AEW University student attributes she expected to build on her future career as a Secondary English/History teacher. These FYE student attributes included demonstration of critical thinking skills; skills in researching pertinent information; and the ability to plan an essay, including using a mind map, introduction, body and conclusion, as well as the ability to find and incorporate credible sources to support her essay.

Another vital academic skill for Kaz was the ability to draft, edit and submit a completed argumentative essay that followed the requirements of the education course as per the Unit Information Guide. Kaz agreed with the University's philosophy that students should engage with the course materials, and with the support personnel. She noted that the FYE professionalism of gaining and implementing academic and AEW skills, sustained her in the crucial first-year University experience. Further, although initially experiencing a couple of Fail grades, through the use of these new academic skills she was able to improve her grades and maintain a steady D average in assessment tasks. To Kaz, student expectations and access to support staff at University were very important to her success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE (as depicted in her role expectations of support staff and personnel related to academic and

AEW skills) and was an implicit and central element of her perception of student expectations at University; this theme is outlined in her belief profile (Figure 4.8).

Kaz discovered that her dedication to academic tasks and the guidance from the support personnel enabled her to develop work of a very high standard at University. She knew that she had entered an environment that rewarded and, indeed, expected very high standards of academic and AEW skills, and Kaz saw the necessity of using assessment tasks as a means of judging each student's work. She explained:

I expected engagement and success from my music students so I knew that University study would require the same standards or even higher. I guess that's why I initially had an 'I can do it on my own' attitude. But really, even my music students need help from me or their parents or other music students... and we encourage that... I encourage it. So, for me, rather than let my self-will derail my studies at uni, I decided to embrace the idea of accepting help and guidance.
(Kaz, Interview response)

Therefore, specifically, for Kaz, the connection to the key support Mentor person was paramount to her engaging and succeeding at University.

As I mentioned before, first was my Mentor and she guided me to the others... so that was great. Yes, I think I would have left uni... but I'm still quite independent [laughs], I really am... but I am not afraid to ask for help... wow that was crazy... I get my music students to seek help... maybe I just thought I was above that at uni... you know... a pride thing... now it's still me who produces the final product, be it a report, or talk or essay... but it's been others who have guided me to produce the finished product... and I'm happy with that!
(Kaz, Interview response)

Kaz relished the rigour of University assessment tasks as it had some parallels to the expectations in her workplace, and also what she required of her own music students. Although she failed a couple of subjects, she valued the idea that passing the assessment tasks was a prerequisite for advancement in the course; therefore, it was evident that she believed that she must use AEW acquisition and implementation for assessment knowledge purposefully, as is presented in her belief profile (Figure 4.8).

As with the other respondents, Kaz believed that the structured guidance given to students in the FYE about the types of support personnel available on campus was most helpful and increased the likelihood of remaining in study. Kaz also stated that, even in her fourth and final year at University, she still advises students (and even her own children) on the importance of asking the right questions of the right people. Kaz indicated that, 'Even my kids are taking on board the things I learned in my first year at University' (Kaz, Interview response).

As with the other respondents, Kaz was adamant about the importance of University students sourcing out the help that is available, and that the onus is on the student to navigate the study aspects of the FYE – especially academic and AEW skills, as she believed these to be the foundation of success for University students. Kaz stated that, 'the University student must seek out help and ask questions... even if they feel it's not appropriate for uni students to seek help – because it is ok' (Kaz, Interview response). Kaz's comments are supported very strongly in the literature (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2012; Kift, 2016). As with the other students, she also stated that these early academic skills would carry over to every year of study at University: 'I'm in my fourth year of study and I still use these academic skills that I learned in the FYE – they have definitely helped me to keep a D average' (Kaz, Interview response). Kaz stated very clearly that students need to monitor their own understanding of the course requirements and to regulate their own engagement and progress in every part of their learning cycle. In effect, Kaz did not anticipate the knowledge gap that she experienced coming from the media industry to University, and the support personnel helped guide her through her early learning transition. This was clearly expressed in her interview, and her response displays her clear belief in student/support personnel acting as firstly dependent, and then interdependent, roles, as shown in Figure 4.9.

This section detailed Kaz's participation in the orientation to study phases of her course. Student and support personnel influences on the object of learning academic and AEW skills in the FYE were presented in the student learning beliefs, individual characteristics, and previous education practices of her activity of first-year University study. As with the other students interviewed, the tools mediating this activity include academic skills and practices specifically related to

argumentative essay writing, physical tools (readings, UIG and course instructions) and cognitive tools (critical thinking and writing). Related influences were considered in the form of University contradictions and constraints and problems associated with the characteristics of the students in the FYE.

4.6.4 Kaz's Case Study Commentary and Summary

The findings of Kaz's interview indicated that, at first, the main concern was combatting her over-confident mindset and her own expectations in the University study regime. Therefore, building questioning, seeking help, resilience and determination into her study journey early on and integrating the relatively new aspects of academic and AEW skills and practices were crucial to her success. She was not fully aware of the difficulties that awaited her in University study; however, after early consultation with her Mentor, and later academic skills and class tutors, Kaz found the transition to University study much easier to navigate (as her improving grades indicate). She stated that, for her, study within a first-year culture at University depended on vital relationship interactions with her Mentor and academic skills and class tutors – without these first-year support systems, Kaz indicated that she would have withdrawn from study. Kaz's actions in response to these tensions and contradictions align with her previous experiences with education and relate to her current study regime beliefs about changing her learning approaches and practices; her implementation of the beliefs was evidenced by her initial Fail grades becoming Distinctions as a direct result of these socio-cultural interactions with the various support personnel.

Furthermore, for Kaz – having not studied for almost thirty years, being single, working full-time as a home-maker, and studying full-time with many commitments, and having two Fail grades – there were many tensions and contradictions within her study environment. Her time was divided and, to completely focus on doing well in the FYE, Kaz had to actuate effective study practices early in her transition. She indicated that her industry experience in writing and other communication skills was no match for the academic requirements and expectations she encountered in her FYE at University. Thus, her first-year assessment tasks required essay writing presented in the form of questions set out in the Unit Information Guide, which was made available via the

unit's Bb site, which Kaz learned to navigate with the help of her Mentor. Kaz acknowledged the benefits of socio-cultural relationships in the FYE at University and utilised the support personnel of Mentor and academic skills and class tutors, who guided Kaz through the early days of her study transition with much-needed encouragement.

Figure 4.8 shows Kaz's specific study regime and learning traits and beliefs about academic skills, AEW, learning and research and writing. A specific and important finding from Kaz's activity system was her reliance on a support person who she believed was instrumental in guiding her through the initial stages of study at University. Another notable aspect of Kaz's study regime evident in her response was that, although she was quite confident in her previous professional role in the media, and also confident as a mum, she soon discovered that accessing support personnel within the University community was a pivotal in her initial and ongoing study success.

The preparation and attainment of important first-year study skills, including research and essay writing for her Education course, utilised the Activity Theory elements of Mediating tools; in Kaz's case, this involved relying heavily on her acquisition of academic aspects, including critical thinking skills, Unit Information Guides (UIGs), study strategies and examples of actual essays. Kaz's specific Object was to implement her own study regime and apply the necessary academic and AEW skills. Kaz's Outcome, as with all the respondents, was for her to complete an effective essay as per the assessment task instructions. The dialogue of contextual requirements influencing the planning, acquisition and implementation of AEW phases of the activity, were informed by these elements as presented in the Division of Labour, Community and Rules nodes in Figure 4.6.

The activity system for Kaz helped articulate what was important for her in her study regime and includes the key elements of an AT model relating to her academic and AEW study interactions with the University community and particularly relating to the Mentor support personnel. It highlights AT elements of subject, mediating tools, object, outcome, rules community and division of labour according Engestrom's AT model (1987).

4.7 Case Study 4 Findings: Dane

4.7.1 About the Student

Dane was single with no commitments other than studying at University full-time in the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) stream. He was attending University straight from secondary school after taking a gap year to travel and work before deciding on his study pathway. Dane had indicated that he was an average student at secondary school and had not applied himself very well to studies. 'High school was more a social event for me [laughs]. I studied a little but I was really there to have some fun with my friends... not the best attitude' (Dane, Interview response). Dane was not one hundred per cent sure he was able to take on University study, having not really studied for many years. He admitted that his study perspective at University was totally different to what it had been in secondary school. Dane mentioned that:

Secondary school? That was a bit of a blur... it really was [laughs]. I was not very committed to the work and although I got through the HSC, I know that I could've done a lot better if I had applied myself... otherwise I wouldn't have signed up for uni... you know... if I thought I was just not good at school. (Dane, Interview response)

Dane clearly expressed that he underwent a paradigm shift in relation to attitude and engagement in education. He equated his failure at school to his own negative attitude and, once he changed his attitude to and desire for learning, he realised that he could succeed at University – although he had to combat some old negative mindsets:

I knew I was an underachiever at school... my mum told me! [laughs] and my teachers... so... I kind of knew I could do better. (Dane, Interview).

Dane indicated that he was from a middle-class rural home on the Far North Coast of NSW and both his parents encouraged him to pursue his dreams, no matter what they were. 'Yeah... mum and dad were cool. Even though they hadn't been to uni, they still encouraged me a lot when I first started... and still do!' (Dane, Interview response).

Dane had been employed part-time in coffee shops during his gap year and also travelled overseas in the twelve months after the HSC. Dane was in his third year

of study as a Secondary English/History teacher and described his overall academic achievement as a Credit average. He also had about six years of experience in music and had tutored younger students in guitar at his secondary school. He had already completed two years at University and indicated that, prior to commencing University studies, he had a good foundation in writing, including expositions, journals and science reports, and believed that this would be an advantage in taking on a Bachelor of Education course at University. At the time of Dane's FYE at University, he realised that his prior school experiences in writing would be of some advantage, although he expected University to be quite different in the type of content and the volume of work. Dane mentioned that his initial concerns about University study were justified because, as he stated:

By week six or seven I was in shock... I really was. I was doing four units and all the assessment tasks seemed to come in at the same time... or maybe it was my poor planning [laughs]... I wanted to give up. (Dane, Interview response)

Although he was fairly confident with the writing skills related to his secondary school studies, the demands of AEW proved quite different and it took most of the first year to really understand and implement the new concepts of academic writing, and particularly AEW. Therefore, Dane quickly realised that his skills in academic writing, including the aspects of critical thinking, research, referencing and writing argumentative essays, needed a lot of work to achieve the standard expected of University assignments. Dane was studying full-time; this included completing four units of work per session with an approximate weekly workload of forty hours, including face-to-face classes and study time. Dane explained that, although this was a very heavy workload, this was necessary for him to complete his degree in the allotted four years. He stated:

It is very important for me to finish my course as quickly as possible because at the moment, I am not working at all during the session... only a bit of work at the coffee shop in the holidays... I want to finish quickly to start earning some real money [laughs]. (Dane, Interview response)

As far as assessment tasks were concerned in the FYE, Dane felt that he was quite confident although definitely not over-confident. He did foresee the depth of knowledge and volume of work, as well as strict assignment requirements that

were expected of him in his University course. As with the other students in the case studies, for Dane, the assessment tasks were clearly outlined in the form of questions set out in the Unit Information Guide for each unit and these were made available via the University's Blackboard site. Although being fully aware of the potential obstacles he might face in his FYE, he still might have given up in his first year of study had it not been for the support staff he had connected with during each session. As Dane stated:

They were a God-send! They really were! I contacted everyone [laughs]. I mean everyone... other students at first... they were very helpful because we were in the same boat! I also found class tutors to be very helpful – you had to find them... they didn't come to me and say 'Dane, do you need some help?' [laughs]. Academic skills staff were excellent too... I pestered everyone [laughs]. Really, I did... but so thankful. (Dane, Interview response)

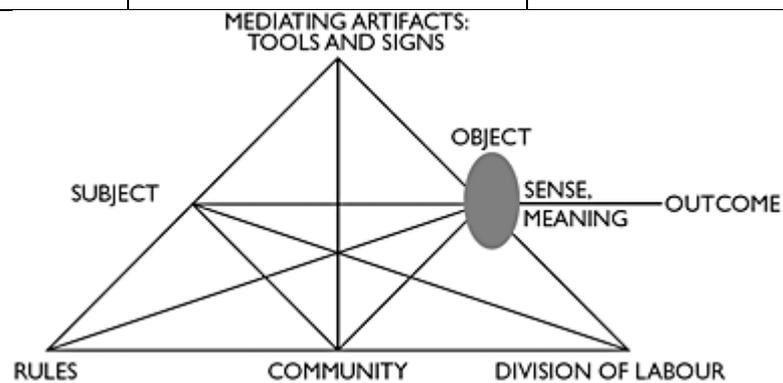
Dane frequently consulted other students as study buddies, as well as academic skills staff, a Mentor and the PASS personnel. He found these support personnel pivotal in reversing his decision to withdraw throughout his first year of study.

4.7.2 Dane's Activity System

Dane's activity system is outlined in Figure 4.10. As with the other three students interviewed, for Dane the Subject part of his activity system captures his specific qualities, such as beliefs about AEW, learning and research and writing; individual attributes, and previous learning practices. It also shows Dane's beliefs about University learning. The planning for study, using AEW and acquiring AEW skills parts include the Mediating tools section to explicate Dane's intellectual and practical tools in each part of his activity. The Object feature is presented to establish the main goal of his activity, and the Outcomes designate the proposed results of the activity. The outline of related elements prompting the planning and AEW sections of the activity, are informed by aspects found in the Division of Labour, Community and Rules sections, as per Figure 4.10 below.

The summary includes the key elements of an AT model relating to his academic and AEW study interactions with the University community. It highlights AT elements of subject, mediating tools, object, outcome, rules community and division of labour according to Engestrom's AT (1987).

SUBJECT	MEDIATING TOOLS	OBJECT
<p>Student:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beliefs (study/learning) • Personal qualities • Attitudes – positive although somewhat hesitant • Past experiences – HSC and gap year before University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning environment • Critical thinking, journals, reports • Unit Information Guide • Academic skills, AEW examples • Study strategies: pedagogical approach, study regime, assessment protocols, presentation of information in an AEW format 	<p>Planning a study regime to incorporate academic skills and AEW</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OUTCOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stated course requirements • Students apply AEW skills • Sense of student responsibility for their own learning • Research skills and completed essay



RULES	COMMUNITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University culture and policies • Student ethical standards • Course rules and expectations of students • Unit expectations and guidelines • Time constraints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PASS personnel moderately significant • Mentor personnel very significant • Academic Skills and class tutors very significant • Other students very significant <p style="text-align: center;">DIVISION OF LABOUR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students – planner, researcher, writer, evaluator • University staff – course designer, facilitator, assessor, support

Figure 4.10 Activity Theory Model of Dane’s Study Activity System

4.7.3 Dane’s Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel

Dane stated that he was a fairly confident student who had learned many vital writing genres and skills in secondary school, especially in his senior years. Prior to University, he felt that his HSC experience would help him with engagement and implementation of the skills needed to be a successful University student.

Like Dave, Kaz and Jasmine, Dane believed in the importance of planning and implementing his own study regime in an effective and strategic manner. His attitude to education had changed greatly and he now saw himself as a dedicated University student who had a real drive to succeed. He was aware from the start of his University studies that there would be tensions and contradictions in his new study regime, although he was confident about tackling these issues head-on and made a determined effort to seek help early; as he stated, 'I pestered everyone. Really, I did' (Dane, Interview). His family were very supportive of his journey into higher education and this support was a strong reason for Dane continuing and overcoming some difficult first-year obstacles.

Dane was an example of a first year student who was came to University straight from secondary school and was determined to engage and succeed at University. His family was very important to Dane and a real motivator, as he wanted to prove to them that he could improve on the laissez-faire attitude to study he had demonstrated in secondary school. He had stated more than a few times to his parents that, 'This is different... I'm different! I'm going to give uni my best shot' (Dane, Interview response). Therefore, like Dave and Kaz, Dane entered the first year of study with mixed emotions, although for different reasons. He knew that dedicated engagement and application and awareness of academic sensibilities and AEW skills would be crucial to his academic success, as it was to his HSC success. In his response, Dane had also outlined many first-year University attributes that he would need to be a successful student, and this was an initial concern for him upon entering University. These expected first-year University attributes included critical thinking skills and finding and applying appropriate evidence to form logical and robust arguments. As with the other three respondents, Dane's stated learning outcomes for the first year of study were focused on the acquisition and application of the AEW skills needed for incorporating research into effective essay writing and presentations. Also like the other respondents, Dane's selection of student graduate attributes and desired study regime outcomes specified a solid link to accessing and using various support personnel, as seen on his interdependent roles of support personnel.

Dane placed a moderate value on using his past secondary and HSC experiences, including researching, planning texts, writing various types of texts and oral communication skills, and he saw this as a very important foundation for University study. Personal stories were used to create connections for him between what he had previously learned about study and academic skills, including essay writing, and the expectations placed on him with the first year assessment tasks in the area of AEW. Dane explained how he viewed the connection between past study experiences and expectations and the protocols and expectations of current University practices using academic and AEW skills:

I entered University study virtually straight from high school – I was quietly confident as I had learned many skills in the HSC that we were told would be very helpful at uni... they were half true! [laughs]. The main difference I saw straight away was the volume of work... the reading... and I like reading... but there was so much reading... there really was... then the other big difference was the assessment tasks... we had these in high school... we even did essays... but... uni essays were different... they were longer! [laughs]. But they had much more research... and referencing... which I thought I knew... well I did... (Dane, Interview response)

Dane was initially overwhelmed by the difference in and level of academic expectations at University. He explains:

But it was harder... I struggled... it seemed so exact at uni... most of my assessment tasks were essays... so... that's when I called out for help [laughs]. I heard of Academic Skills tutors... and of course the class tutors... but they were hard to get... the Academic Skills personnel were excellent... without them... I would have left uni for sure... in about week six I just had so many assessment tasks due... and I couldn't send them all to the Academic Skills [laughs]. So... at first I just sent one essay I think it was... then I went from there in the feedback... it was very helpful. (Dane, Interview response)

Dane saw that it was his responsibility to find help and he had heard of academic skills tutors via his first tutorials in his first session. Dane indicated that, 'That's when I called out for help... the academic skills tutors were excellent' (Dane, Interview response). Dane noted the importance of this support, although it was sometimes impossible to make a appointment due to the many assessment tasks that seemed to all come in at the same time. He stated that he 'would submit one

assessment task to Academic Skills [staff] and see what the feedback was like and then apply this to his other tasks where relevant' (Dane, Interview Response). Dane, like the other respondents, knew it was entirely his responsibility to engage and succeed at University and that he was accountable for how much he was willing to invest in every area of his studies.

The on-campus personnel available for support proved beneficial, as Dane was able to apply the advice they gave him about everything from where to find the campus library, to who to approach about how and when to complete the many and varied assessment tasks. Dane stated many times that the stimulus and opportunity for him to learn may have come from these support personnel, but the ultimate responsibility to learn, and especially to learn academic and AEW skills, was his. As with the other students in the interviews, the transforming of theoretical knowledge and skills into the application of the associated AEW skill, can also be interdependent when the various personnel are called upon to assist – an AT community is at work. Dane stated:

University is similar to secondary school and especially the senior years and the HSC. I knew it would be so that was no surprise – but what really surprised me was the amount of support programs that are available at uni... it's so good! You think 'oh this is uni, grin and bear it', but with Mentors, and class tutors, and academic skills tutors, and even PASS programs... it's a real blessing, it really is – and I used them all... as I said before, yes, I pestered them [laughs]. (Dane, Interview response)

Figure 4.11 below displays results from Dane's interview questions regarding his beliefs about University learning. The various parts of the continuum for Dane display what he believed to be important concerning the nature of learning and his study regime in the FYE at University. The results display a very strong right-hand side belief continuum for four of the parts and clearly indicate his beliefs about student-initiated activities. His beliefs about the nature of learning in understanding protocols and processes for AEW received mid-range scores. In these two, Dane clearly indicates a balance between these two aspects of his learning.

Beliefs about University Learning

These responses were informed by the responses to the interview questions.

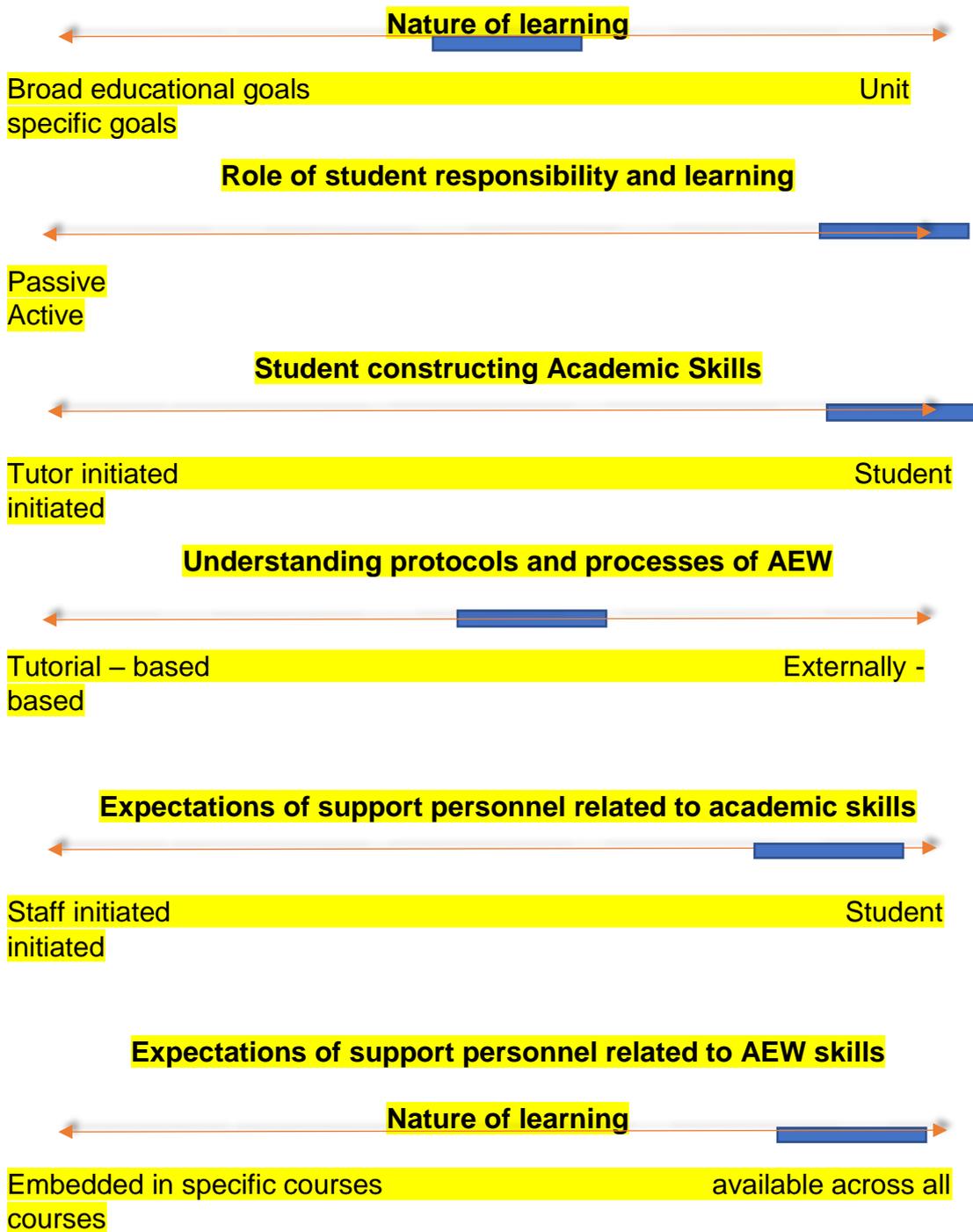


Figure 4.11 Dane's beliefs about University Learning

Dane's results in Figure 4.12 below show responses about who assisted him the most regarding the *interdependent roles of support personnel*. It clearly shows that Dane benefited strongly from all the support personnel at University, with PASS depicted at the mid-range mark on his continuum. The results show that

Dane believed that all staff were available to assist him in his FYE and that he utilised their services.

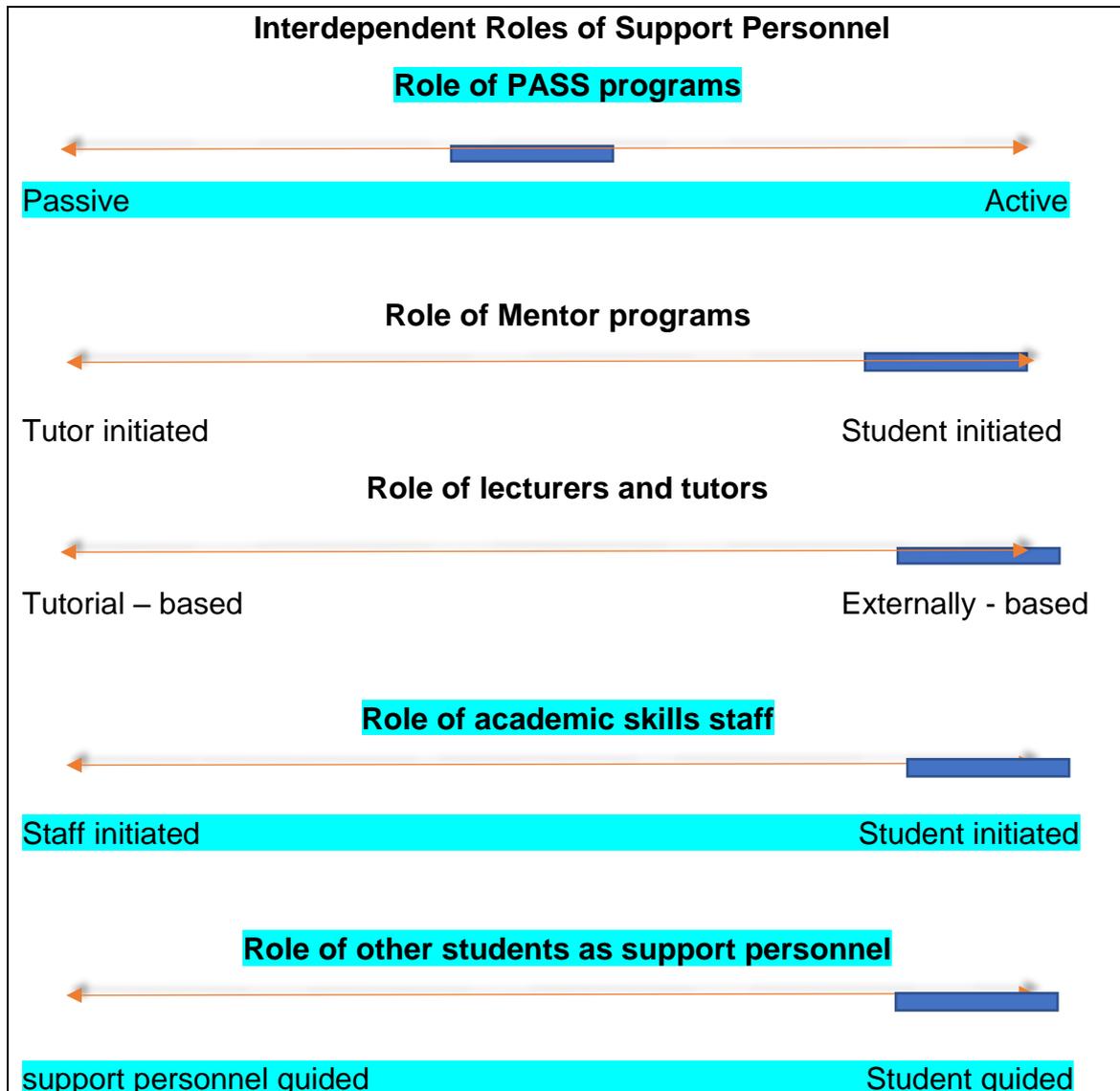


Figure 4.12 Dane's Perceptions of the Interdependent Roles of Support Personnel

Dane intimated that he saw a robust study regime as one that incorporated the student's own acquisition and implementation of academic and AEW skills via the support personnel; thus, he held a constructivist view of learning at University. It was also evident through the case study findings that he was prepared to initially seek help in any way possible and called upon all the support personnel in his FYE at University. In conjunction with the support personnel, Dane wanted to navigate all the aspects of learning in the FYE at University and draw upon his previous education experiences in secondary school, and particularly the HSC.

He was very dependent on the support personnel, including class and academic skills tutors, other students as study partners, Mentor personnel and PASS tutors. As Dane stated in his interview, 'I used them all'. (Dane, Interview response)

Dane's response showed that he believed University students should learn actively, as depicted in *Nature of Learning* and *Role of Student Responsibility and Learning*. Dane's comments indicate an expectation that first-year University students should develop their own learning processes, in conjunction with support personnel. Therefore, Dane believed that University students should be responsible for designing and implementing their own first-year study regime that involved academic and AEW skills. However, Dane also explained that in the areas of *Student Constructing Academic Skills* and *Understanding Protocols and Processes* of AEW, the University support personnel played a vital role in helping him access information needed to construct this knowledge, throughout his entire FYE at University (Figure 4.12).

Like the other three students interviewed, Dane understood that learning at University was an interdependent process that involved the University student and the support personnel working together to form a strong study regime. Dane described this idea:

I wanted help right from day one... to get the help I needed to succeed... not to have to do it my way. My parents were great for me. Secondary school and University study have some similarities and I know the support personnel are there to help... I did my part of course... they did theirs... it was fantastic... I will continue to ask for help and learn more from others so I think having them was a life saver... and my parents too... I had to throw that in... and academic skills staff and tutors... (Dane, Interview response)

Dane indicated time and again that support personnel were very important for his engagement and success at University. He stated that all the support personnel were helpful to him at different times – and he continues to utilise their assistance:

They helped me to be quite confident now with academic and AEW skills... essay writing wow! Lots of essays... but now I know... kind of like a formula [laughs]. How to write a great essay... wish I knew this in the HSC! [laughs]. (Dane, Interview response)

Dane's commentary demonstrated his view that an effective study regime and learning was more than just having a tutor do it all for him – learning at University is an interdependent process. Further, Dane espoused the belief that students are active agents in their own learning processes and call upon support personnel to assist them with these new academic skills; they are therefore more likely to stay engaged and succeed with their studies (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012). This supports Dane's beliefs as displayed in *Expectations of Support Personnel Related to Academic and AEW skills*.

Dane was now a strong proponent of academic learning and, while recalling his previous experience in using written and communication skills in his, had changed considerably now that he was at University:

We were told at school that the types of texts and the study techniques we were learning for the HSC would set us up for University study. It was partly true but if I had relied on that advice fully, then I would have floundered even more in my first session at uni. After being guided by the helps at uni I was able to produce an essay that was University quality and that was a sheer joy. (Dane, Interview response)

The excitement in Dane's voice displayed a new-found confidence in his own learning – a confidence that had enabled him to traverse the many obstacles found in first-year study at University:

I've gone from thinking that the HSC will be very similar to uni, to admitting that I needed to make a few big changes on my own in the first sessions. I am getting C averages... and a couple of Ds [laughs], so... this help is a key to my success with academic and AEW skills. I can do it! (Dane, Interview response)

Dane saw academic and AEW tasks, including critical thinking, as opportunities for him to develop the desired behavioural characteristics and qualities of a pre-service teacher that can be taken into his professional practicum field, as well as after graduating from University. Further to his example above, Dane also stated an example of how he felt in the FYE at University relating to academic skills:

Due to having just completed my HSC, and being fairly confident about passing all subjects, I knew that I had what it takes to succeed at University engagement and success. In fact, I have already used many of these academic skills of thinking and writing on my Pracs... so, I'm passing this on to my students and I

haven't even graduated yet... I think that's cool... my parents are very happy as well. I am in my third year and doing well I think... I love teaching... I have taught guitar before but now it's on a bigger scale... and its great... it's so exciting!
(Dane, Interview response)

As with the other three interviews, Dane believed behavioural traits such as confidence, resilience and self-awareness were best learned through engagement with other University personnel in the initial stages of study in higher education. He firmly believed in the value of engagement and close relationships and guidance from the support staff in the FYE learning activities. Further, in terms of his ideas about an effective study regime, Dane held that ongoing engagement relationships with all the support personnel were vital to his success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE at University in relation to the *Role of Mentor Programs* and the *Role of Lecturers and Tutors/Academic Skills Staff* (Figure 4.12).

Dane was very appreciative of the support personnel and went as far as stating that without the interactions with and help from these personnel in his FYE, he would probably have withdrawn from University study altogether. Dane added that support personnel had helped him refine his HSC skills into effective University study and assessment skills. Dane stated many times the advantage all University students have in the opportunity to connect and interact with the wider academic community and his belief, as with the other respondents, supports the Activity Theory's emphasis on the need for positive socio-cultural interactions. He explained:

I found myself coming fresh from secondary school and the HSC. I had coped quite well in high school even though I know I had not applied myself the way I should have. I was quite prepared and thought if I can now fully apply myself to my University studies, then I stand an excellent chance of succeeding... and I have... I am! [laughs]. (Dane, Interview response)

Dane, like the other three respondents, stated that a solid connection to support personnel in the FYE was crucial to his success at University. Dane differed from the other three respondents in that he had accessed all of the support personnel all of the time, whereas the others had preferred mainly one area of support.

However, he stated that these had helped him to see the difference between secondary learning and University learning:

As I've mentioned earlier, I found support through the support programs... and they helped me to see the difference between high school essays and uni essays, they're similar but different [laughs]. ... just you know... discovering materials and skills and helps to get me on the right track with my writing... with my essays. (Dane, Interview response)

From a student perspective, Dane's beliefs were clearly oriented towards 'all available personnel-guided', with a view that although student engagement in University studies should be sourced primarily by students, which leads to professionalism in the discipline of learning, it is still important to use the support personnel available. Dane's disposition is depicted in the importance of roles of support personnel as per the survey/interview section (Figure 4.12).

Dane indicated that the support personnel were pivotal to his overall success at University, and particularly in developing strong essay writing skills of critical thinking and reading, compilation of research notes and writing an effective argumentative essay. Although Dane had completed most of these skills in secondary school, he stated that the depth of engagement with the work at University was much greater. Dane also stated that students should engage with the course materials, and with the support personnel, as well as use the tools, and academic writing skills and Blackboard information and technology. His desire for FYE professionalism, and thus high personal expectations, sustained him in his crucial first-year University experience and enabled him to develop and maintain a steady Credit average in assessment tasks. For Dane, student expectations and access to support staff at University were very important, indeed paramount, to students' success with academic and AEW skills in the FYE, as is depicted on his role expectations of support staff and personnel related to academic and AEW skills, and was a very important component of his perception of student expectations at University, as shown in Figure 4.12.

As with the other respondents, Dane also stated that, even at the end of his third year at University, he still advocates that students should seek help if they are having difficulties; as he said, 'There are always difficulties... always something

that will jump out at you and confuse you... but... there's always help... but you must go to them... they very rarely come to you' (Dane, interview response).

Dane was also adamant about the importance of University students sourcing out the many forms of help that are available and that the onus is on the student to navigate the study aspects of the FYE, and especially academic and AEW skills, as he believed these to be the foundation of success for University students in their first year. Dane said, 'the University is a community of inquiry and students need to ask questions and call upon the support personnel that are available in this education community' (Dane, Interview response). That is, according to Dane, the 'student must seek out help and ask questions... even if they feel it's not appropriate for uni students to seek help – because it is ok' (Dane, Interview response). His sentiments are strongly supported by the literature (Engestrom, 1987; Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2012; Kift, 2016). As with the other students, he also stated that these early academic skills carry over to every year of study at University: 'They have helped me to keep a C average... they really have' (Dane, Interview response).

Dane stated very clearly that students need to monitor their own understanding of the course requirements and to regulate their own engagement and progress in every part of their learning cycle. In effect, Dane did not anticipate the knowledge gap that he experienced coming from secondary school and the HSC into University study, and the support personnel helped guide him through the early learning transition. This was explicitly articulated in his interview, and his actions suggest a tacit belief in student/support personnel acting firstly in dependent and then interdependent roles (Figure 4.12); this is also reflected in Engestrom's Activity Theory.

This part displayed Dane's participation in the initial study processes of his course. Student and support personnel influences on the Object of Dane learning academic and AEW skills in the FYE were considered in the form of his student learning beliefs, individual attributes, attitudes and past study experiences. As with the other students that were interviewed, the tools mediating this activity include both academic skills and practices specifically related to argumentative essay writing, physical tools (readings, UIG and course instructions) and cognitive tools (critical thinking and writing). Related impacts were considered in

the form of University limits and problems connected to the attributes of the students in the FYE.

4.7.4 Dane's Case Study Commentary and Summary

The findings of Dane's interview indicated the main concern at first was overcoming his reliance on past HSC and secondary school study mindsets to align with the new expectations in his University study regime. Therefore, building questioning, seeking help, resilience and determination early into his study journey and refining his already-developed academic and AEW skills and practices were crucial to his success. Although he was aware of the difficulties that awaited him in University study, Dane found the transition to University study much easier to navigate (as his consistent grades indicated) after early consultation with many support agents, including academic skills and class tutors. He noted that, for him, study within a first-year culture at University depended on vital relationship interactions with support personnel including other students, academic skills and class tutors, Mentors and PASS personnel – without these first-year supports, Dane stated that he would have probably withdrawn from study altogether. Dane's actions in response to these tensions and contradictions are considered in terms of alignment with his stated study regime beliefs and the potential for altering his study methods and practices, as demonstrated by the consistent Credit average grades that he attributed to his specific interactions with the University's socio-cultural climate.

Despite coming straight from secondary school, being single, studying full-time and having no other commitments, Dave still encountered many tensions and contradictions in his study regime. This meant his prior study habits and understandings had to be re-assessed and modified where necessary for him to completely focus on the new study environment and doing well in the FYE. Thus, his first-year assessment tasks required essay writing formats similar to those he had learned for his HSC, although modifications were needed and were implemented by Dane. Dane, like the other respondents, acknowledged the benefits of the socio-cultural relationships in the FYE at University and utilised the support personnel who guided him through the early days of study at University.

As with the other case study students, from Dane's perspective, learning appeared to be fundamentally an intellectual constructivist phenomenon whereby Dane, with help from the various campus support personnel he had utilised, initiated events that led to significant academic and AEW skill changes. It was evident that he was prepared to initially seek help in any way possible and called upon all the support personnel – class and academic skills tutors, other students, PASS and Mentor personnel. According to Dane, this was the key to his continued engagement and success at University. As Dane mentioned, he wanted to navigate all the aspects of learning in the FYE at University and draw upon his previous education experiences. The activity system for Dane helped to present what was important for him in his study regime and included the key elements relating to Dane's academic and AEW skills, and particularly in relation to the support personnel.

4.8 Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion

The previous sections of this chapter presented a description and interpretation of the complex activity systems of the four students in the case studies. These complex activity systems are discernible from the perceptions of four University students who had completed at least one study session/semester. Each of the students was completing the Bachelor of Education (Secondary) and conveyed their previous experiences and relationships with a range of support personnel, with specific reference to the development of their academic skills, including AEW, skills throughout their FYE. The case study participants were Jasmine (Not first in her family at University), Dave (First in his family at University), Kaz (Mature age/Fail grade), and Dane (School leaver).

These case studies and this cross-case analysis were guided by the research question, *By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?* This complex question guided this investigation into the influence of approaches and support personnel who might assist first-year University students to succeed and continue with their program of study. The study was cognisant of the influence of contextual and social structures on students' performance at University, and the relationship between individual and contextual factors in the decision-making

process. Insights were obtained from the activity systems and other findings presented in the four case studies.

In this cross-case analysis, the discussion focuses on the similarities and differences between the four participants. Four main sections constituted each study. The first section was about the student and focused on aspects such as age, education experiences prior to University, work experience, aspects relating to family and friends, specific links and attitudes to University study. The second section focused on the students' activity systems and captured each student's distinct features, including their beliefs about academic skills and AEW. This section also outlined the key activity system elements of Subject, Mediating Tools, Rules, Community, Object and Outcome in explaining each student's development of a first-year study regime. Relationships between the educational background and study beliefs of each student were also mapped to illustrate the significant role of individual beliefs in shaping decisions about beginning study and acquiring academic and AEW skills. The third section identified the students' beliefs about University learning and support personnel. It presented the respondents' comments to investigate each student's beliefs about learning in their FYE and the acquisition and implementation of academic and AEW skills via support personnel. These aspects were denoted by a mediated, socially constructed portrayal of their personal perceptions and practical theories and experiences about what worked best for them in the FYE. The fourth section provided a case study summary and commentary and completed the discussion by considering the impact of positives, tensions and contradictions related to each of the students' lived academic experiences. This summation explored what worked best for the students in relation to engagement and success and the relationships with the various support personnel and implementation of the students' learning visions and study regimes. The discussion was organised around Engestrom's AT concepts, including object and motive and principles including community, engagement, and personnel who assist students in their FYE. This cross-case analysis is similarly structured according to those four areas.

4.8.1 Cross-Case Analysis – About the Students

The task of including a study belief profile for each respondent uncovered complex and highly individualised perspectives on the nature of study regimes and learning. In outlining their beliefs, the four students also revealed a network of connections among the specific and related components of the activity of planning, acquiring and implementing academic and AEW skills in their teaching degree course. Specifically, students displayed an intricate exchange between their adopted learning regimes; their individual experiences as University students; their personal abilities, attitudes, knowledge and skills; and their relationships with the various supportive personnel on campus.

The four respondents' specific characteristics were also linked to the professed affordances and constraints of the academic skills being integrated into their FYE learning regimes. This part also links to the analysis of the case studies by focusing on evidence of student study beliefs across the group via the interview instrument. The pertinent examples are taken from the case studies to highlight how the goals and purposes motivate the students to participate in the activity of planning, acquiring and implementing AEW skills, and this was shown in the ways they relate to, and give meaning to, the object of study and learning in a University community.

4.8.2 Cross-Case Analysis – Activity Systems

The predominant expectation that University students should acquire academic skills was mirrored in the participant's shared belief in the importance of the various support personnel, including PASS, Mentors, tutors, and other students. This displays a student constructivist approach, characterised by the belief that students develop their own understanding by initially acquiring and implementing these academic skills themselves, although the presence on campus of the support personnel is both helpful and encouraging. An undergraduate course that utilised these ideas would typically be designed in a manner that would embed these socio-cultural attributes into each unit in the FYE (Lizzio, 2006; Tinto, 2012; Kift, 2016).

Although the way academic and AEW skills were seen to be acquired and implemented by the participants varied to some degree, the overall importance of acquiring these skills was strongly evident in the comments made by all students. The four students in the case studies provided rich illustrations of their intention to study and their learning in terms of the balance between student-initiated study regime and support personnel-initiated learning in relation to the students' beliefs about University learning. For example, Jasmine's study regime involved the acquisition of academic skills with assistance from support personnel – especially PASS, tutors and other students – and included skills such as researching, writing, editing and publishing information as an argumentative essay. Kaz and Dave's study regimes for acquiring these academic skills reflected a definite connection via assistance from support personnel, especially academic skills staff and class tutors. The acquisition of academic skills via assistance from support personnel for Dane included a strong reliance upon tutors and other students.

The respondents revealed their thoughts about student-initiated views about study and learning and the acquisition of academic skills via the various support personnel. The participants' stated beliefs about what they considered to be important in education at institutions of higher learning were relatively similar (for example, when asked to identify their educational goals and what they found to be important in the FYE at University). Further, it was evident in the responses that they believed and practised many of the important educational and graduate characteristics expected of University students, and were determined not to deviate from the graduate attributes expected by this institution.

In addition, the study preferences of two participants, Kaz and Dave, were predominantly concerned with the benefits of first-year students making academic connections early in the session/semester. For Kaz and Dave, academic skills and class tutors were important in helping them with their study regime, and especially with the acquisition and demonstration of AEW skills and related competencies. Kaz and Dave also strongly believed that the University should be focused on on-campus engagement and that Distance Education might *distance* the students and support personnel from each other. In addition, what Dave and Jasmine identified as key University imperatives was very interesting.

Dave is a mature-age student and Jasmine is not first in her family, but both agreed on the importance of student/support personnel connections throughout University study and particularly in the FYE. Jasmine is from a family that has several members who have completed a University degree, and therefore has had much support from her family with her University studies, and yet she still agreed about the importance of socio-cultural interactions at University. Jasmine mentioned that without these support personnel in the FYE she would not have survived, even though she had support from family members.

Conversely, Dane is a school leaver student and had no other family members experiencing University study, but he most definitely agreed on the importance of socio-cultural connections at University and stated that this has assisted him greatly. All students wanted to improve their study practices through engaging with the support personnel class tutors and other students. Certainly, the diversity of beliefs about *who* was helpful as support personnel in the FYE highlights that the theories of student engagement, study and success are highly individualised and are boosted by a community that follows an Activity Theory model (Vygotsky, 1978; Engestrom, 1987; Tinto, 2012).

Although the socio-academic understandings and student support preferences expressed by participants displayed diversity, the reliability and intricacies of their descriptions were relatively consistent. In addition, research about University students (Lizzio, 2006; Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012) was consistent with these students, who displayed a more sophisticated knowledge of *what they want* from a degree and *where they are going* after they graduate, and who possess a more intricate and rich range of knowledge, skills and beliefs about what creates effective learning in their undergraduate course and in general. In the study, the participants were enthusiastic, determined University students, who had clearly developed motivations for their proposed study and course regime from a learner's perspective.

However, there were some clear variances in the comments used to describe these thoughts. For example, Jasmine and Dave both relied heavily on the class tutors and the PASS personnel for assistance with academic skills including AEW in their FYE. In contrast, Kaz explained that her greatest help was in the form of Mentor program, where the personnel directed her to other means of assistance

– including academic skills staff – and other students via informal ‘study-buddy’ relationships. In Dane’s interview, he indicated that *everyone* – PASS, Mentors, academic skills and class tutors as well as other students – had assisted him in gaining invaluable skills and knowledge related to academic and AEW tasks in his FYE.

Similar distinctions of expression were noticeable when respondents shared the importance of having support personnel available on campus to assist them with the necessary FYE academic skills. For example, all four mentioned that just having someone available was comforting and stabilising in the early months of study, and without the help of the various personnel they may not have continued with their studies at University. All participants tended to describe their study intentions, and their ongoing engagement and success, with direct reference to their own experiences with the specific support personnel.

4.8.3 Cross-Case Analysis – Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel

In relation to their beliefs and ideas, all students agreed that there was an important link between the roles and responsibilities of the various support personnel and the academic success of University students in the FYE. Further, strong agreement on the nature of acquiring and implementing academic skills was evident, in that all respondents held a clear student support personnel viewpoint. This viewpoint was emphasised by the opinion that students learned actively rather than passively, as represented in each students’ beliefs about University learning. All students stated that, rather than wait for support personnel to find the students, the learning process must be student -initiated. The support staff were then able to direct the first-year student to the right place or person and thus assist the student to acquire and apply skills in higher-order thinking related to reading, research, drafting and writing argumentative essays.

In Jasmine’s case, it was evident that she saw a place for support personnel assisting her in the initial academic understandings, and then reproducing the concepts and principles of academic and AEW skills learned via the interrelationships between them. Jasmine’s personal study philosophy acknowledged that the dominant disciplinary paradigm by which students would

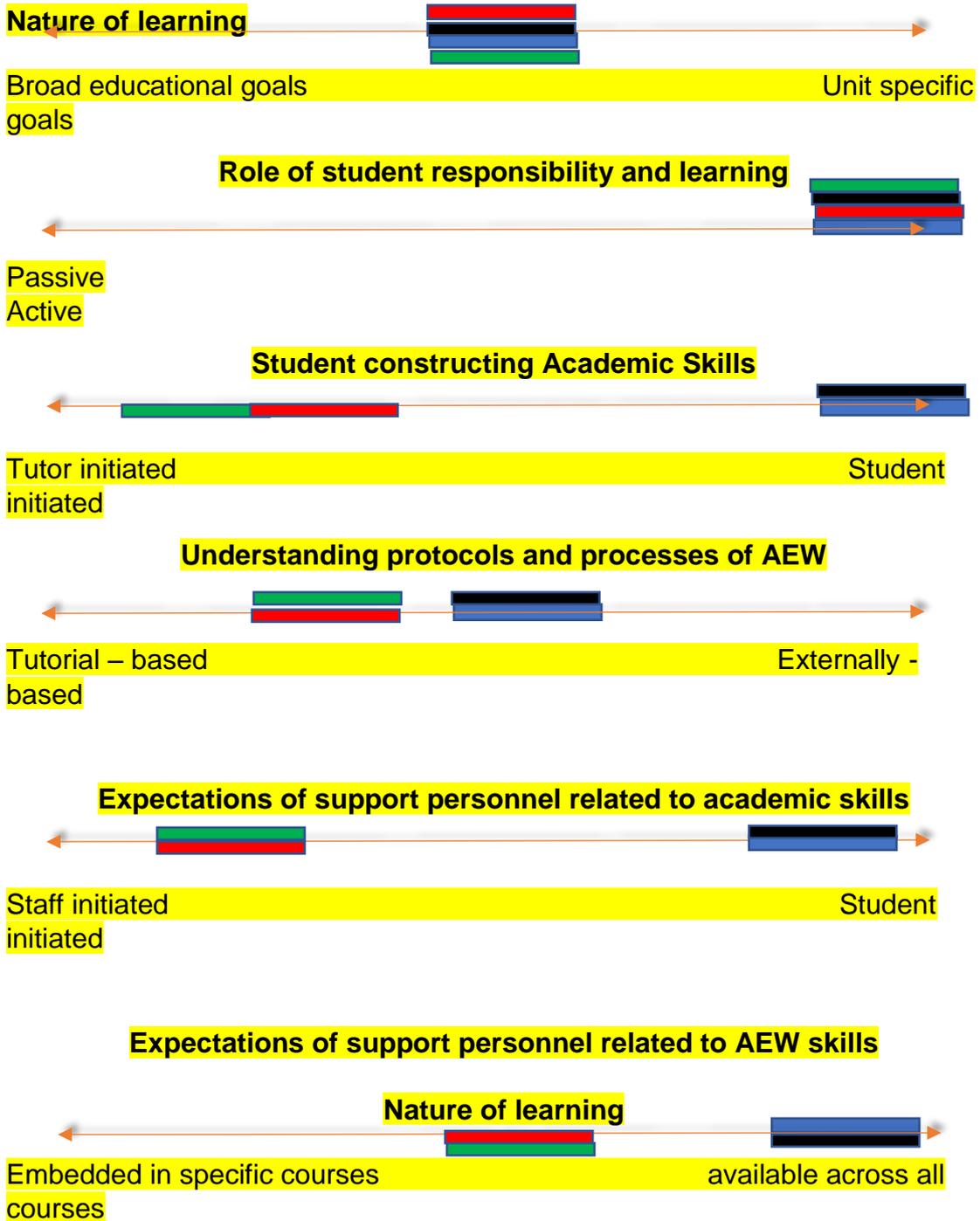
be largely assessed was centred on retrieving information via research methods and then producing an argumentative essay that answered the assessment task question as per the Unit Information requirements. Jasmine stated that she could distinguish between what needed to be done by her, on an individual basis, and what needed to be sourced in conjunction with the various support personnel. A strong belief orientation evidenced by all participants was the expectation that students develop academic disciplinary knowledge and skills both individually and via assistance from personnel on campus, and the latter's social presence was a key element to the students' academic success in the FYE.

Furthermore, the influence of individuals' FYE learning experiences and development as University students was further evidenced in their comments on the fact that there were multiple support personnel that each of the participants had accessed at some point during their crucial FYE, which correlates with many recent theories on student engagement and success at University (Kuh, 2012; Tinto, 2012; Kift, 2016). Participants in this study were first-year Education students who, by the end of the FYE, could highlight their knowledge of academic and AEW relationships. It could, therefore, be claimed that they were decisively choosing the conceptual FYE position most suited to the context being discussed – that is, planning, acquiring and implementing academic skills, in a student-initiated, strategic learning process rather than a 'learn as you go' approach (Kuh, 2012).

For example, the importance of accessing support personnel in the FYE was specifically noted in the interdependent roles of support personnel dimension. As first-year University Education students, they each stated the importance of integrating first-year support options to advance their ways of understanding the discipline of education as well as the structural concepts of academic learning. Relating to this central learning concept, Jasmine and Dave clearly expressed their desire for Universities to incorporate academic learning opportunities for students in their FYE to gain early access to PASS and class tutors as part of the support process. Similarly, Kaz and Dane also stated that a central learning concept concerning FYE support personnel for academic knowledge was very important, but also explained their intention was to advocate support personnel of *any kind*.

Beliefs about University Learning

These responses were informed by the responses to the interview questions.



The four colours indicate what position and therefore, the student perception regarding their Beliefs about University Learning.

Jasmine = █

Dave = █

Kaz = 

Dane = 

Figure 4.13 Students' beliefs about University Learning

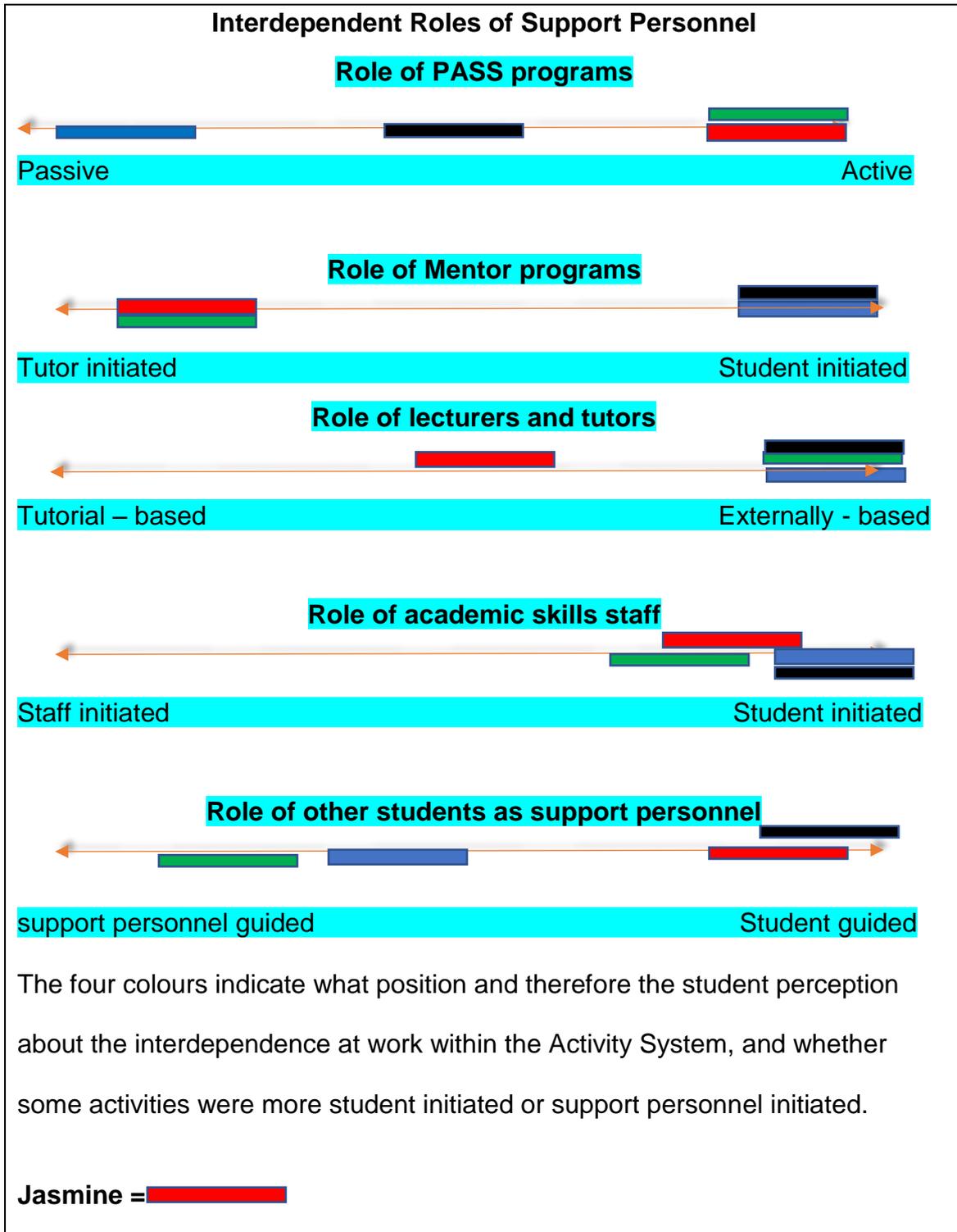




Figure 4.14 Students' Perceptions of the Interdependent Roles of Support Personnel

The respondents showed that their FYE study dispositions were more important than just contacting the specific support personnel and that the individual student should be taught to be accountable for their own individual learning. These students referred to the idea that, ultimately, engagement and success at University is dependent on the student's desire and focus on succeeding, regardless of other help provided by personnel, including tutors, PASS, Mentors and other students. Respondents often qualified their positions on any given study dimension by referring to their experiences in study prior to University, as well as their FYE at University, and how these journeys are continuing. These students also mentioned their personal attitudes and expectations, and their broader study expectations, knowledge and standards in first-year courses. The influence of socio-cultural structures was implied, with references to the student learning culture and accepted study approaches within the School of Education; the University study policy context; and imperatives such as submitting and passing all assessment tasks. A range of constraints also featured prominently in participants' descriptions including study/family/work issues; the availability of support staff; and the number of assessment tasks given in any session. The findings in the study, which give prominence to context, therefore go some way towards explaining the basis of Tinto's observation that 80% of students who withdraw from University study attribute their withdrawal to a negative first-year experience (2008).

All four respondents expressed their education and study beliefs with reference to prior experiences, social school settings and current contextual structures in their local University setting. The students regularly emphasised their stances on each of their own learning and study areas as reasons for their proposed course of study in the FYE. This precise, independent intentionality suggests that individual beliefs should be regarded as significant essentials sustaining a more extensive understanding of student engagement, thinking processes and

success at University. The strong, specific, contextualised and active nature of the students' study regime stances uncovered in this study aligns with Kift's (2016) explanation of the importance of student intentionality as a means of facilitating student engagement and success in higher education.

4.8.4 Cross-Case Analysis – Summaries and Commentaries

In conclusion, the summaries and commentaries section of each student revealed invaluable information on the perceptions of the students directly relating to their activity systems. Respondents in this study displayed similar profiles, in that each had prior education experience, particularly with essay writing, and all were subject to the University's expectation of refining the socio-cultural connections via the links to the various University support personnel on campus. In general, the participants, and the University faculties, interpreted this social connection imperative as a call for more on-campus support programs, or to at least review the current programs and modify where necessary. Participants generally perceived their current and future socio-academic task as being to align their personal educational beliefs, values and expectations for student learning with University and subject/unit requirements for a more efficient first-year University experience. For example, all respondents expressed a desire to capitalise on the functionality afforded by the University's support programs to facilitate academic and AEW skills skills. The dominance of study regime dispositions and beliefs favouring social and academic tasks on transforming and using knowledge purposefully suggested the clear viability and selection of these support personnel advocating for the continuation, or modification, of these first-year support programs at this University.

Furthermore, the summaries and commentaries section suggest that as students engaged in the first-year study regime, as well as the actual planning and implementation process, a constructivist approach was evident. Their decisions about using study processes and their preferences for support personnel were strongly influenced by their individual theories of learning and were also guided by their previous experiences with academic skills and learning in general. Therefore, their learning approach was identified as a socially constructed

process through their interactions with PASS, Mentor, academic skills unit and class tutors, as well as support from other students in their courses, or elsewhere.

4.9 Activity Theory Lens Relating to the Findings

This section offered additional analysis, through the lens of AT, on the possible interrelationship among these first-year study components. Prior to the beginning of their first-year study period, all respondents in the research project could explain in detail their plans for engaging and succeeding as a first-year University student and particularly relating to academic and AEW skills. Their study regime findings uncovered key aspects relating to their FYE and their individual practical ideas of how best to learn at University. One aspect was the perceived affordances and constraints of the available study information, including study guides, Unit Information Guides (UIGs), textbooks and Blackboard study materials and how they initially navigated this crucial area. The second key aspect was the students' individual view of socio-academic connections and interactions in achieving an effective study regime.

The idea of academic and personnel benefits and affordances can be functional in the existing situation, in that there may be values, conventions and past educational experiences determining how, or who, a student might use as support to assist with developing academic and AEW skills.

Respondents stated that they consistently selected support personnel who had the potential to assist with study activities related to their first-year student temperaments. The case study students referred to their observations of the tools' functionality and study regime efficacy gained from their previous education achievements and disappointments related to academic and AEW skills.

For example, all participants had varying previous experiences with academic thinking and writing skills to actively produce effective assessment tasks. In planning their study regimes, Jasmine, Dave and Kaz's choice of support personnel reflected their belief about the importance of choosing one person whom they believed would best assist them with guidance in academic and AEW skills in their FYE. Dane's emphasis was on choosing all of the support personnel who were available to guide him through his first-year experience with academic

and AEW skills. Therefore, Dane's learning regime captured and capitalised on the supportive personnel of PASS, Mentors, academic and class tutors as well as other students. Jasmine's learning regime captured and utilised mainly the PASS class tutors and she indicated that these were her mainstays in acquiring and implementing academic and AEW skills. Dave's learning regime combined a strategic choosing of class and academic skills tutors, as well as PASS later in his FYE, and he indicated that these support personnel were instrumental in his overall first-year academic success. For Kaz, an effective learning regime was one that included her precise selection of a Mentor, who was responsible for helping Kaz gain important knowledge and skills related to academic writing in her FYE. Kaz also mentioned that, later in the session, her Mentor was also very helpful in directing her to other support personnel. The four respondents, although diverse in many ways, agreed that having a person they could ask questions about study was crucial to their overall engagement and success with academic and AEW skills in their FYE (Engestrom, 2001; Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2014).

4.10 Conclusion

The findings and subsequent analysis from the data collected in the surveys and four case study interviews were presented in this chapter. The survey respondents and the four case study participants were School of Education students who had completed at least one session in Higher Education at the University where this study was conducted. They had varying experience in academic skills from secondary school and University studies, and were completing their undergraduate degree with hopes of becoming school teachers. In each case, participants' espoused learning and study belief orientations about academic and AEW skills at University, were outlined and discussed involving a framework obtained from a thematic analysis of the literature and expanded from the dialogue produced during the post-FYE individual interviews. A rich account of students' participation in the activity of planning, acquiring and implementing academic and AEW skills was given through an account that incorporated the researcher's explanation of respondents' articulated beliefs, decisions, intentions and educational practices, exemplified by direct quotes from the students. This

narrative was also strongly supported by the inclusion of the student survey, which served to clarify and verify many of the findings from the case studies.

The respondents stated a variety of beliefs about their first-year study at University and the acquisition and implementation of academic and AEW skills. They also identified whom they believed to be the key support personnel in their FYE, and they held firm opinions and attitudes developed over time through personal educational experience as school and University students. The participants could articulate their personal goals and expectations for their own study regime in the FYE and beyond. Respondents' purposes were mediated by important contextual impacts, such as University and unit policies and expectations, professional pre-service teaching standards, the socio-cultural climate of the University's community, and the diverse nature of first-year University students and the support personnel who assisted them during their early study period. Respondents displayed a range of study, organisational, planning and learning support approaches mediated by both the unit design in the Bachelor of Education course, and implementation of important practical tools such as Blackboard, UIGs, unit readings and textbooks. All participants experienced various positives and benefits, concerns and constraints, during the planning and application of their ongoing study regime, and these aspects triggered pivotal decisions regarding the various support personnel. A clear first-year study framework engaging Activity Theory was applied to detect possible University tensions and contradictions underpinning these conflicts and respondents' subsequent efforts to solve perceived problems by clarifying, and effectively applying, the object of acquiring and implementing academic and AEW skills.

In conclusion, this section provided an analysis of student perceptions in constructing their activity systems by drawing upon Activity Theory. Further, it presented a synthesis and discussion of each student, their contextual and academic study regimes, and influences on their participation in the activity of acquiring and implementing academic and AEW skills through their interactions with various support personnel.

The next chapter presents a summary of study, restating the aim and the key and supporting research questions that guided the study. After summarising the

research design and methodology, it provides a summary of the key findings and implications of the study, as well as making suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter restates the aim of and the research questions guiding this study, explores the significance of the study, presents a summary of the literature review, and outlines the research methodology employed. Subsequently, a summary of the key findings is presented in relation to the research questions that guided this study. Implications are identified that can inform the approaches and personnel most influential for student success in the FYE. While there are limitations in relation to the generalisability of the findings, there is the potential for consideration by those concerned with improving the FYE in higher education and other contextual settings.

5.2 Restatement of the Aim and the Research Questions

As outlined in Chapter 1, the following question specifically guided this research project; that is, By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?

The review of the literature informed the formulation of the key research question and the supporting questions that guided this study. The supporting research questions were:

1. *In what ways do academic skills development, and especially AEW, influence student success in the FYE?*
2. *In what ways do support personnel influence student success in the FYE?*

Thus, this study aimed to better understand how University students in the FYE make decisions about learning new academic skills, including AEW, in a contemporary education environment. Understanding the cultural, social and mediated nature of learning (Engestrom, 1987; Bourdieu, 1993; Wacquant, 2015), the intent of this study was to describe and interpret the multi-faceted nature of learners in the first year of study at a regional institution of higher education. Unless first-year students are aware of their own cognitive disposition

and the dynamics that influence their decision making regarding academic skills and AEW, they may become a statistic, one of those who choose to withdraw from study in the FYE (Lizzio, 2010; Tinto, 2014; Federation University Australia, 2016).

Further, this study assisted in understanding how the attributes of the individual, such as their beliefs about University learning, academic skills, AEW and personnel available at University, connect, interact and sometimes conflict with their surrounding academic, cultural and social context. To illuminate these implications and perceptions of effectiveness, the research explored the lived experiences of University students through an Activity Theory lens. The study also contributed to discussions about the use of Activity Theory for investigating the FYE in higher education, by drawing upon Activity Theory in this research.

5.3 The Significance of this Study

The study was significant for three main reasons, within the framing assumption that the FYE was important as it influenced student success and retention, which has become a priority for higher education institutions in Australia.

First, it provided insights into the academic skills, including AEW, that students might have before entering University, and their perceptions of how these might influence student success. Second, it provided insights into the ways in which various support personnel might influence student success. By investigating the activity systems of four University students, the importance of their perceived relationships with support personnel and others, such as other students, were illuminated. This also provided some guidance about who might be best deployed to help students in their FYE, for example, with developing their academic skills, including AEW writing skills. Third, it contributed to the use of Activity Theory through its application in this study within the context of the FYE in higher education.

5.4 Summary of the Literature Review

From a review of the relevant literature presented in Chapter 2, a synthesis of that literature review (see Table 2.1) identified the importance of, and issues and

challenges associated with, the FYE. The synthesis of the literature review highlighted three key overarching student study aspects: (i) literature relating to the First-Year Experience at University, (ii) literature relating to Text Types, Academic Writing and AEW, and (iii) literature relating to Social and Academic Capital and Support Personnel. These broad themes indicated the importance of areas that influence student success, such as students' previous educational background, their competence in academic skills, including AEW, and the assistance available from University support personnel. The review of literature also examined Activity Theory, which informed the research design and methodology.

Therefore, this study, guided by this synthesis of the literature review, drew upon Activity Theory (Engestrom, 2001), a cross-disciplinary, theoretically based, conceptual framework stemming from Vygotsky's work on the nature and development of human behaviour (Lantolf, 2006; Wacquant, 2014) in the 1920s. Vygotsky proposed that cultural and social interactions are not external to the mind, but are instead part of the way the mind is formed (Engestrom, 2001; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Drawing upon Activity Theory, the activity systems of four University students were constructed to investigate their FYE lived experiences.

There were many studies identified in the literature that highlighted the importance of academic skills and its link to success in tertiary studies (McInnis et al., 2000, p.22; Cottrell, 2007, p. 57; Grellier & Goerke, 2006 p. 106; Krause et al., 2008). According to Grellier and Goerke (2006, p. 96), much of the students' time at University will be spent on critical academic thinking, reading, research and writing. Two key elements of student success include AEW and social capital. Over the years, researchers (McInnis & Hartley, 2002; Kuh, 2012; Krause, 2009; Tinto, 2011) have identified the need to monitor and support students in the initial stages of their coursework.

Therefore, the initial stages of tertiary education are 'a time for transition, growth, and development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes essential for academic success, intellectual growth, living independently and developing interpersonal relationships, and emotional well-being' (Wilcox, 2006, para. 1). Indeed, other studies have highlighted the specific areas of writing and social aspects as

predictors of student success at University (Kift & Nelson, 2005; Lizzio, 2010; Cottrell, 2010; Tinto, 2014). This further reinforced and informed the approach of this research, which investigated the approaches and support personnel that influence student success. It aimed to add to the findings of those previous studies through its employment of Activity Theory to provide a richer account of the students' activity systems and illuminate the roles and relationships that impact positively on their academic success and on retention in the FYE at University.

5.5 Research Methodology

As stated in Chapter 3, the research used a mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2010; Neuman, 2011) conducted in two phases. In Phase One, survey data were collected from Education students (N=218) at the regional University in Australia being studied. In Phase Two, data were collected from four students who had completed first-year studies. This provided rich insights into their lived experiences in relation to the FYE, support personnel and approaches to their study regime, including AEW. The four students in the case studies were:

- 1 One student defined as being **first in family** to study at University;
- 2 One student defined as **not being first in family** to study at University;
- 3 One student defined as being **a school leaver**; and
- 4 One student defined as being a **mature age, non-school leaver and Fail grade**.

After investigating the activity systems of those students, a cross–case analysis of the four students was undertaken to identify tensions, contradictions and similarities, as well as implications for institutions, relevant support personnel and students.

Therefore, this study used a combination of exploratory and descriptive research methodologies to investigate student perceptions about interactions between key University support personnel and the students' approaches in acquiring and applying academic skills, including AEW. This research methodology enabled the key and supporting research questions to be addressed through a quantitative

and qualitative approach, supporting use of an AT lens to illuminate the rich, deep and meaningful student responses about their lived experiences as first-year University students.

5.6 Summary of the Major Findings of the Study

The findings of this study were comprehensively presented in Chapter 4. In this section, a summary of the major findings of Phase One and Phase Two is provided by directly referring to the key research question and the supporting research questions. The key research question asked: *By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?*

5.6.1 Phase One – Student Survey Key Findings

From Phase One of the study, key findings were obtained from the student survey administered to Education students (N=218), and these are summarised in this section.

5.6.1.1 Demographic Information

The demographic data (refer to Table 4.1) of the 218 students who responded to the survey revealed that the majority of respondents (90%) identified as being from the 18–49 age group, with almost half (47%) between the ages of 18 and 29, while 34% were first in their family to attend University. In addition, 72% were female and 28% were male. 90% of the respondents indicated that they were obtaining either a Credit or Distinction grade average and 5% stated their grade average as a High Distinction.

5.6.1.2 Orientation

In relation to student perceptions about Orientation, the findings presented in Table 4.2 indicated that 48% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed and a further 15% were undecided in relation to the statement that starting at University was relatively easy. While 74% of students had read most of the Orientation information sent to them, and 78% found it useful, this meant that almost a quarter of the students surveyed indicated that the Orientation information was not useful.

5.6.1.3 Academic Skills

As shown in Table 4.3 in Chapter 4, 100% of students either agreed (14%) or strongly agreed (86%) that 'Proficiency in academic skills is needed to succeed at University'. However, 72% of students strongly disagreed and 18% of students disagreed with the statement that, 'Before commencing University studies, I had proficiency in academic skills'. While approximately 90% of students stated that their academic skills had improved since starting University, the findings showed that there was no room for complacency, with 97% of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that their proficiency in academic skills needed further development.

A set of findings indicated the students' perceptions of the impact specific support personnel had on first-year student engagement. In relation to support personnel and academic skills, as shown in Table 4.4 in Chapter 4, Tutors/Lecturers garnered the highest ranking, with 87% of students suggesting that they were either helpful or very helpful. This was followed by Other Students (80%), and personnel from the Academic Skills Unit (69%).

In relation to their perceptions about the number of sessions needed, 73% stated that they needed 2–3 lessons from tutors/lecturers for academic skills, while 60% said they needed 4–5 lessons from the Academic Skills Unit personnel, and 84% indicated that they needed eight or more lessons or consultations with other students who helped them with academic skills.

5.6.1.4 AEW Skills

The findings for AEW skills showed that 28% of respondents agreed and 72% strongly agreed that proficiency in AEW skills is needed to succeed at University. However, while all students believed that proficiency in AEW skills was important, 80% of the students stated that before starting University they did not have proficiency in AEW skills. Indeed, only 5% strongly agreed that they had proficiency in AEW skills prior to commencing University. While 20% agreed and 68% strongly agreed that their proficiency in AEW skills had improved since starting University, 10% agreed and 83% strongly agreed that their proficiency in AEW skills still needs improving, and 93% indicated that proficiency in AEW skills enabled them to succeed with assessment tasks. The other key finding of the

AEW survey findings was that students ranked PASS personnel most highly as being helpful or very helpful in developing the students' AEW skills. They ranked 'Other Students' second, and Academic Skills Unit personnel third. Although students ranked Mentor personnel lower, with only 29% of students indicating that they were helpful or very helpful, Mentors were still seen to be valuable for those students. The findings suggested that a variety of support personnel were useful and individual students differed to some extent in their perceptions of the most helpful. These findings suggest that human agency in establishing and maintaining relationships with the range of support personnel was important in terms of the connectedness in assisting in student success (see Tables 4.4 and 4.7).

5.6.1.5 Student Perceptions of Aspects of University Influencing Student Success

The survey concluded with two optional questions (see Appendix C). These questions allowed the students to write about other aspects that had either contributed to their success or raised obstacles or barriers to success in their studies in their FYE at University. The key findings here indicated that there were aspects that added to the overall success of students at University. These aspects were identified under 11 themes; Family support, Time management, the Course of my choice, Staff in general, Written communication/essay structure units, Belief in self – belief I can do it, engaging tutors who deliver content, academic skills tutors, Uni Mentor with online help, Focused determination, and hard work.

Other key findings from the Student Survey related to aspects that detracted from the students' overall success and were identified as barriers or obstacles. These included 15 themes; Lack of time, not asking for help, Too much work, Family commitment/my kids, Not connecting with others, Return to study after more than ten years/twenty years, Computer hassles, Online learning was difficult, Lost enthusiasm, Tired/exhausted, Money, Boring tutors, Challenging work/too much work, Bored, and Work/course too easy.

In summary, the survey findings found that the majority of the students concurred that aspects of the FYE, such as orientation, the development of proficiency in

academic and AEW skills, and access to support personnel were of vital importance in their University success. The above key findings directly related to investigating the two supporting research questions (In what ways do academic skills development, and especially AEW, influence student success in the FYE? In what ways do support personnel influence student success in the FYE?). Those findings provided a context within which the individual case studies could be situated. Key findings from those case studies are summarised in the following section.

5.6.2 Phase Two – Case Studies Key Findings

In Phase Two of the study, key findings were obtained from case study interviews of four Education students who had also completed the student survey. These case study interviews permitted a deep and rich qualitative investigation of the students' thoughts about their FYE at University.

Subsequent to the individual case studies, presented in more detail in Chapter 4, a cross-case analysis was presented. Collectively, these illuminated the students' lived experiences at University, presenting a description and interpretation of the complex activity systems of the four students in the case studies. These complex activity systems were constructed from the perceptions of four participants who were University students and had completed at least one study session/semester.

Each individual case study, and the subsequent cross-case analysis, was organised in four sections. The first section provided a discussion and analysis of information *About the Student*, and included aspects such as their age, University background, family life, and work and study goals. The second section presented their personal *Activity Systems* as per Engestrom's AT model. The third section examined the students' *Beliefs about University Learning and Support Personnel*, while the fourth and final section provided a *Case Study Commentary and Summary* for each of the four students.

Consistent with the intention in selecting the four students for the case studies, the section *About the Students* outlined that each of the students was an Education student at the regional University being studied. Participants were Jasmine, who was not first in her family at University; Dave, who was the first in

his family at University; Kaz, who was a mature age student who had experienced a Fail grade in at least one assignment/unit; and Dane, who was a school leaver. There were variations in ages, marital status, school background and reasons for studying in higher education between each case study, and key point to emerged from the case studies was that Universities need to understand that students come from a diverse range of backgrounds and have different needs to be met to assist in their success. Subsequent sections, outlined in the following summaries, of all of the case studies reflected how each student perceived the kinds of support that would enable them to succeed.

Key findings were illuminated in Chapter 4 in the presentation of each student's activity system. The construction of the four activity systems aimed to provide insights into the lived experiences of these four students, in order to obtain the students' perceptions about *who* and *what* worked best for them in their FYE at University. While there were similarities and differences at work within each of the four student's activity systems in their FYE, these similarities and differences involved aspects such as the preferred support personnel (Community), study materials (Mediating Tools), student and course expectations and ethical considerations (Rules), and what they hoped to gain from accessing the support personnel, and thus applying academic and AEW skills (Outcome) as per the *Activity Theory Model* of each student in Chapter 4.

Although the students displayed varying beliefs about University learning, the four respondents indicated that, with the appropriate support person, they were able to acquire and implement academic and AEW skills in their FYE at University.

The case study analysis relating to the students' *Beliefs About University Learning and Support Personnel* showed that each student clearly agreed that to succeed at University, they had to be active in the planning and implementation of their own study regimes. The four case study findings in this respect were merged and presented in Figure 4.9 This also showed some differences as well as similarities in beliefs held by the four students. To illustrate, a finding from the individual case studies was that, although the section on *Beliefs About University Learning and Support Personnel* showed the importance of learning, each student had specific choices of how this learning should take place. For example, Jasmine indicated that she expected staff to initiate support with academic skills,

while Dane and Kaz stated that students should initiate this support, as depicted in Figure 4.13 in Chapter 4. Thus, although the results indicate the choice of support personnel differed slightly between the four respondents, it was clear that the student connection to these support personnel not only positively affected the students' academic skills, but also significantly influenced the students' acquisition and application of AEW skills. Figure 4.13 shows that Dave and Jasmine expected the student and the support personnel to have equal responsibility relating to AEW skills, however, Dane and Kaz saw it to be more student initiated.

Findings relating to each students' study regime were summarised in the concluding section, *Case Study Commentary and Summary*. This section provided many important results for each student and was very beneficial for the researcher in ascertaining *what* and *who* was important for these students in their FYE. The findings in this section display each students' specific characteristics and perceptions of how they navigated the journey through their FYE. Key words here included determination, resilience, combatting negativity; transition to study; over-confident; and support personnel.

The *Case Study Commentary and Summary* section for each student indicated that, despite some negative past educational experiences, students in the FYE at University could improve their success with assessment tasks, but each suggested varying forms of effective support. The interactions and relationships each student had experienced, as shown in their respective University activity systems, helped to bolster their academic and AEW skills. For example, Jasmine stated that the activity system components helped her with the preparation, attainment and implementation of AEW parts. Furthermore, as with the other case study students, from Dane's perspective, learning appeared to be fundamentally an intellectual constructivist phenomenon, whereby Dane, with help from all of the various campus support personnel, initiated events that led to significant positive academic and AEW skill changes.

Thus, collectively, the data analysis showed that in their first year of University study, these students, with the help of specific support personnel, acquired and implemented academic and AEW skills to develop strong, effective study capabilities. For example, Figure 4.14 indicated that the four students strongly

agreed that Academic Skills Unit personnel and other students were paramount in helping them to develop first-year academic skills. Importantly, the findings from these four case study respondents suggested that, in the FYE at University, the combination of determination by the students and access to competent support personnel, resulted in engagement and success in the first year of study and beyond, as summarised in their *Case Study Commentary and Summary* sections.

Access to support personnel was influential in the accomplishment of precise student study regime goals for all respondents, and this impact was explained in more detail in the four case studies and the cross-case analysis. Although the survey results also verified these themes of the importance of support personnel, the interviews, through a qualitative element, depicted this theme in a strong anecdotal manner. Although the respondents of the case studies differed on *whom* they thought was most helpful, they all agreed that support personnel were crucial to their first-year study success. The results of the survey align with these sentiments. Although it required the commitment of the University to make support programs and activities available, it was seen as the responsibility of the University student to seek out and access them and to implement the information provided by the support personnel.

5.7 Implications of the Study

The findings presented in the previous section, and more comprehensively presented in Chapter 4, provided insights into the FYE through the wider student survey findings and the findings emanating from the four case studies.

The implications from the findings are presented and discussed according to the implications emerging from the key survey findings and the implications emerging from the key findings of the four case studies and the cross-case analysis.

5.7.1 Implications from the Key Findings of the Survey

The following five implications emerged from the key survey findings from the student survey administered to 218 Education students at the regional University studied.

1. In relation to the demographic data, which portrayed the diversity of the students, a key implication is that Universities need to understand this diversity and design FYE in ways that support students to succeed. For example, to illustrate this demographics, 72% were female students, while 90% were in the 18-49-year age group. Therefore, the key question to be considered is – how effectively is the FYE designed to cater for the diversity of students entering the Education program?
2. In relation to Orientation, an implication is that the University needs to strengthen the design and effectiveness of Orientation. 63% of students found Orientation information to be helpful, and this should encourage the University to continue, and improve, its existing 'O Week' program.
3. In relation to academic skills and AEW skills, one implication to emerge from the findings is that the University should sustain and build upon its existing programs to develop students' proficiency in academic and AEW skills. The findings that showed that, while approximately 90% of respondents stated that their academic and AEW skills had improved since commencing University, 97% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that their academic skills needed further development. In addition, all students believed that proficiency in academic skills and AEW skills were important to succeed in their studies.
4. In relation to support personnel, the findings identify that a variety of support personnel were perceived by students to be either helpful or very helpful. The support personnel highlighted in this study included the class Tutors/Lecturers, PASS, Other Students, Academic Skills Unit personnel, and Mentors. The findings serve as a timely reminder that students are increasingly diverse in terms of their background and needs, and are not satisfied by one-size-fits-all approaches to supporting their study success. Therefore, these first-year students would benefit from a diverse range of first-year academic support personnel and programs.
5. In relation to proficiency in academic skills and AEW skills, the findings suggest that the development of proficiency in academic skills and AEW skills should be embedded into first-year units, as 93% of students indicated that their proficiency in academic skills had enabled them to succeed in assessment tasks, while 93% also indicated that their

proficiency in AEW skills had enabled them to succeed in assessment tasks.

Overall, student perceptions identified in the survey highlighted the importance of the relationships they formed with academics and tutors, with other students, and with a range of support personnel.

5.7.2 Implications from the Findings of the Case Studies

The student survey and the case study findings showed that there were identifiable approaches and support personnel strategies that influence student success. The implications emerging from these findings suggest that there are potential advantages for students and the University if these approaches and support personnel are well designed and implemented. The following four implications from the case studies complement those from the student survey.

The first implication is the importance of relationships with a range of support personnel, as the four students from the case studies all outlined the importance of connecting with someone who can provide support in their FYE. Thus, how the University initiates and continues with effective first-year support personnel programs, such as Mentor, Pass and Other Students, is important. Although perceptions of the most effective support personnel differed from student to student in the case studies, all students indicated the importance of specific support personnel. These insights were corroborated by the student survey findings, which showed that student proficiency in academic and AEW skills was directly related to access to support personnel. One implication might be that the University should implement ways in which Mentors, PASS, academic skills and class tutors/lecturers and other students could connect with the students.

A second implication is the need for the University to design connections between the support personnel and effective academic and AEW materials in the students' first year of study. The four students stated that their immediate connection to *someone*, as well as effective academic study materials, was paramount to their study success. This was reflected in the student survey findings, with students stating the importance of having specific lessons in academic and AEW skills, being assisted by support personnel, and linking these with their assessment tasks. Some of the case study students stated that they preferred class tutorials

as an approach in acquiring academic and AEW skills. Thus, the University should ensure that academic and AEW skills are embedded in tutorials and/or assessment tasks within specific first-year Core Units.

A third implication is that the University should guide each support personnel in delivering effective academic support in ways that encourage interdependence between students and the support personnel and encourage a sense of resourcefulness among the students. The four case study students stated that acquiring and implementing study success approaches should be student-initiated. That is, University study should be a student-centred, co-constructed experience, which develops a sense of agency among students.

A fourth implication is that the University needs to ensure it enhances the visibility of support available for students so that all students are aware of the variety of support programs. For example, one of the findings in the case studies was that some of the students had not even been aware of the range of support personnel programs at the University.

According to the four case studies, the students' approaches to study changed positively during their FYE through their connections to and relationships with the support personnel; their proficiency improved in relation to their performance in academic and AEW skills, and they believed that this resulted in successful results in assessment tasks. As was the case with the survey results, the four case studies also identified positive student changes to their study and learning regimes, and the impact on successful grades in their University environment. This student success in the FYE appears to be directly related to the students' connections and relationships with their preferred support personnel.

5.8 Contribution this Thesis makes

As outlined in Chapter 1, the guiding research question was *By examining the activity systems of first-year students, what approaches and personnel are most influential for student success?* This study was situated within the important priority area of student success and retention in the FYE in higher education in Australia. To investigate this question, the research explored the lived experiences of University students through an Activity Theory lens. AT was

presented as the theoretical framework underpinning the inquiry of this thesis. The development of AT was discussed to build a clear picture of the theoretical constructs employed to characterise and interpret the complex activity of student learning in the FYE at University in an academic context. An examination of the contradictions and tensions was also presented to determine the extent to which these can enhance learning in the FYE.

Consistent with the case made for the significance of this study, this research made three contributions to knowledge in relation to approaches and personnel that can influence student success in the FYE; namely;

1. It provided insights into the academic skills, including AEW, that students might have before entering University, and their perceptions of how these might influence student success during the FYE;
2. It provided insights into the ways in which various support personnel might influence student success; and
3. It made a contribution to the use of Activity Theory through its application in this study within the context of the FYE in higher education.

Upon reflection, Activity Theory was found to be an appropriate conceptual and methodological approach for application in studying the FYE in higher education. It enabled an analysis of the diverse activity systems of four first-year University students, and the tensions and contradictions of the FYE, to construct representations of the relationships within those complex activity systems. The subsequent analysis enabled by this approach facilitated understandings through which future action might be planned.

Activity Theory allowed for both a theoretical and practical examination of the interactions of students and support personnel. This was achieved by presenting a framework for an exploration of the interactions with support personnel in developing their proficiency in academic and AEW skills (Subject, Community and Object), and how these activities were mediated by related aspects in these surroundings (Rules, Tool Use and Division of Labour). Its conceptualisation of individual activity occurring in social contexts was an appropriate approach for investigating, understanding and finally reporting the impact of accessing and implementing AEW tools in a University activity system. It was particularly

suitable in its ability to investigate and clarify the mediation that occurred between various elements in the activity system following the placement and utilisation of the AEW tool.

In this study, the student preferences for support personnel in the University activity system resulted in contradictions and tensions. In this sense, a component of Action Research was occurring. As Activity Theory provides a strong theoretical account as to the mediating power of tools in human activity (Engestrom, 1987), it was an effective tool with which to examine and understand the changes in the students' first-year University activity systems.

Using Activity Theory as a lens to examine the impact of support personnel on first-year University students' acquisition of academic skills identified considerations that might be of value in improving student connections and outcomes, study regime practices, the distribution of academic material including AEW knowledge and skills at a class and University level, and the development and/or modification of first-year support programs. At a personal level, the researcher had the opportunity to investigate in some detail a sample of Education students through the survey and case study data collection and analysis methodologies, and through focussing on aspects of theory and practice. This resulted in a deepened understanding of the relationships between first-year University students and the support personnel who help these students to engage and succeed with study at University.

5.9 Reflections on the Study

The opportunity to conduct research has been both personally and professionally rewarding and challenging. It was a reminder to the principal researcher, as a University lecturer, that the successes and challenges University students face every session/semester are real and exciting, and can be changed and improved. The researcher has also had the opportunity to witness and investigate more deeply what happens for students in the first-year University experience. Further, inferences were able to be made from this study, which can inform my role within this University, as well as the University itself.

An invaluable lesson for the researcher was to examine any preconceived ideas and philosophies about student relationships with support personnel and their study regimes. Prior to the study, it was predicted that relationships do matter in the context of students acquiring and utilising academic and AEW skills in their FYE at University. This prediction turned out to be accurate, and perhaps reflected strongly the notion of Community, Labour and Outcomes as per Engestrom's Activity Theory model. The students' access to, and use of, the various support personnel further supports the AT model and Lizzio's 5 Senses model, in that connectedness is a crucial factor that seems to be linked to positive student engagement and academic success for students in their first year of study at University.

The perceived main implications of the project, according to the participants' responses, are that first-year University support programs are essential, that academic and AEW skills are not acquired without some initiation from the first-year student, that specific support personnel – for example, class and academic skills tutors – help specific students at specific times throughout the session/semester, and, finally, that people and relationships are important in developing strong first-year University study regimes.

5.10 Suggestions for Future Research

As this study focused on students from an Education faculty in a regional University, the following suggestions for further research are made with a view to expanding upon this study:

1. A similar investigation could be conducted of the FYE to provide insights into the approaches and support personnel that influence student success for students from other faculties from this regional University.
2. A similar investigation could be conducted to provide insights into the approaches and support personnel that influence student success for students from other Universities in Australia, as well as internationally.
3. Design and conduct a longitudinal study within this regional University, building upon this study, in order to track students' perceptions about and

beyond their FYE, relating specifically to academic and AEW skills and the support personnel who assist them.

5.11 Conclusion

This chapter restated the aim, the research questions guiding this study, and outlined the significance of the study. Subsequent to providing a summary of the literature review with reference to the synthesis of that literature review presented in Chapter 2, a summary of the Research Methodology employed was provided. This was followed by a summary of the key findings that provided answers to the research questions guiding this study. Implications were identified that can inform action in relation to FYE student study approaches and the support personnel who are most influential in enhancing student success in the first year of study. The chapter concluded with reflections on the study. While there are limitations in relation to the generalisability of the findings of this study, the findings of this research identify issues for consideration by those concerned with improving the FYE in higher education and other contextual settings.

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APPENDIX A. Email Communication to Education Students: Student Survey

Information Sheet

Student Survey

Improving the First-Year University Experience: Implications for Addressing the Influence of Social Capital and Academic Skills, including AEW

Chief Investigator

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Alan Fenn-Lavington

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Why is the research being conducted?

The aim of this study is to identify implications for informing the improvement of argumentative essay writing (AEW) and academic skills (for this study, academic skills will include components of: research, critical thinking, written communication and essay writing, ANU, 2016) within the context of the first-year university (FYE) experience. Moreover, the study aims to examine the effectiveness of the relatively new roles of the personnel who help students in building academic capital through AEW capabilities. To illuminate these implications and perceptions of effectiveness, the research will explore the lived experiences of university students through an Activity Theory lens.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in a 10-15-minute online survey to help the researcher understand your perceptions about your first-year experience at university and, in particular, relating to the personnel (Staff members, Mentors, PASS personnel, etc.) who have helped you with academic skills, including AEW.

How will participants be selected for the research?

Participants for this Student Survey will be selected based on the following:

- 1.** Students currently enrolled in the School of Education at Southern Cross University;

AND

2. Students who have completed at least one semester of University study.

Risks to you

There are no risks associated with participation in this research project. All participants will be over 18 and there are no perceived conflicts of interest for participants. The research will be conducted in a completely ethical manner with the interests of the participants being of paramount importance at all times.

Your Confidentiality

All participants will remain anonymous. The data collected and analysed will be stored on a secure computer hard drive in the School of Education and Professional Studies (Gold Coast campus).

All data are being collected for research purposes only and will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis.

Your participation is voluntary

All participation is voluntary. The decision not to participate in this research project will, in no way, impact upon your academic results. Completion of this survey will be taken as your consent to participate in the research. Potential participants are free to withdraw at any time.

Questions and further information

If you wish to make any further enquiries about this research, our contact details are:

Alan Fenn-Lavington: alan.fenn-lavington@scu.edu.au

Professor Glenn Finger: g.finger@griffith.edu.au

The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. Ethics approval Number: [HREC Ethics Approval to be provided]. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 4375 on research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

APPENDIX B. Student Survey

Improving the First-Year University Experience: Implications for addressing the influence of social capital on academic skills, including argumentative essay writing

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

This survey is for students who have commenced or have completed at least one session/semester of undergraduate studies.

This survey explores the First-Year Experience (FYE) of students who have completed at least one session/semester at SCU.

It contains questions on your thoughts about argumentative essay writing (AEW) and whom you consider has helped you the most with your early student experiences with university studies.

The survey should take about 10 minutes to complete.

Ethical conduct of survey

This survey is part of Alan Fenn-Lavington's Doctor of Education study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Withdrawal without completion or explanation is possible at any stage.

This is a CONFIDENTIAL survey. No report or information will be produced that identifies any participant by name or otherwise. Therefore, by completing this survey, your consent to participate will be assumed to have been provided. You are free to withdraw from the survey at any time without comment or penalty.

If you have any questions that you would like to ask about this survey, please contact Mr Alan Fenn-Lavington alan.fenn-lavington@scu.edu.au or call 0413 802 308

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. Ethics approval Number: [HREC Ethics Approval to be provided]. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 4375 on research-ethics@griffith.edu.a

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION

SECTION A – ABOUT YOU

This section asks you questions about yourself.

1. Age (Please indicate):

Less than 20

18-29

30-39

40- 49

50+

2. Gender (Please indicate): _____

3. Have you studied at any of the following before?

TAFE

University

If YES, please indicate in what year/s:

TAFE _____

University _____

4. Current course name: _____

5. What is your current year level of study of your course? _____

6. How many sessions/semesters have you completed? _____

7. Is English your main language?

Yes

No

If NO, please state your main language _____

8. Are you first person in your family to undertake university studies? _____

9. Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background?

Yes

No

Choose not to disclose

11. Would you consider yourself to be high, middle or low socio – economic standing?

High

Middle

Low

Choose not to disclose

12. Enrolment status (please indicate):

Full time student

Part time student

Other

13. How would you describe your overall academic achievement? (Please indicate)

Fail

Pass

Credit

Distinction

High Distinction

SECTION B – ORIENTATION

This section asks you for your thoughts about your orientation experience at Southern Cross University.

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about orientation.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
14. I have found starting at SCU relatively easy.					
15. Orientation sessions at SCU were very helpful.					
16. I read most of the orientation information that was sent to me.					
17. I found the orientation information useful and easy to read.					

SECTION C – ACADEMIC SKILLS

This section asks you for your thoughts about academic skills

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about your academic skills. Examples of academic skills needed for successful study at University include, but are not limited to, preparing for and completing different forms of study and assessment tasks such as assignments, examinations, effective reading, taking notes at lectures and tutorials, and independent and collaborative study.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
18. Proficiency in academic skills is needed to succeed at university.					
19. Before commencing university studies, I had proficiency in academic skills.					
20. Since commencing university studies, my proficiency in academic skills has improved.					
21. My proficiency in academic skills needs further development.					
22. I know where I can find help with academic skills at SCU.					
23. I have accessed support at SCU for developing my academic skills					
24. My proficiency in academic skills has enabled me to succeed in assessment tasks.					

Please indicate the extent to which each of the following were helpful in assisting with developing your academic skills at SCU.

Personnel	Not Applicable	Very unhelpful	Unhelpful	Undecided	Helpful	Very helpful
25.Lecturers						
26.Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)						
27.Mentors						
28.Other SCU Students						
29.Academic Skills Unit						

Please indicate how many lessons/consultations with each of the following you believed were needed to improve your proficiency in academic skills.

Personnel	Not Applicable	1 session	2-3 sessions	4-5 sessions	6-7 sessions	8 or more sessions
30.Lecturers						
31.Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)						
32.Mentors						
33.Other SCU Students						
34.Academic Skills Unit						

SECTION D – ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING (AEW)

This section asks you for your thoughts, more specifically, about AEW

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about your AEW.

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
35. Proficiency in AEW skills is needed to succeed at university.					
36. Before commencing university studies, I had proficiency in AEW skills.					
37. Since commencing university studies, my proficiency in AEW skills has improved.					
38. My proficiency in AEW skills needs further development.					
39. I know where I can find help with AEW skills at SCU.					
40. I have accessed support at SCU for developing my AEW skills					
41. My proficiency in AEW skills has enabled me to succeed in assessment tasks.					

Please indicate the extent to which each of the following were helpful in assisting with developing your AEW skills at SCU.

Personnel	Not Applicable	Very unhelpful	Unhelpful	Undecided	Helpful	Very helpful
42. Lecturers						
43. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)						
44. Mentors						
45. Other SCU Students						
46. Academic Skills Unit						

Please indicate how many lessons/consultations with each of the following you believed were needed to improve your proficiency in AEW skills.

Personnel	Not Applicable	Only 1 session	Only 2-3 sessions	Only 4-5 sessions	Only 6-7 sessions	8 or more sessions
47. Lecturers						
48. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)						
49. Mentors						
50. Other SCU Students						
51. Academic Skills Unit						

SECTION E – YOUR THOUGHTS

52. What aspects of university have assisted you to succeed? (Optional)

53. What aspects of university have provided barriers/obstacles to you being successful? (Optional)

Thank you for completing this survey

APPENDIX C. Information Sheet

Student Case Study Interview

Improving the First-Year University Experience: Implications for Addressing the Influence of Social Capital and Academic Skills, including AEW

Chief Investigator

Professor Glenn Finger

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Higher Degree Research (HDR) Student Researcher

Alan Fenn-Lavington

School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University

Email: alan.fenn-lavington@scu.edu.au

Why is the research being conducted?

The aim of this study, as part of my Doctor of Education research, is to identify implications for informing the improvement of argumentative essay writing (AEW), a very important assessment tool, and academic skills within the context of the first-year experience (FYE) at university. Moreover, the study aims to examine the effectiveness of the relatively new roles of the personnel who help students in building academic capital and especially through AEW capabilities. To illuminate these implications and perceptions of effectiveness, the research will explore the lived experiences of university students through an Activity Theory lens.

What will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in a 30-minute interview to help the researcher understand your perceptions about your first-year experience at university and, in particular, relating to the personnel (Staff members, Mentors, PASS personnel, etc.) who have helped you with academic skills, including AEW.

Risks to you

There are no risks associated with participation in this research project. All participants will be over 18 and there are no perceived conflicts of interest for participants. The research will be conducted in a completely ethical manner with the interests of the participants being of paramount importance at all times.

Your Confidentiality

All participants will remain anonymous. The data collected and analysed will be stored on a secure computer hard drive in the School of Education and Professional Studies (Gold Coast campus).

All data are being collected for research purposes only and will be destroyed upon completion of the thesis.

Your participation is voluntary

All participation is voluntary. The decision not to participate in this research project will, in no way, impact upon your academic results. Potential participants are free to withdraw at any time.

Questions and further information

If you wish to make any further enquiries about this research, our contact details are:

Alan Fenn-Lavington: alan.fenn-lavington@scu.edu.au

Professor Glenn Finger: g.finger@griffith.edu.au

The ethical conduct of this research

Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*. Ethics approval Number: [HREC Ethics Approval number 717/2016]. If potential participants have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the research project they should contact the Manager, Research Ethics at Griffith University, on 3735 4375 on research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. DO YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS INTERVIEW? _____

2. YOUR AGE: Less than 20 18-29 30-39 40- 49 50+

4. HAVE YOU STUDIED AT TAFE OR UNIVERSITY BEFORE? _____ If yes, when and for how long?

5. YOUR CURRENT COURSE NAME: _____

6. WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT YEAR LEVEL OF STUDY OF YOUR COURSE? _____

7. HOW MANY SESSIONS/SEMESTERS HAVE YOU COMPLETED? _____

8. DO YOU COME FROM A NON-ENGLISH-SPEAKING BACKGROUND? _____

If yes, please indicate the other language/s spoken _____

9. ARE YOU THE FIRST IN YOUR FAMILY TO ATTEND UNIVERSITY? _____

10. ARE YOU OF *ABORIGINAL OR TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER BACKGROUND? _____

* Choose not to disclose

11. WOULD YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF OF HIGH, MIDDLE OR LOW *SOCIO – ECONOMIC STANDING? _____ *Choose not to disclose

12. ENROLMENT STATUS: Full time student _____ Part time student _____

Other _____

13. THIS STUDY IS PRIMARILY ABOUT YOU AND ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING – HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOURSELF IN PROFICIENCY WITH AEW BEFORE YOU ATTENDED UNIVERSITY? (1 = LOW PROFICIENCY AND 10 IS HIGH) _____

14. HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOURSELF IN PROFICIENCY WITH AEW NOW THAT YOU HAVE ATTENDED UNIVERSITY? (1 = LOW PROFICIENCY AND 10 IS HIGH) _____

15. YOUR AVERAGE GRADE IN THE COURSE SO FAR IS (HIGH DISTINCTION, DISTINCTION, CREDIT, PASS, FAIL) _____ * CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS OF THE INTERVIEW RELATE DIRECTLY TO AEW

16. OVERALL, HOW EASY HAVE YOU FOUND ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING AT UNIVERSITY?

17. HAS YOUR COURSE INCLUDED ANY DIRECT ASSISTANCE FROM THE STAFF IN HELPING YOU WITH ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING? PLEASE EXPLAIN THIS A LITTLE

18. CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE ABOUT THE PEOPLE IN THE LIST BELOW WHO HAVE HELPED YOU TO SUCCEED WITH ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING? (E.g. NONE; LOW; MEDIUM; HIGH; VERY HIGH)

- A) PASS PERSONNEL
- B) MENTORS
- C) LECTURERS/TUTORS
- D) ACADEMIC SKILLS PERSONNEL
- E) STUDENTS
- F) ANY OTHER PEOPLE

19. IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHO/WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND TO BE MOST BENEFICIAL IN HELPING YOU TO SUCCEED WITH AEW? BRIEFLY EXPLAIN WHY THIS HAS BEEN A BENEFIT.

19. AFTER AT LEAST ONE SESSION, HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU NOW WITH ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING?

20. IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT COULD SCU DO TO IMPROVE HOW STUDENTS ENGAGE AND SUCCEED WITH AEW?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART IN THIS INTERVIEW

APPENDIX D. The Structure of the Argumentative Essay

- **A clear, concise, and defined thesis statement that occurs in the first paragraph of the essay.**

In the first paragraph of an argument essay, students should set the context by reviewing the topic in a general way. Next the author should explain why the topic is important (**exigence**) or why readers should care about the issue. Lastly, students should present the thesis statement. It is essential that this thesis statement be appropriately narrowed to follow the guidelines set forth in the assignment. If the student does not master this portion of the essay, it will be quite difficult to compose an effective or persuasive essay.

- **Clear and logical transitions between the introduction, body, and conclusion.**

Transitions are the mortar that holds the foundation of the essay together. Without logical progression of thought, the reader is unable to follow the essay's argument, and the structure will collapse. Transitions should wrap up the idea from the previous section and introduce the idea that is to follow in the next section.

- **Body paragraphs that include evidential support.**

Each paragraph should be limited to the discussion of one general idea. This will allow for clarity and direction throughout the essay. In addition, such conciseness creates an ease of readability for one's audience. It is important to note that each paragraph in the body of the essay must have some logical connection to the thesis statement in the opening paragraph. Some paragraphs will directly support the thesis statement with evidence collected during research. It is also important to explain how and why the evidence supports the thesis (**warrant**).

However, argumentative essays should also consider and explain differing points of view regarding the topic. Depending on the length of the assignment, students should dedicate one or two paragraphs of an argumentative essay to discussing conflicting opinions on the topic. Rather than explaining how these differing opinions are wrong outright, students should note how opinions that do not align with their thesis might not be well informed or how they might be out of date.

- **Evidential support (whether factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal).**

The argumentative essay requires well-researched, accurate, detailed, and current information to support the thesis statement and consider other points of view. Some factual, logical, statistical, or anecdotal evidence should support the thesis. However, students must consider multiple points of view when collecting evidence. As noted in the paragraph above, a successful and well-rounded argumentative essay will also discuss opinions not aligning with the thesis. It is unethical to exclude evidence that may not support the thesis. It is not the student's job to point out how other positions are wrong

outright, but rather to explain how other positions may not be well informed or up to date on the topic.

- **A conclusion that does not simply restate the thesis, but readdresses it in light of the evidence provided.**

It is at this point of the essay that students may begin to struggle. This is the portion of the essay that will leave the most immediate impression on the mind of the reader. Therefore, it must be effective and logical. Do not introduce any new information into the conclusion; rather, synthesize the information presented in the body of the essay. Restate why the topic is important, review the main points, and review your thesis. You may also want to include a short discussion of more research that should be completed in light of your work.

A complete argument

Perhaps it is helpful to think of an essay in terms of a conversation or debate with a classmate. If I were to discuss the cause of World War II and its current effect on those who lived through the tumultuous time, there would be a beginning, middle, and end to the conversation. In fact, if I were to end the argument in the middle of my second point, questions would arise concerning the current effects on those who lived through the conflict. Therefore, the argumentative essay must be complete, and logically so, leaving no doubt as to its intent or argument.