Indigenous participation in health sciences education: elements of the institutional learning environment critical for course completion.

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Education, Health & Science, Charles Darwin University

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I hereby declare that the work herein, now submitted as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Charles Darwin University, is the result of my own investigations, and all references to ideas and work of other researchers have been specifically acknowledged. I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being currently submitted in candidature for any other degree.

Signed: ………………………………… Date: ………………………

Full Name: Helen Gilmore Spiers
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Abstract

At a time when health professionals struggle to address severely inadequate social conditions which are reflected in the poor health of Indigenous peoples from remote and rural Australia, Indigenous students are receiving confused messages from national politicians concerning their level of support available. This study identifies ways in which Western tertiary institutions may better appreciate those elements of the Indigenous students’ learning environment considered critical for success.

This study initially describes the institutional support structures and applied strategies currently considered effective and culturally appropriate to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Northern Territory. In attempting to investigate whether these solutions to the acknowledged problem of low retention rates and course completions in tertiary study are supported by the students themselves, the study records the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students enrolled in three Northern Territory institutions across both the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) undergraduate and post-graduate health sciences courses. With its methodology based within the Interpretive Paradigm, the study utilises qualitative research orientations, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, and acknowledges the ethical and political dimensions of the research. The resultant data provides insights into the many complex issues impacting on Indigenous Health Science students, many of whom are employed as community Health Workers.

The research identifies that the informal learning generated by their unique experiences results in the students reaching a hybrid cultural space within the Western tertiary environment in which they can be an individual without loss of cultural identity.

Amongst the findings it was learnt that institutions need to further foster relationships with the family and community connections of the students. This study reveals a Model of Support recommending that increased institutional Cultural Sensitivity involving the simultaneous development of Cultural Nurturing and Cultural Connections is required.
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<td>ABS</td>
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<td>AEDP</td>
<td>Aboriginal Employment Development Programme</td>
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<td>AICD</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Company Directors</td>
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<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>Accelerated Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP</td>
<td>Australian Labor Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>Australian National University</td>
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<tr>
<td>AQF</td>
<td>Australian Qualifications Framework</td>
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<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
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<td>CDEP</td>
<td>Community Development Employment Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDU</td>
<td>Charles Darwin University(^1)</td>
</tr>
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<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEET</td>
<td>Department of Employment Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DETYA</td>
<td>Department of Employment and Training and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIAEP</td>
<td>Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IASU</td>
<td>Indigenous Academic Support Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP</td>
<td>Indigenous Employment Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPR</td>
<td>Load Pass Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCR</td>
<td>Module or Competency completion Rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAEP</td>
<td>National Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATSIEP</td>
<td>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTEU</td>
<td>National Tertiary Education Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCIS</td>
<td>National Centre for Indigenous Studies</td>
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<td>NTU</td>
<td>Northern Territory University(^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCIADIC</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCRGSP</td>
<td>Review of Government Service Provision</td>
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\(^1\) Prior to 2004 the CDU was called the Northern Territory University (NTU).

\(^2\) NTU was renamed Charles Darwin University in 2004.
TAFE  Technical and Further Education
TEP  Tertiary Enabling Programs
VET  Vocational Education and Training
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This study identifies ways in which Western tertiary institutions may better appreciate those elements of the Indigenous students’ learning environment considered critical for success. With its methodology based within the Interpretive Paradigm, the study utilised qualitative research orientations, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, to record the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students enrolled in three tertiary institutions in the Northern Territory.

The research identified that the informal learning generated by their unique experiences resulted in the students reaching a hybrid cultural space within the Western tertiary environment in which they could be an individual without loss of cultural identity.

Amongst the findings it was learnt that institutions need to further foster relationships with family and community connections of the students. This study revealed that a Model of Support that increased institutional Cultural Sensitivity involving the simultaneous development of Cultural Nurturing and Cultural Connections is required.
Chapter One

The Research and its Context

1.1 Introduction

“self-determination involves developing a national training strategy ...finding ways to keep Aboriginal students at school longer, encouraging vocational training after school, and devising strategies for redressing drop-out rates at TAFE Colleges and universities...Better education will have spin-offs in higher levels of employment, better housing and better nutrition...essential to primary health”. Lowitja O’Donoghue: Keynote address to the 3-4th Biennial Australian Rural and Remote Health Scientific Conference, *Cultures in Caring*, 1998.

These words provide a fitting introduction to this thesis because they convey the essence of the background and the history upon which my research hinges. The Australian Indigenous population, as Australia’s First Peoples, has increased in number and remains a distinct cultural group within multi-cultural Australia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. However, both the issues of education and health remain a cause for concern today because of the current levels prevalent in the lives of Indigenous people in both of these. It is the field of Indigenous tertiary education that is the background for this research study.

To understand Indigenous education in Australia, it is necessary to locate it within the history of Indigenous people since colonisation. Since 1788, Australian Indigenous people have been exposed to a barrage of socio-economic-political-cultural influences which have led to rapid and often traumatic socio-cultural change. Such change was marked by a series of specific policy eras including segregation/protection, assimilation, integration, self-determination and self-management (Eckermann, 1999).

Despite the first Indigenous graduates appearing in the 1950s and 60s, and the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students starting university in 1993 reaching parity for the first time with the population share, the issues of Indigenous participation and success continues to remain a problem for tertiary institutions across Australia.
The aim of this study is to document the institutional support structures and applied strategies currently considered by Australian tertiary institutions to be effective and culturally appropriate and record the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous tertiary students concerning their learning journey and the issues of significance that arose as they undertook that journey (including the documentation of any support that they received). A perceived outcome of this study is that critical elements of their study journey are documented with the result that institutions may improve or review their support practices based on the perceptions of the students.

This chapter is an introduction to the study. It will explore an overview of the research problem and indicate its significance and relevance, including an appreciation of the contribution the proposed study may make to tertiary institutional practices in Australia. Indigenous student experiences will inform this study and the personal influences on their aspirations and expectations will be investigated by isolating factors they considered to be critical in shaping their learning journey.

1.2 Overview of the Study

The entry of Indigenous people into Australian tertiary institutions was heralded with the momentous occasion in 1966 when, according to Lester-Irabinna Rigney (2003), Australia ‘witnessed’ Kumantjayi Perkins become only the second Aboriginal Australian to graduate from an Australian university.

*Unthinkable, according to Colin Bourke (1994) the first Indigenous scholar to become Dean of a Faculty, who declared that Indigenous Australians rarely, if ever, participated in higher education courses in the first 175 years of European settlement in Australia (Rigney, 2003).*

Public debate about Indigenous education in Australia is also a debate about underlying issues defined by social, historical and cultural forces (EL-Ayoubi, 2004). The Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) National Framework of Principles for Delivering Services to Indigenous Australians commits all levels of government to ‘achieving better outcomes for Indigenous Australians, improving the delivery of services, building better opportunities and helping Indigenous families and individuals to become self-sufficient’ (ABS, Yearbook Chapter, 2008). Australia has two Indigenous peoples — Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people.
Together they number over 455,000, representing approximately 2.5 per cent of the total population of Australia (ATSIC, 1999; ABS Yearbook 2008), and are growing statistically in number compared to the non-Indigenous population in Australia. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders had little or no involvement in educational institutions during the first 175 years of European settlement in Australia. Indigenous education was alienated and marginalised. This was not a reflection of Indigenous peoples’ lack of interest or belief in the value of learning and education. For over 40,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have existed with complex rituals and ceremonies, powerful cultures and thriving languages, through formal and informal educational processes (Arnold, 1995).

It is widely acknowledged that Indigenous people in Australia endured many generations of discriminatory, segregated, inferior and culturally-adapted education until well after World War II (Lane, 1998). Curricula in higher education institutions, in fact all levels of publicly-funded education in Australia, were pre-dominantly based on a Western view of history, society and culture.

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people naturally have a different perspective on Australia’s history than that of many immigrant Australians. What Europeans call ‘settlement’, we call ‘invasion’ (ATSIC, 1999).*

This meant that Indigenous students were at a distinct disadvantage in being able to participate on an equal footing with other Australians in society in general and in the field of education in particular. It was not until the 1940s that Indigenous children were provided with teachers in government reserves and the first special assistance programs began only in 1969. In 1994 the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey revealed that nearly half of those surveyed aged 15 and over had no formal education or had not reached Year 10 levels. This meant that in 1994 the Year 10 certificate was the highest educational attainment for less than three Indigenous people in ten (ATSIC, 1999). According to the National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, p. 2), while the level of education attained by Indigenous students is on the increase, there are still a higher proportion of Indigenous VET students enrolled in basic level courses and AQF Certificate I and II courses. The Indigenous rate (43.4%) of enrolment in these courses was more than 18 percentage points higher than the non-Indigenous rate (25.3%).
1.2.1 Background
Discussions concerning the importance of equality of access to educational services, equitable educational participation and appropriate strategies and approaches to Indigenous education have fuelled debate from community, government organisations and the public in general for decades (EL-Ayoubi, 2004). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in Higher Education were negligible in the late 1960s but by 1997 it had risen to 7,460 with continual improvement through to 7,871 in 2002 which indicates an annual increase of around 2.4% (ABS Yearbook 2004). However Indigenous enrolments declined after 2004 with a decrease of 5.9% between the years 2004 and 2005 in comparison to an overall increase of 1.3% of all students attending higher education providers in the same period (ACTU, 2007). There has since been gradual improvement with the enrolment of Indigenous Higher Education students in 2006 being similar to the stable numbers of the 2001-2004 period (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006, p. 3).

Overall the number of Indigenous students has grown by 19.4% since 2001. Between 2005 and 2006 there were increasing numbers of Indigenous students in all four education sectors. Indigenous students were 4.0% of all VET students in 2006, compared to 3.8% in 2005 and 3.3% in 2001. Currently Higher Education success rates (comparing 2001 and 2004) and TAFE pass rates (comparing 2002 and 2005) are increasing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. 22).

Statistically, Indigenous students’ success and retention rates remain at least 20 per cent lower than one would expect with their share of the population (ATSIC, 1999, ABS, 2006). Statistics (ABS, 2006) show that in the 18-24 years age group, Indigenous people are less likely to be attending university or a technical and further education institution than non-Indigenous people – significantly so for university attendance (6% of Indigenous people compared with 25% of non-Indigenous people in this age group). In a recent lecture in Reconciliation Australia’s ‘Closing the Gap Conversations’ Series (2009), Gary Banks, Chairman, Productivity Commission, stated that his expectation when he presented the first Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (OID) Report in 2003 was that many of the disparities evident at that time would have begun to narrow by now. He went on to say that six years and three reports later, only 20 per cent of the indicators have shown significant improvement. Another 10 per cent of the indicators have actually gotten
worse (Banks, 2009, p. 2). He acknowledged that for half of the indicators in the Report the data was still not complete enough to show whether there had been any progress.

Education has been flagged by the Federal Government as one of the key factors in the Australian reconciliation process (Arnold, 1995, p. 5; Hunter & Schwab, 2003, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2008)). Both the Federal and State Governments continue to express their frustration with the slow advancement of educational attainment. Mick Dodson, in his speech as ‘Australian of the Year’ for 2009 said:

“...That every child deserves a good education...are things all of us agree on. We’ve agreed on it for a very long time – and yet we still can’t do it (Banks, 2009, p. 6).”

The “Little Children are Sacred” report is the latest in a series of official reports indicating the severity of the current educational crisis in Indigenous communities where it is estimated that over 2000 primary-aged children are not enrolled or do not attend an educational facility and with many more not in regular attendance. A ‘snapshot’ of some statistics indicates the disparities and the crisis surrounding Indigenous education. For example, there has been too slow an improvement in retention rates at secondary level education in recent years: in 2003, less than 33% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were still in school at Year 12 level (ABS, 2004) compared with 43% in 2009 (Banks, 2009, p. 7). Statistically, less than 3% of Indigenous people have tertiary degrees compared with greater than 13% of all Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, 2004, 2006). The disparities represented by these statistics continue to be alarming and stress the urgency in addressing Indigenous higher education in research (EL-Ayoubi, 2004).

Current practices of educational institutions in the designing of courses, in facilitating and supporting student learning and in the assessing of student achievement are seen to have a direct impact on Indigenous students’ successful participation (Banks, 2009, p. 7; Arnold, 1995). Researchers continue to call for further investigation of the social and political factors that work against Indigenous involvement in Australian tertiary study: Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET). (Keeffe, 1992; Weir, 2001, Schwab & Anderson,
Gelade & Stehlik (2004) conclude that there is evidence of a:  

“concomitant resistance to move beyond this comfort zone (‘Aboriginal education programs’) into programs offered through mainstream institutions and in settings away from home…further research …would provide more insight into this issue”.

Over the past twenty years there have been a number of reports making major contributions to the processes associated with tertiary education for Indigenous students. These include the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) (1989), the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC, 1991) and the Review of Government Service Provision (SCRGSP) Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators (2007, 2009). Prominent Aboriginal educator, Tracey Bunda, as Director of the Aboriginal Learning Unit at the University of Newcastle in 1994, stated that Aboriginal people are ‘still visitors in a non-Aboriginal system despite being owners of this land’ (Bunda, 1994). She believed that this very common experience on the part of Aboriginal students in mainstream education systems was fundamental in accounting for the difficulties that they experience. Mick Dodson (1994) added his comment to this conversation during the delivery of the Frank Archibald Memorial lecture in that same year:

…it is a fundamental human right that Indigenous peoples be guaranteed an education which respects and strengthens our cultural heritage. A right and not a privilege.

A key issue for the Northern Territory, the context of this study, has been how to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students across all levels and circumstances. The Northern Territory has a higher proportion of Indigenous population than other States and Territories and the Indigenous culture in this population has continued to thrive. In remote northern and central Australia settlement was less disruptive to traditional systems and many groups have been able to continue their ceremonial duties. Some Aboriginal groups in these areas might not have seen a white person until the 1930s or even later (ATSIC, 1999). The 2006 Census of Population and Housing recorded that 28% of the Northern Territory population identified as being Indigenous, an increase of 2.9% on the 2001 Census data (ABS, 2006). It has been projected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that, on current population trends, 50% of the Northern Territory population will be Indigenous by 2010. Although the number of Indigenous enrolments in
tertiary-level study has increased in the Northern Territory in the last ten years, it has not increased sufficiently enough in relation to the higher level of Indigenous population in the Northern Territory. Such figures of low Indigenous representation in the Australian tertiary education system continue to be of major concern. The institutional response has been to put in place targeted support services for Indigenous students as a means of ameliorating transition problems and assisting in academic orientation. To some extent, this approach has been successful (Kutieleh, Egege and Morgan, 2002).

1.2.2 The Indigenous Learning Journey

...educational institutions continue to operate from assumptions and ideologies which are alien to and inappropriate for Indigenous peoples (Dodson, 1994).

Indigenous differences in learning and the low level of participation in higher education need to be understood beyond being forms of disadvantage (EL-Ayoubi, 2004). Incorporating Indigenous ‘ways of doing’ and learning into tertiary institutional constructs and practices is paramount in establishing an environment where the inter-cultural learning journey is mutually inclusive.

Our own unique ways of knowing, teaching and learning are firmly grounded in the context of our ways of being. And yet we are thrust into the clothes of another system designed for different bodies and we are fed ideologies which serve the interest of other people...What are the values that the education system is transmitting to Indigenous peoples? (Dodson, 1994).

Each player in the Indigenous tertiary learning journey brings their own cultural safety discourse and this needs to be explored and shared as the journey continues to ensure the achievement of personal and professional goals. Noel Pearson (2008) confirmed this recently when he spoke at the national conference of the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) in Queensland. In his speech he linked the Cape York Institute’s vision statement, taken from Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen, with the need for people to be in a position to choose lives that they have reason to value – necessitating strong social and cultural norms to be instilled in the young people during their formative years so they will develop “to their utmost potential”. How young Indigenous adults can reach their utmost potential in the current tertiary educational
environment lies at the heart of the research considerations in this study, the topic of the next section in this chapter.

1.2.3 The Research Questions
The study is an attempt to identify ways in which Western institutions may better understand and appreciate which elements of the Indigenous students’ learning environment appear to be critical for successful course completion. Its methodology is based within the Interpretive Paradigm, an analysis of the social world informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, that is to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrell & Morgan, 1982, p. 28). The study sits within the phenomenological school of thought located within this paradigm and seeks to study the ways in which social reality of the Indigenous experience is meaningfully constructed. This approach allows a wide range of methods, such as naturalistic enquiry, personal experience, interviews and conversations as used in the study, to present a broader range of insights to inform the field. All these forms of inquiry are interpretive in that they seek a deeper understanding of the meaning and action made by the participants based upon their perspectives (Zhang, 2005, p.77).

The naturalistic enquiry methodology is particularly relevant to this study. It is related to ethnography (Vidich & Lyman, 2000; Somekh & Lewin, 2005) and shares with it a commitment to detailed description. In understanding others, naturalistic enquiry tries as far as possible to keep close to the language, meanings, thoughts, activities and contexts of the people who are participants in the study and to represent them in a manner that is understood by others (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 133). This fits well with the study which analyses the historical and current institutional context of Indigenous support as well as investigates those elements of the institutional learning environment considered critical for course completion by the students themselves. Therefore, it is set within the ‘natural world’, ’grounded’ in the everyday lives of the participants in the study and relies on in-depth description to report social or cultural events (Denzin, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Zhang, 2005; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

The study draws on tertiary Indigenous student experiences across three case study sites from the Northern Territory. The experience of post-graduate, undergraduate and VET students in relation
to organisational practices associated with institutional support strategies is evaluated using personal reflection on their individual journeys.

In order to contain the parameters of the study an area of higher education and/or vocational education and training had to be selected which was likely to contain an adequate number of Indigenous enrolments. The Health Science area of study was selected after advice was received from the Centre for Remote Health, Alice Springs. DETYA statistics, (2000, p.11) demonstrate that in 1999 the proportion of all Indigenous students in tertiary institutions enrolled in Health was 13.3 per cent compared to 11.8 per cent for non-Indigenous students. This is the third highest field of study chosen by Indigenous students behind Social Sciences (34.8%) and Education (30%) although it is recognised that there is an overlap with students sometimes in combined courses. This statistic has remained steady to this day (ABS, 2004; ABS 2006). As a result, it is expected that the conclusions drawn from this study can be broadened and applied to Indigenous students in all avenues and institutions of tertiary study.

The study arose in part out of my experience as an Adult Educator, and later a TAFE Manager, in the Jabiru/Kakadu/Western Arnhemland region of the Northern Territory between 1986 and 2001. Initially the organisation and delivery of training requested by Indigenous groups in the area relied on trial and error. Hours were spent discussing this topic and getting feedback from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Being a non-Indigenous educator, the aim was to strive to negotiate and establish the most productive way in which to create a learning environment conducive to success for most, if not all, of the Indigenous students in the training program. This study is an attempt to better understand the factors needed to ensure success and are considered critical by the Indigenous students themselves. In fact, the urgency to know ‘what works’ in Indigenous Education has recently been identified by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which has agreed to establish a national clearing house on best practice and success factors, providing a central repository of rigorously assessed evidence (Banks, 2009, p. 15).

In summary, the focus of this study will be to identify some of the key personal, institutional and community factors associated with successful educational engagement by Indigenous tertiary
students. The research methodology will involve recording the perceptions of Indigenous students in both VET and HE undergraduate and post-graduate Health Science courses across three case study sites about the elements of the institutional learning environment critical to their successful completion/ongoing progress in their course. The study will also involve an historical analysis of the institutional support structures in place at the institutions attended by the Indigenous students.

Therefore, the study intends to address the following research questions:

(1) What are the general institutional support structures in place for Indigenous students at tertiary institutions in Australia?

(2) Using Indigenous students’ perceptions, what factors influence their reaction to the range of critical incidents and issues that arise, and which of these factors have the potential to affect their progress during the course of their learning journey?

(3) With the benefit of the findings, derived from achieving those objectives, what are the elements of the institutional learning environment critical to the Indigenous student’s successful completion/ongoing progress in their course?

As a result of the research questions, there are two dominant foci in this study:

(1) To investigate adult learning processes within a cross-cultural environment, particularly focusing on the Indigenous student’s experience and world-view, and

(2) To review the issues related to Indigenous students making sense of, interpreting, and succeeding in Western-focused institutional learning environments. The visual imagery associated with a journey will be used when referring to the experiences of the Indigenous students as they undertake their study program.

Like Schwab (2001), this study begins with the premise that institutional and/or community strategies and structures that support and encourage the success of Indigenous students have much to teach us about ways to re-engage Indigenous students during their post-compulsory (educational) years.
1.2.4 Justification for the Study
At the Australian Indigenous Education Conference in Fremantle in April 2000, Sally Farrington et al (2000) presented a paper detailing a research project at the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, which investigated the factors that influence the participation, progression and retention of Indigenous students in fulltime health professional courses. During the presentation, she suggested that much of the previous research already conducted into the issues of access, progression and retention of Indigenous students in tertiary study had been quantitative research aimed at establishing baseline data and statistics. It was time for research to be conducted to identify the possible reasons for these statistics and she goes on to state:

There is a need to conduct research which can reveal the reality and complexity of the students’ experience of tertiary study (p. 4).

Farrington confirms the urgent need for such research as expressed in the final report of the 1995 National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Peoples, where it was recommended that:

much more research is needed on participation, and...it must be qualitative research...capable of identifying what actually fosters continuing engagement in education by indigenous people (DEET, 1995).

In addition to this instance, researchers have commented:

Although there is an extensive body of literature on both international and indigenous students, little research has been conducted into attrition/retention factors from the students’ perspective (Kutieleh, Egege and Morgan, 2002, p.39).

Combining these comments with the previously mentioned recent agreement by COAG (Banks, 2009, p. 15) to establish a repository for best practice and success factors in Indigenous education, such recommendations will inform the purpose of this study as outlined in the next section.

1.2.5 The Informants in the Study
As mentioned earlier, the study is qualitative research founded in phenomenology within the interpretive paradigm focusing on a naturalistic enquiry approach. The study recorded the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students, already enrolled and part-way through their
studies, in both VET and HE undergraduate and post-graduate Health Science courses across three case study sites from Alice Springs to Darwin in the Northern Territory. The perceptions concern the elements of the institutional learning environment these students consider critical to the successful completion or ongoing progress in their course. All students in the study identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. They all agreed to participate in the study as per ethical research guidelines and were keen to tell the story of their experiences. Overall, 47 students participated in at least one interview each. Twelve of those participants were also involved in follow-up interviews throughout their course of study. As the study progressed, a further 36 Indigenous students who were also enrolled at the three case study sites participated in at least one focus group session.

Gaining access to potential participants proved an issue because of practical complexities as well as a need for consideration of cultural sensitivities. The three tertiary institutions were geographically separate and institutional protocols for each site had to be followed to access Indigenous students. After ethics applications had been approved at each institution a known Indigenous staff member was contacted, the study discussed and the person invited to become a member of the Indigenous Reference Group attached to the study. This small Reference Group was set up to advise and support the study because of a number of factors, one being that the researcher is non-Indigenous and another being the sensitive nature of the research. Students were canvassed through the staff member either in person or through a letter asking if they would be interested in volunteering for the study. In this way, the Indigenous Reference Group member acted as an intermediary for the study, the researcher had no knowledge of who had been invited to participate and the volunteers knew the researcher had been recommended by an Indigenous staff member from their particular campus. This modus operandi protected the integrity and rigor of the methodology. Once the volunteers had agreed to participate, an introductory phone call was made by the researcher to organise interviews with participants.

1.2.6 Case Study Sites
As mentioned previously, this study was undertaken in three geographically separate tertiary institutional case study sites in the Northern Territory. The criteria for choosing the institution as a case study site were that it had to deliver both VET and HE Health Science courses, there had
to be Indigenous students enrolled in these courses and it had to be located in the Northern Territory for ease of access by the principal researcher.

1.2.7 Significance
This study is significant in several ways. In the first instance, research into mature Indigenous students in both a VET and HE institutional context is a new area of study. Secondly, this study is unique because it utilises the phenomenographic methodology which starts with the voice of the student and develops what Yin (1994) terms ‘converging lines of enquiry’, including from the institutions themselves, in order to reach conclusions. Student experience is the research context. This is in direct contrast to behaviourist methodologies that validate experience from the researcher’s perspective and use quantitative measures such as examination results or retention rates as indicators of success. Few studies have focused on such an approach with Indigenous students at tertiary level. Some research has identified with Indigenous students during the compulsory school years but little has been achieved with tertiary students except involving a particular class group or year level.

Another significant aspect of the study is that it will generate knowledge of the learning journey used by Indigenous adult students as they pursue a tertiary qualification. There is a need to further explore the interaction between Indigenous students at tertiary level and the institutions in which they are enrolled. By investigating the learning journey undertaken by these students, this study makes a significant contribution to the national issue of Indigenous student support. It will look at the issues of significance identified by the students in determining whether they continue or withdraw from their course. Such detailed attention to the lives of the students is lacking in other studies. In general, studies of this nature are usually taken from the perspective of the institution and not the student.

The outcomes of this study will be welcomed by researchers in social science, practitioners in Indigenous education and training; Indigenous tertiary students and those tertiary administrators who daily strive to strengthen the link between available support and successful student participation.

1.2.8 Limitations
There were several limitations to the study that had to be given some attention.
Firstly, in order to contain the parameters of the study, an area of VET and/or HE had to be selected which was likely to contain an adequate number of Indigenous enrolments. In 1998 Award completions by Indigenous students in Higher Education Health Science programs in the Northern Territory was 16.9 per cent. Secondly, and most importantly, as with any study of this nature, because I am a non-Indigenous researcher a number of operational, political and moral concerns were identified. Whilst I had spent nearly two decades in the Northern Territory working in the field of adult education on Indigenous communities, appropriate cultural protocols and institutional procedures had to be followed. Assistance was sought from the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (AIATSIS, 2000). To that end, the processes and parameters continued to evolve as the study progressed.

It is acknowledged that if I analysed current and historical data and interpreted and categorised open-ended and closed questions alone, then my world view and biases could give the results a particular perspective. To mitigate this I implemented two practices: firstly, an Indigenous Reference Group was set up to advise and support the study; secondly, the perceptions of the Indigenous students as ‘voices’ was integrated into the research design and formed the basis of the thesis methodology.

> Aboriginal people... are the greatest source of knowledge of their own needs, their learning process and the ways in which learning takes place and the most effective way and environments in which...(they) learn” (Sherwood & McConville, 1994, p.40 quoted in (Farrington et al., 2000).

### 1.3 Structure of the thesis

In terms of the structure of the thesis, themes which emerged from the research were grouped and analysed according to the critical incidents and issues identified by the participants in the context of their learning journey. The foundations for the research and the research context were briefly introduced and discussed in Chapter One. Chapter Two provides an historical overview of the support strategies in place for Indigenous students in Australian tertiary institutions highlighting how current strategies evolved and their cultural purpose.

As this study takes place in a cross-cultural setting, it is necessary to ground it in a conceptual base that allows appropriate exploration and explanation of the different ways of learning and
understanding the world. This is done in Chapter Three which explores the notion that learning is not a passive process, specifically that for learning to occur there must be a level of consciousness that allows one to perceive and think about what is happening outside and inside oneself in such a way that it can be evaluated and acted on (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This self-evaluation means that learning is a continuous process of both assimilation\(^1\) and accommodation\(^2\). Arguably the most difficult of these processes occurs when an individual faces challenges to their view of the world (Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p.32). Approved ways of seeing and understanding are shaped by language, culture and personal experience which collaborate to set limits to our future learning. Chapter Three debates what constitutes the definition of learning and explores the process of acquiring new knowledge, skills, insights and attitudes. Since the late nineteenth century the major shortcoming of early theories was that the learner was viewed as a passive receiver of information – an empty vessel to be filled with good information by teachers (NCVER, 2005). The history of learning has shown a shift from this notion to one that accepts that the learner already has considerable knowledge and understanding about the world and takes an active part in creating new knowledge. This shift, from the ‘instructivist’ to a ‘constructivist’ approach, is the direction that teaching has taken over the past few years, including the pedagogy found in tertiary institutions. The constructivists suggest that learners construct knowledge and meaning from the circumstances where they have experienced that knowledge, with the construction being viewed as an ongoing interpretive process reinforced by past and ongoing experiences. Abelson, (1976, cited in Arnott, 1994) suggests that individuals possess ‘cognitive scripts’, or acquired behaviour as it is referred to in a later chapter, which are used in everyday known events. Learning occurs only when events take place that are outside the individual’s ‘cognitive scripts’. Thus, learning only takes place when prescribed outcomes fail to occur and generate a need to understand which must be fulfilled. An extensive area of learning termed ‘socio-cultural constructivism’ was coined to describe the process of learning in a social context (NCVER, 2005). Barer-Stein (1987, cited in Arnott, 1994) suggests that, also at its simplest, learning is the recognition of difference. It involves becoming aware, observing, acting, confronting and involving. At the point of involvement, there is a “gradual melding of the new

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1 New information that is consistent with prior ideas and beliefs, easily combined with existing knowledge and reinforces the existing views (Posner et al., 1982)

2 If the new information is inconsistent or in conflict with existing ideas, then the learner may be required to transform his/her beliefs (Posner et al., 1982).
and the old” (p.20) as learning takes place. This point of involvement is often the result of interaction with others within a specific social context and can be a powerful source of meaning development. In some cases it can also lead to chaos and confusion, resulting in anxiety and a feeling of helplessness and so the research surrounding adult learning, cited in Chapter Three, is very relevant to this study.

We find that our specific points of view or beliefs have become dysfunctional, and we experience a growing sense of the inadequacy of our old ways of seeing and understanding meaning (Mezirow, 1991, p.94)

Chapter Four discusses a range of methodologies that have informed the development of this study. It explains the approaches taken in the study as well as describes the process of research and data analysis. The strengths of the interviews and conversations with the focus groups used in the study are also discussed.

In the three chapters that follow, Chapters Five, Six and Seven, the voices of the Indigenous participants describe their experiences as they begin their journey and engage with the institution during the arriving, surviving and sustaining stages. Chapter Five describes what happens just prior to, and upon arrival at, the commencement of the learning journey; Chapter Six, the development of coping strategies; and Chapter Seven explores resilience and self-reflection as the participant reaches a level of sustainability in their tertiary studies. Through interaction with people around them the students learn different ways of looking at the world and, in the process, gain a better understanding of themselves. Although engaged in differing study paths, commonalities were experienced in the students’ learning conditions and learning progress and these will form the basis of the analysis of data found in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight generalises what happens during the learning journey of the participants in the study. The response to critical incidents and critical reflection is analysed along with the resultant change in perception of who they are and how they fit into the tertiary study environment without loss of cultural identity. This chapter also forms the basis for the practical consideration in Chapter Nine concerning how institutions can support the learning journey undertaken by Indigenous students.
The practical application of this study can be found in Chapter Nine which positions its findings within the current field of research about the practicalities and mechanics of educational institutions providing cultural safety to Indigenous students. Both Chapters Eight and Nine reconnect the outcomes of the study with the initial research propositions by highlighting points related to Indigenous student learning and tertiary teaching. Suggestions for further research in the area of Indigenous student support within cross-cultural contexts conclude the study in Chapter Ten.

This thesis makes an important contribution to the literature on Indigenous student support in cross-cultural institutional contexts. By reporting the personal experiences of a significant sample of Indigenous tertiary students through their learning journey, it addresses, and goes beyond, a significant gap in literature about the learning experiences of Indigenous adult learners in tertiary institutional contexts.

As mentioned earlier, the following chapter will provide an overview of the institutional support strategies currently considered by Australian tertiary institutions to be effective in ensuring the retention of Indigenous students. This provides important background information for the context of this study.
Chapter 2

Historical Context of Study

Equity is the yet-to-be-finished business of the twentieth century. Much still needs to be done. And there is a sense of urgency - both to fulfil Australia’s promise of providing a fair go for all and to complete the work of this century before the end of the decade. Time is critical (National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1994, p.2).

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the context associated with institutional support structures and applied strategies currently considered by Australian tertiary institutions to be effective and culturally appropriate for Indigenous students. Initially a review is provided concerning the historical background of Indigenous student involvement in tertiary studies. This is followed by a summary of the resultant institutional measures initiated to increase access and participation. It is expected that this overview will assist in appreciating the finer details of the critical incidents experienced by the study participants, a focus of a later chapter. At the close of this chapter mention is made of recent 2007 research studies relating to participation rates and qualifications gained by Indigenous tertiary students. This provides a lead-in to the next chapter which expands on what is currently considered best practice in Indigenous tertiary student learning.

2.2 Indigenous Education in Australia – a historical perspective

From the time of the British invasion of Australia during the late 18th century governments were generally not involved in education of the citizenry. So the first commitment of government funds by Lachlan Macquarie to the establishment of schools for Indigenous children was most certainly viewed as an innovation. Indigenous people were subjects of the British government and it was considered necessary for them to attain, as soon as possible, all the advantages of their status as British subjects (Partington, 2002, p.33).

For the 19th century, appropriate strategies to effectively address primary and secondary levels of Indigenous education, let alone tertiary Indigenous pedagogies, were long delayed or inadequate (EL-Ayoubi, 2004). As a result, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people rarely participated in higher education courses during the first one hundred and seventy-five years of European
colonisation. In general, the first generation of schools established for Indigenous children were short-lived and unsuccessful. Indigenous students failed to make progress in school and often abandoned their education soon after starting. Institutions blamed this failure on a popular belief that Indigenous people lacked intelligence. (EL-Ayoubi, 2004). In New South Wales the first attempts to educate Indigenous children were made in 1815 when the Native Institution, a government funded boarding school that separated children from their parents in order to educate them, was established at Blacktown. The methods of instruction employed by these institutions conflicted with the traditional culture and learning styles of Indigenous people and doomed most educational efforts to failure. Hart (1970, p.15) noted:

> It was the introduction of a completely new kind of education using neither the traditional methods nor the background knowledge of children that caused difficulties.

Between the 1840s and the early years of the twentieth century, very little was being done for the education of Indigenous people except for the removal of mixed descent children from their traditional lifestyle to segregated reserves where non-Indigenous people were not allowed to go (Partington, 2002, p.39). This Protectionist attitude towards Indigenous well-being in regards to school-aged education continued until well into the mid-twentieth century. This exclusion not only denied children of Indigenous descent access to education but also silenced Indigenous voices and marginalised Indigenous culture which in turn perpetuated assumptions that Indigenous people were incapable of assimilating Western intellectual knowledge (EL-Ayoubi, 2004). However, new initiatives emerged during the late 1930s that pushed for change on all levels of Indigenous education.

In 1924, the Australian Aborigines Progressive Association (AAPA) was formed in Sydney under the leadership of Fred Maynard. The AAPA tried to raise awareness of the struggle of Aboriginal people but were forced to abandon their work in 1927 due to constant harassment by the police. However, the possibility that Indigenous Australians might have a future was gradually seeping into white Australian consciousness in the 1930s and society witnessed intensifying debate over how Indigenous survival could best be ensured (McGregor, 2005, p.5). In 1932, political activist William Cooper formed the Australian Aborigines League to demand inclusion of Aboriginal people in the Australian nation. The demand was for Aborigines to be regarded as full citizens possessing the same rights, benefits and responsibilities as other
Australians and not their relegation to an eternal primitivity (McGregor, 2005. p.6)³. It also involved protest against their living conditions. In 1935, a small delegation led by the same William Cooper, now secretary of the Melbourne-based Australian Aborigines League, petitioned the Federal Minister for the Interior for representation of Aborigines in Parliament, the establishment of a national department of native affairs and the introduction of state advisory councils on Aboriginal affairs. The Government failed to respond to these demands.

By the late 1930s Government policies of assimilation had forced Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, for reasons of equity and self-determination, to recognise the need to access mainstream education on an equal footing with other Australians. At a meeting of the Australian Aborigines League in 1936 the above-mentioned political activist William Cooper acknowledged this and “claimed the same right (as white Australians)...for our smart children to be able to qualify as doctors, lawyers, teachers and nurses” (Arnold, 1995). In 1937, William Cooper then drafted a petition signed by many Aboriginal people for presentation to King George V. Neither the British nor the Australian Commonwealth government responded. On November 13, 1937, Cooper called for a Day of Mourning to be held on Australia Day, 26 January 1938, to highlight the plight of Indigenous peoples and stir the conscience of non-Indigenous Australia. William Ferguson also launched the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) in 1937. Together, William Cooper and William Ferguson planned the first Day of Mourning. In order to gain public support for the Day of Mourning, William Ferguson and the President of the Aborigines Progressive Association, J. T. Patten, wrote a pamphlet entitled “Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights.” The pamphlet condemned the NSW Aborigines Protection Act 1901-1936 and the Aborigines Protection Board and called for new policies for Aboriginal affairs, with full citizenship status for Aboriginal people and rights to land⁴.

This powerful message appeared to fall on deaf ears. In the view of academics such as Maria Lane (email comment 10/12/02) there followed the racist policies of the forties and fifties. There were numerous accounts of the discrimination and hostility Indigenous students of all ages received at the hands of fellow students and teachers:

³ Cooper to John McEwen, Minister for the Interior, 26 July 1938, NAA, A659, 1940/1/858
Of course, receiving the “same” education does not necessarily mean the education was entirely suitable for Indigenous students. (Pennington, 2002, p.47).

The 1950s and 1960s saw the first appearance of Aboriginal graduates in Australia. However, the assimilation policies of the time, endorsed by various government institutions, supported the push for education of Indigenous adult students to be restricted to a handful of fields of study, or mono-education, involving welfare-oriented professions. In the words of Marian Kickett (2003):

*In those days they wanted Aboriginal girls to be nurses, aides or shop assistants… the pre-assimilation push [was] for a handful of trained people (nurses, teachers, missionaries, welfare workers) to work with their own people and save whites the trouble.*

On 27th May 1967 the situation changed. The 1967 referendum, which constituted the beginning of a national acknowledgment of Indigenous rights, gave the Commonwealth Government the authority to develop educational programs for Australia’s Indigenous peoples and student assistance programs began in 1968 (Arnold, 1995). However, despite the first Indigenous graduates appearing in the mid-twentieth century and the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students starting university in 1993 reaching parity for the first time with the population share (Arnold, 1995), the issues of Indigenous participation and success continued to remain a problem for tertiary institutions. Even though by the mid-1990s there were 5000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in ten fields of study at Australian universities, this represented only 1% of the 500,000 total number of students enrolled at tertiary level (DEET 1994, pp. 105-6). Low participation rates were also evident in regional tertiary institutions, for example, during the 1990s enrolment of Indigenous students at the University of New England (le Rouz & Dunn, 1997) rose from 118 (1990) to 160 (1997) because of an increase in external numbers (from 83 in 1990 to 117 in 1997). But this represented only 1.06% of the total student population (15,000) for 1997, a level that did not adequately reflect the percentage of Indigenous persons in the general population (approx. 1.6-1.8% in 1997).

According to le Rouz et al. (1997, p.10):

*The situation at this regional Australian university, long known for its interest in Indigenous education, is no different from most other Australian tertiary institutions in relation to Indigenous student enrolment.*

In the mid-1980’s, the Hawke Australian Labor Party (ALP) government established two national committees of enquiry, both chaired by Aboriginal people, to investigate the employment and educational situation of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. Mick
Miller, ex-chairman of the North Queensland Land Council headed up the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs while Aboriginal educator Paul Hughes chaired the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force. Both committees undertook extensive consultations and investigations, and produced reports calling for large-scale changes (Boughton 1998, p.4).

In 1985 the Miller report documented the unacceptable level of Indigenous disadvantage and made recommendations for changes to Aboriginal education and training. This resulted in the start of the Aboriginal Employment Development Programme (AEDP). The Report of the Miller Committee made the connection between education and employment, presenting a comprehensive package of recommendations designed to rationalise Aboriginal economic development policy and programs around a general theme of increasing Aboriginal economic independence. Their recommendations emphasised the importance of education as an essential prerequisite to economic participation, and the provision of training more accurately attuned to labour force needs, including training in enterprise management. Their Report also provided evidence that improvement in education and training levels could overcome racism, geographic isolation and cultural difference to produce equal employment outcomes. The review concluded that:

*Low school completion rates have considerably exacerbated Aboriginal employment difficulties and have resulted in a relatively low number of Aboriginal people being able to go on to tertiary and further education.* (Miller, Bin Sallik et al. 1985, p. 197).

The Hughes Report, in conjunction with discussions Mick Miller had with the Commonwealth government, led to the development, and in 1989 the adoption, of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) which stated that:

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia.* (Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), 1989, p.3).

It committed all Australian governments, Commonwealth, States and Territories to the achievement of educational equity, defined in terms of statistical parity with non-Indigenous Australians in levels of access, participation and outcomes at all levels of the education system (Boughton 1998, p.4). The result was a heightened awareness of Indigenous issues amongst educators in tertiary institutions in both the VET sector and the HE sector.
However, it was still noted (DEET 1995, p.114) that although Indigenous Support Centres operated on many major campuses of higher education, insufficient attention was given to the appropriateness of the Indigenous educational experience towards improving their educational outcomes. Boughton (1998) was also strongly critical when he stated that:

...today, the most significant of these goals of statistical equity appear no closer than they were ten years ago; in fact, they are receding further into the distance.

As previously mentioned, Indigenous enrolments at Australian universities rose 60% during the years 1994-9, to almost 8,000, or 1.5% of all entering students, but the persistence and graduation rates of such students remained low. Geoffrey Maslen (1999) quotes Dr. Carolyn Allport, then President of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) as saying that:

...black academics believed that universities should provide more support to aborigines than they offered other students, including “cultural support” such as special centres for students...University is a very ‘white’ place...is also a very alien place, so funding has to go to helping the students cope (Maslen, 1999, p. 55).

The fact remained that, despite the growth of support services for Indigenous students in tertiary institutions as a direct result of the 1967 referendum, and despite Indigenous enrolments at Australian universities gradually rising over the years, the issue of engagement with education and retention of Indigenous students continues to be a focus for educators today. Currently in the northern part of Australia, strong Federal Government intervention is in place with the aim of ensuring that all Indigenous Australians have the opportunity to attend school and, with adequate attendance, further education and training. This response is, in part, due to the details of common-place violence in Indigenous communities cited in the “Little Children are Sacred” report, previously mentioned in Chapter One, which was released in June 2007. Education is seen as a crucial issue in relation to global improvement in the lives of Indigenous community populations. The fear is that:

...continuing declines in Indigenous involvement in higher education will perpetuate disadvantages experienced by Indigenous Australians and hinder their full participation in Australia’s economic and social developments (ACTU, 2007).

From the statistical evidence it would appear that the issues confronting Indigenous students appear to relate to not only their access to courses or their motivation to access courses, but to their effective involvement and successful completion of these courses. Research would seem to
indicate that issues such as inappropriate staff expectations, cultural mismatch in course content and responses to racism on campus have continued to appear as areas of concern for students (White, 1992). In the next section of this chapter there is a brief look at recent trends in participation rates in tertiary study by Indigenous students which appear to support this premise.

### 2.2.1 Recent trends in qualifications gained

Researchers (Hunter and Schwab, 2003) agree that historically there have been some absolute improvements in Indigenous educational outcomes over the period 1986 to 2001. Census data from 2006 (ABS, 2006) continues to confirm this hypothesis for the years between 2001 and 2006. A high proportion of Indigenous VET students are school-aged, undertaking courses while still at school or through a training organisation. 14.3% of Indigenous VET students in 2006 were aged 16 or less and 21.4% were aged 17 or less. This compares to non-Indigenous rates of 8.3% and 14.6% respectively. In addition to this, the strong participation by Indigenous males in VET continued in 2006 with more than half (53.2%) of Indigenous VET students being male (36,007 students), an increase of 2,757 male students over 2005. This level of participation is significantly higher than in the higher education sector where Indigenous males were 34% of all Indigenous students in 2006. In 2006, Indigenous students were 4.0% of all VET students and 2.7% of all Australian Apprentices. In 2006, the Indigenous participation rate in VET was 13.0% (up from 12.3% in 2005) compared to the overall national rate of 11.4%. Consequently, VET has tended to foster the development of innovative practices such as preparing Indigenous education units in order to address the specific cultural needs of Indigenous people (Robertson & Hughes 1999)

In 2006, 21.4% of Indigenous VET students were aged 17 or less, compared to 14.6% of non-Indigenous students. VET is an attractive option for many school-aged Indigenous students and offers an important alternative pathway to school education (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006, p. 89). Not surprisingly, Indigenous students enter VET by way of employment programs designed to bring the unemployed into the workforce. Another possibility highlighted by Hunter and Schwab (2003) is that since an Indigenous person is able to work

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5 Sources: NCVER national VET provider collection and IEP performance reports (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006)
on a Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) scheme, currently called Indigenous Employment Program (IEP), and also receive Abstudy payments, more Indigenous people may choose VET courses to augment their skills because they are often compatible with part-time work (Gray & Thacker 2000).

Comparing the above statistics with Higher Education institutions, the total number of Indigenous students at universities in Australia increased over the twenty year period from 1986 to 2006 for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous males and females. However the number of commencing Indigenous students decreased during the years 2001 and 2006 by 278 or 6.7% (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006). It is of note that over the same period, the number of Indigenous male students decreased by 103 (3.3%), similar to the fall over the period from 1986 to 1991. For Indigenous females there has been a steady increase in attendance rates at universities from 3.5% in 1986 to 5.1% in 1996 to 5.4% in 2006.

However, while attendance is an important step to securing an educational qualification, the successful completion of courses is what counts in terms of enhancing economic outcomes. It is interesting to note that a higher proportion of Indigenous students are enrolled in Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate I and II level courses compared to non-Indigenous students. In 2006 the Indigenous rate (43.4%) was more than 18 percentage points higher than the non-Indigenous rate (25.3%) for that level of course. In terms of overall educational outcomes, in 2006, the overall module or competency completion rate (MCR) for Indigenous students was 70.8%, a slight decrease on the 2005 outcome (71.0%). The non-Indigenous rate increased slightly over this period to 83.0%. Significantly, Commonwealth Government data (2006) indicates that the overall proportion of Indigenous students studying at AQF Certificate III level and above was the lowest since 2001.

Another statistic worth considering is that, despite the Indigenous Load Pass Rate (LPR) for government funded Indigenous students rising from 60.1% in 2000 to 66.2% in 2006, the gap between the Indigenous rate and the All Student rate (78.2%) remained stable during this period at 12 percentage points (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006). This clearly indicates that improvements in Indigenous education need to be made within the tertiary education sector if parity with non-Indigenous students is to be achieved. It is noteworthy
that levels of post-qualification employment for Indigenous students are not remaining steady either. The Student Outcomes Survey of VET Graduates shows that 66% of Indigenous graduates were employed following graduation compared to 80% of non-Indigenous graduates. This shows the Indigenous result drops two percentage points from 2005 to 2006.

In conclusion, Hunter and Schwab (2003) state *By any measure the Indigenous population remains relatively disadvantaged* (p. 14). Policy reviews over the past thirty years have identified a range of possible interventions to improve outcomes in Indigenous education. Notably Cobbin, Barlow et al. (1992) and others (Gibb, 2003; Farrington, 2000; Garvey et al. 2000) took the view that endeavours to increase access and participation would need to be creative, bold, and take account of sociological, historical and educational characteristics previously ignored by the mainstream education movement. In the next section actual initiatives introduced by tertiary institutions will be examined.

### 2.3 Institutional Measures to Increase Access and Participation

Early Governmental policy and institutional support initiatives in Australia were commenced in the 1970’s aimed at increasing Indigenous student participation in education. A number of support strategies were introduced, including financial assistance. However, such assistance was unable to resolve other complexities faced by Indigenous students such as cultural marginalisation and isolation, both in social and academic terms (Arnold, 1995, p.17). The exclusion of cultural values from the school curriculum, inappropriate educational experiences, and different cultural notions of appropriate behaviours, expectations and outcomes are well documented as causes for the inequitable participation of Indigenous students in the educational systems of Australia (Folds, 1987; Keeffe, 1992).

By 1989, both the Federal and State Governments had endorsed the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, created in consultation with communities, teachers, educational institutions and government departments. This Policy reflected the themes outlined in the 1988 Hughes Report and recommended a range of changes to be made in primary, secondary and tertiary education to improve Indigenous students’ access and success in education. As a result of a number of reviews of this policy, the 1995 Final Report supported the idea that education needed to be re-conceptualised and reconstructed, to take into account the
aspirations of Indigenous Australians. However it left the practical formulation of this re-
construction open-ended with operational decisions left to the educational institutions themselves
(Arnold, 1995).

The complexity of the issue has not gone unnoticed. In a review of the past twenty years of
Indigenous education, Schwab (1995) was, however, to point out that ultimately, statistical
equality in Indigenous education in the immediate future may remain elusive for the same
reasons economic equality has (p.24). Simply focusing on the statistical measurement of
retention and graduation outcomes cannot produce a holistic approach to education on its own.
Other factors that impact on Indigenous education also need to be taken into account, such as
historical exclusion and marginalisation, demographic and geographic distribution and issues of
cultural appropriateness of curriculum (Walker and Humphries, 1999, p.9). For this reason, the
majority of educational institutions address Indigenous student participation by devising
strategies and policies that endorse the national directions (Aboriginal Education Strategy 1999-
2001) and provide practical solutions to these more holistic factors. The practical aspects of this
operational journey, including some specific examples, will be outlined during the next section.

2.3.1 Practical solutions
As a result of the concerted focus by government in the early 1990s to redress educational
disadvantage associated with a number of targeted groups, a range of measures were introduced
by virtually all tertiary institutions across Australia. Prominent among these were increased
engagement and ownership by Indigenous families, educators and communities in educational
decision-making at the local, regional and national levels; increased numbers of Indigenous
people employed in education and training; promoting and ensuring equitable access to and
participation in education and training; promotion, maintenance and support of the teaching of
Indigenous studies, cultures and languages; and the provision of community development and
training including English literacy and numeracy for Indigenous adults (Hunter and Schwab,
2003, p.16).

In implementing institutional and national policy on student support, Prebble et al. (2004)
identified that institutions can influence the assimilation, retention and course completion rates
of their students by providing comprehensive and well-designed support services. Initiatives such
as Tertiary Enabling Programs\(^6\) (TEP), Accelerated Literacy (AL) and Government-supported tutorial programs have been steadily introduced and modified, presenting academic options to Indigenous students both mature aged or school leavers.

Institutions respectfully incorporated the Indigenous perspective into program or policy decision-making with, amongst other initiatives, the development of Indigenous-managed sub-committees associated with university ethics committees so consideration of the Indigenous perspective was made in decision-making associated with institutional research applications. An example of this occurs at the Menzies School of Health Research in Darwin where the Aboriginal Ethics Sub Committee provides advice to the Human Research Ethics Committee on all applications involving Indigenous peoples in the northern zone (http://menzies.edu.au). Practical motives also underpinned the Charles Darwin University development in 2005 of a Yolngu\(^7\) language course because:

\[ ...many\, doctors,\, lawyers,\, local\, government\, and\, land\, council\, workers\, now\, realise\, that\, their\, ability\, to\, communicate\, with\, Yolngu\, people,\, and\, to\, comprehend\, the\, mental\, universe\, of\, north-east\, Arnhem\, Land,\, could\, be\, vastly\, enhanced\, by\, even\, a\, slight\, degree\, of\, language\, proficiency\, (http://www.cdu.edu.au). \]

Other administrative measures were introduced into institutional operations such as the acceptance of special entry requirements, Abstudy, individualised tutorial assistance in specific content areas, tertiary bridging and preparatory courses, additional support services, institutional and community liaison and the initiation of community advisory committees (Cobbin et al. (1992, p.77)). However, Prebble et al. (2004) also highlighted that the context in which the education takes place impacts the effectiveness of these efforts. With increasing diversity of student cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, they recommended that university administrators pay greater attention to retention practices that adapt to this diversity rather than requiring all students to assimilate a standard set of expectations. They recommended closer study be given to, amongst others,

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\(^6\) The Tertiary Enabling Program gives students the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge they will need for successful achievements in tertiary studies.

\(^7\) The Yolngu are an Indigenous Australian people inhabiting north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. Yolngu means “person” in the Yolŋu languages.
• The impact of student support systems on particular cultural groups (for example Maori, Australian Aborigine); and
• The extent to which the cultural capital that students bring with them to tertiary study is acknowledged and valued within that institution.

Many of these policies and practices have been adjusted over time in accordance with government changes to the national direction in Indigenous education. These changes have not always resulted in increased benefit to Indigenous students. Hunter and Schwab (2003) are of the view that changes to Abstudy instituted by the Howard government in the year 2000 reduced access to and eligibility for this particular support program for some Indigenous students who would have been Abstudy recipients in the past (p.17). Contrary to government predictions, an analysis of census data between 1996 and 2001 shows a corresponding reduction in the educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Hunter and Schwab (2003) believe that:

Abstudy (has)…come to symbolise recognition of the special educational disadvantage of Indigenous Australians. Indigenous people regard the program as a ‘tried and true’ means of enabling access and participation where it would otherwise be difficult…it has long been clear that Indigenous students have had and continue to have unique needs as a result of cultural differences and a history of disadvantage and dispossession. (p.17).

However, Cobbin (1992) is of the opinion that concern for genuine equality and equity waned in the 90s even though the move from Aboriginal Participation Initiative (API) designated places to more seemingly generous across the board support for all Indigenous students looked on the surface to be favourable (p.77). What occurred was an increased emphasis on issues of accountability, efficiency, quality assurance and measurable performance indicators. These had their operational difficulties and affected the operations of the very system designed to assist access for Indigenous students.

Where achievements in Indigenous access, participation and outcomes in education have been made, there has often been a corresponding recognition of cultural difference during the same period which assisted these advances (Bourke, Burden and Moore, 1996; Hunter and Schwab, 2003). One such example is the McAuley-Champagnat Programme, a recognised educational alternative VET programme in the Greater Shepparton Region of Victoria. It supports young people who have disengaged from mainstream education or who are ‘at risk’. What makes the
Programme unique is its pastoral care. The Programme takes responsibility for the case management of all students and co-ordinates external agency support where necessary. This practice is supported by Deanne Minniecon (2001) in her paper “Thoughts at the beginning of a Career in Indigenous Health”, who states that if universities are serious about increasing the number of Indigenous people undertaking postgraduate studies (in research), then they need to consider:

- The different world view of Indigenous people and the associated learning styles;
- Providing study information which is able to be understood; and
- Employing more qualified Indigenous people as mentors and support for Indigenous students. The Aboriginal staff members are critical to the success of the McAuley-Champagnat Programme mentioned above. As role-models, the relationships that they have with the students are vital (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006, p. 105).

Programs that encourage Indigenous participation in education whilst simultaneously being responsive to family, community and cultural commitments have been powerful tools for bringing Indigenous students into educational settings (Hunter and Schwab, 2003). More recently, Alford and James (NCVER, 2007, p.40) noted in their research that there is a marked preference by Indigenous students for connectedness with their teachers whilst at the same time remaining connected with their cultural preferences. Some interviewees in this study (NCVER, 2007) believed that greater pastoral and vocational support may even overcome the fear and avoidance of work experience and placements evident in some communities such as the Koori student community in regional Victoria, the site of the NCVER study. You need to walk both sides of the line with them, one researcher noted, referring to the nexus between the student and their family and community context. This should not be pampering but fair dinkum total support, he added.

The emerging practices of Australian institutional culture and promotion of cultural capital connects well with this concept of dual socialisation. Instead of requiring students to separate from their old world, their culture of origin in order to become an incorporated member in a new one, their culture of immersion, dual socialisation converges the two worlds, allowing students to function effectively and less stressfully in both. Charles Darwin University (CDU) developed the Indigenous Academic Support Unit (IASU) which plays a significant role in supporting
Indigenous students to confidently progress their studies. Recent highlights at CDU include the opening of Indigenous Centres at three campuses - Gurinbey at Casuarina, Duwun at Palmerston and Akaltyle at Alice Springs. These Centres provide well appointed amenities in a culturally safe, physical and intellectual environment.

*Indigenous students are encouraged to reach their full potential through the efforts of highly skilled and committed staff and a range of programs designed to enhance their academic capabilities* (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006, p.123).

As cited in Prebble (2004), Rendon et al. (2000) recommended the coalescing of the two cultures where *individuals not totally separate themselves but instead be supported to transit between two cultures*. It was noted that this required transforming the academic and social culture of tertiary institutions to accommodate culturally diverse students. This is supported by Walker (2000) who comments that:

*Universities need to create an environment in which academic staff and curriculum cater for the academic and demographic diversity of Indigenous Australians, foster cultural inclusivity and recognize their distinctive rights and interests* (Prebble, 2004, p.86).

To create and maintain this supportive environment, universities have introduced further initiatives. Most institutions now ensure all staff undertake some level of cultural awareness training to ensure that they appreciate Indigenous cultural history and specific cultural areas of importance such as the kinship system and sites of significance in addition to current protocols expected to be followed when visiting or receiving Indigenous elders. Many institutions now have dedicated ‘spaces’ available for Indigenous students to study and work together within a specific enclave such as a Study Centre. For instance, the Jabal Indigenous Higher Education Centre in the Australian National University (ANU) was established in 1989 and has established itself as a leader in Indigenous Studies at ANU through the expansion of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies (NCIS) in 2005 (http://law.anu.edu.au/NCIS). Such dedicated spaces are considered likely to have a positive impact on the learning experience of Indigenous students (Prebble, 2004; Hinton & Tickner, 1999; Ramsay et al. 1996).

One outstanding example of an institution attempting to offer culturally appropriate policies and procedures is the Curtin University of Technology. This institution’s efforts in Aboriginal education were acknowledged in the DEET Quality Reports over three consecutive years.
due mainly to the programs developed within the Indigenous student-focused Centre for Aboriginal Studies. The Curtin Aboriginal Education Plan 1992, and subsequent revisions, included the following objective: *To achieve and maintain retention and graduation rates of Aboriginal students to a level commensurate with Curtin students generally.* In 1995 in this same institution, a high-level committee was established to assist in the formulation, implementation and ongoing review and development of the University’s Aboriginal Education Policy, strategies, plans and initiatives.

Similar practices can be found in other universities across Australia especially in regions where a large percentage of Indigenous students could potentially enrol such as James Cook University in Queensland, Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, the University of Notre Dame with its regional centres in the far North and Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory with its many regional centres catering to Indigenous communities and homelands. Institutional practices within programs such as the teacher training at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Education and James Cook University provide a culturally contextualised delivery environment with a *three-way conversation between the Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and Western academic cultures* (Henderson, 2001). There is an emphasis on consciously recognising the knowledge Indigenous students bring to the course. This concept will be further explored in the Chapter 3. With this development in the field of Higher Education, attention will now be given in the next section to what has been happening in the field of VET during this period of change in tertiary education in Australia.

### 2.3.2 Advances in VET – or are they?

With respect to VET in Australia, the last ten years in particular have seen a large increase in Indigenous participation especially in mainstream programs. This indicates that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education-related policies of the decade have had some success. Robinson and Bamblett (1998), in the report, *Making a difference: The impact of Australia’s Indigenous education and training policy*, indicated that major progress in Indigenous education was expected over the next decade. This proved correct.

Training packages were first introduced into the Vocational Education and Training sector in the mid-1990s. Developed by industry, they consist of a set of nationally endorsed standards,
guidelines and qualifications for training, recognising and assessing skills. Since their implementation, the number of individuals studying towards a training package qualification has increased significantly (Blythe, 2004). The implementation in 1998 of the New Apprenticeships system, aimed at providing apprenticeship and traineeship training in a greater number of industry areas, has contributed substantially to this rise. In recent times, the introduction of the Australian Technical Colleges, and even more recently, the Trade Training Centre networks, particularly in regional areas, has been aimed at boosting the number of school-leavers entering vocational training, especially in fields where skills’ shortages exist and have been officially identified. These include the fields of construction, automotive, metal fabrication, mining and childcare. Indigenous student participation has been encouraged.

Two of the most marginalised groups in education and training, young Indigenous people and Indigenous men, continued to access VET in large numbers in 2006 (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006, p 103). Indigenous VET students aged 17 or less had twice the participation rate of their non-Indigenous peers while there were 12 Indigenous male VET students for every Indigenous male university student.

While many Indigenous people commence courses in VET from a disadvantaged base, there are some encouraging signs of improvement in educational outcomes. Almost half of all Indigenous students are enrolled in courses at the AQF Certificate I and II levels, which is around twice the rate of non-Indigenous students. However, in 2006 the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes in these Certificate courses improved, decreasing for the first time.

In 2006, there were more positive outcomes for Indigenous students in:

- the load pass rate for government funded Indigenous students of 66.2%;
- the overall module/competency completion rate of 70.8%; and
- the module/competency completion rate for literacy and numeracy of 66.4%.

Australian Apprenticeships continued to be a real success story for Indigenous Australians. The outcomes in 2006 saw the highest number of commencing and continuing Indigenous Australian Apprentices and increasing numbers undertaking AQF Certificate III and higher level courses. More than 77% of Indigenous apprentices continuing in-training undertook such a course in 2006, up from 62% in 2001. In 2006, 3,525 Indigenous students
successfully completed their Australian Apprenticeship course, including two thirds of completions at the AQF Certificate III and higher levels. Overall, Indigenous students achieved 2.5% of all Australian Apprenticeships completions in 2006 which closely matches their overall participation rate.

The increasing number of Indigenous enrolments in VET, including mainstream courses, indicates that the ATSI education related policies of the last ten years have had some success. However, recently an NCVER report (Alford and James, 2007) looked at the pressures on an Indigenous community in a relatively prosperous regional ‘city’ which impact on people’s participation in education, training and employment. It was found that more than one-third (43% in one region) of Indigenous students in this area of Victoria leave the school system either after primary school or in early secondary school. A number of school-based issues appeared to contribute to the low participation and retention rates, including culturally biased curricula, the lack of Indigenous educators in schools and the absence of a more general affirmation of Indigenous culture and identity. Low acquired levels of literacy and numeracy were also contributing issues. Vocational education and training opportunities appear to be provided too late for many Indigenous students because by the time these become evident many have already disengaged from formal education and training.

A lack of personal confidence on the part of the student and poor family knowledge of the education and training system combine to produce insurmountable barriers to the Indigenous VET students when approaching mainstream work experience and placements (Worktrainers, 2005, cited in NCVER, 2007, p.31). Evidence in this report indicates very few successful course completions. Many regional Indigenous students circulate from one course to another and from program to program, in an unproductive journey around the post-school VET system that leads few into employment (p.30).

In the survey associated with the report, comments from those Indigenous students who did progress into the post-school VET system indicate that the issue of engagement and retention of Indigenous students is indeed complex for VET institutions because of the disadvantaged background of the majority of their students. Surveyed students indicated poor relationships with VET staff (55%) and many recounted situations that they described as being racially-motivated
(72%) whilst most students (74%) wanted more Indigenous staff and/or teachers, followed by tutors (58%), a dedicated Indigenous learning space (42%) and more Koori cultural awareness and content in the learning environment (26%).

In practical terms, VET Colleges and institutions have initiated many supportive practices in an attempt to overcome the limitations and barriers identified above. These include literacy and numeracy support, academic tutor support and raising awareness of what is meant by work culture such as punctuality, safety culture in the form of occupational health and safety and study skills like report writing. Flexibility is supported by VET policies and practices to fit in with cultural and family commitments of their students. The Indigenous Academic Support Unit (IASU) that was previously mentioned is typical of what a VET institution provides in the way of support (Commonwealth of Aust. 2006, p. 103). Developed by Charles Darwin University (CDU) it provides a range of educational and personal services for Indigenous students including referral of students for individual or group ITAS tutorial assistance, providing information about scholarships and other opportunities that become available, and provision of advocacy support in helping students deal with issues such as study problems. They will also refer students to support agencies such as counsellors and provide information and assistance to access other services on campus, including disability services. In addition to these services, the IASU conducts a number of introductory programs for Indigenous students to facilitate their transition to university education.

2.4 Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, it is necessary to revisit to its original purpose to contextualise institutional support for Indigenous students within the historical perspective of education in Australia. The very slow awakening of educational bureaucrats to the educational and social needs of Indigenous students had to be explained before introducing the research findings that follow in the next chapter. The issue of Indigenous student support is now a slowly growing field of research that will also be explored further in the following chapter. However, findings indicate that what is known about this topic is still very institutionally-based and very little work has been conducted on the impact of institutional socialisation on the success or otherwise of the
Indigenous student within the institutional context. This identified gap in existing research will be pursued in this study.
Chapter Three

Conceptual Background and Review of Theories

The bad news is that the rising numbers of Indigenous Australians who gain access to higher education experience lower progress and completion rates than their non-Indigenous peers.

(Dr Brendon Nelson, Education Minister, AAP General News, June 2002)

3.1 Introduction

Previous chapters provide an introduction to this study including a brief description of the historical context of the research and the politically imperative nature of the study. I begin this chapter with an examination of the current studies of institutional practice and the research concerning institutional support for Indigenous students. Consideration of what is meant by institutional culture and student identity is followed by a brief investigation of the dynamics of student learning with a focus in particular on the effect of cultural context and initial motivation on learning. Widespread perceptions of the issues surrounding Indigenous student learning are then considered prior to the chapter considering the third focus, and concluding section of the chapter, adult learning theories and processes.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, this study was conducted in a cross-cultural context within three tertiary institutional environments in the Northern Territory. The unique qualities and characteristics of the Australian Indigenous culture is assumed to be a major player in this study. There are basically two aspects to this study. They both relate to the research questions identified in an earlier chapter. One is concerned with the student’s own personal experiences and reactions as an adult learner. The social and cultural learning and development that takes place from the time the student first enrols in tertiary studies and begins the journey through academia will be the early focus of the study. Aspects of the student’s social and adult learning environment that they believe is impacting on their academic progress will be analysed. The other aspect connected with the study is the more institutionally focused academic, social, political and cultural practices of the institution and how the students view these with respect to having an impact on their progress. Throughout this chapter particular aspects of the tertiary experience, highlighted through the research and relevant to this study, will contribute to the mapping of the
Indigenous student’s experiences at tertiary level. In particular, the emerging national discourse, where student departure is influenced by perceptions of how well their cultural attributes, such as learning styles, are valued and accommodated by the institution, will underpin progression through the main body of this chapter. A few examples where Indigenous culture has been successfully integrated into a Western-based educational environment will be considered to highlight current institutional thinking. It is both helpful and important to appreciate aspects of both the Indigenous culture and the Western-based educational culture that may impact on adult learning and teaching before we look into the informants’ learning experience in later chapters of this thesis.

3.2 An Overview of Research into Institutional Support

With this study based within the context of tertiary institutions, it is crucial that an overview of the research that has been conducted into institutional support for students is examined early in this chapter. A cursory glance indicates that there are limitations in what is available due to the nature and location of the studies. This section will examine both the studies and limiting associated issues.

In the first instance, the evidence suggests that the literature research in the field of institutional support and its effect on student outcomes is voluminous (Zepke, Leach & Prebble, 2003, p.2). Whilst the number of Australian-based research projects has increased over the past two decades, many of them are internationally based. Most of these have been published over several decades primarily in the USA (Tinto, 1975, 1988, 1993; McInnis et al., 2000). The majority of researchers are non-Indigenous researchers investigating factors affecting success at tertiary level study in Australia over a range of types of studies. Predominantly they focus on the negative aspect of course progression: non-completion/attrition by students from the institutional perspective, only sometimes specifically targeting Indigenous students. In similar proportions to that found by Prebble et al. (2004), I found that the vast majority of the studies offer ways to assimilate ethnic minority students into existing institutional cultures whereas only about a third challenge institutions to change policies and practices and adapt to the cultural capital brought to the institutional environment by such ethnically diverse students.

Tinto (1975, 1988) developed a predictive model of integration based on Durkheim’s theory of suicide and Ven Gennep’s work on stages of transformation. Durkheim had theorised that a lack of integration into the fabric of society could lead to suicide. Tinto suggested there was a similar
link in higher education between student departure and a lack of institutional integration (Prebble et al., 2004). Van Gennep theorised that a person’s journey to adulthood involved staged transitions between that person and other members of society.

The model developed by Tinto in 1975, the first year cultural aspects were treated seriously within research associated with student support, described a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the institution. He felt that these interactions continually modified students’ goals and their commitment to an institution in ways that lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of drop-out. When the student concludes that the academic, social, emotional and/or financial costs of staying are greater than the benefits of persisting, then they depart and withdraw from their course. The proposal that student commitment and the endeavours of educational institutions could lead to desired student outcomes was also a focus for early research by Astin (1977, 1985). The cornerstone of his work became his theory of involvement – students learn by becoming involved (Astin, 1985, p.133, found in Prebble et al., 2004, p.2). This led to further development and refinement with Bean et al. (1980, 1985) producing a Student Attrition Model. Whilst they agreed that students’ actions are influenced by interactions with the institution and other students, they drew attention to the strong influence of the external environment and to success factors such as good academic standing in the course (Prebble et al., 2004).

Over the next few decades, research theories included terms like persistence, retention, completion, graduation and their antonyms withdrawal, non-completion, drop-out, attrition and departure. According to McInnis et al. (2000), it is clear that student withdrawal is a very complex and often very individualised process involving the interplay of institutional, social and personal factors (Prebble et al., 2004, p.51). Although Yorke (1999) argued that the theory of non-completion is generally under-developed, Tinto’s theory and models continued to evolve and be criticised.

Herein lies the explanation for the diversity of research directions, and resultant tertiary institutional policy directions, to date. Two groups originating from the critics of Tinto (1975, 1988, 1993) have made up the majority of research output over the past three decades: those who wish to revise and improve Tinto’s theories and those who propose entirely new theoretical directions. The first group expand on Tinto’s theory of integration (1993) with models of student
departure being developed to include an assimilation process, fitting the student to the institution (Castaneda, 1993). However, the second group abandon integration in favour of adaptation, with the institution changing to accommodate the student (Cabrera et al., 1999; Berger, 2001; Walker, 2000; Tierney, 1999; Thomas, 2002). More recently, a few studies have taken a slightly different theoretical approach but still based on one of the two directions mentioned above. These include two New Zealand studies: Purnell (2002) who explains her research in terms of Nicholson’s Transition cycle8 and Bennett and Flett’s (2001) research into the role of Maori cultural identity in student success (Zepke et al., 2003, p.2).

Prior to 1990, arguably the most thorough synthesis of the literature on undergraduate student outcomes was undertaken by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) which synthesised research published since Feldman and Newcomb’s *The Impact of College on Students* (1969). They focused primarily on North American literature and did not look beyond English language studies. A major result relevant to this study is that their research evidence showed that certain kinds of students benefit more from one instructional approach than another. This gave the authors confidence to predict that students with different ‘learning styles’ would profit from different teaching styles. Kuh and Love (2000) refer to this as the ‘culture of origin’, that is the habitus and cultural capital that students bring to the institution when they arrive.

Differences that can be attributed to culture and that may impact on learning have been the basis of some studies into Aboriginal learning. Hughes (1987) found that Aboriginal students possessed a group attitude which conflicts with the individuality that is encouraged in Australian education systems and that Aboriginal learning is spontaneous and relies on repetition and listening as opposed to institutionally formal learning which requires structure, inquiry and verbalising. Guider (1991) noted that Indigenous students were not future-oriented; work and activities are not bound up in small divisions of time; and they prefer to learn through imitation and observation, and trial and error (Boulton-Lewis, Wilss & Lewis, 2001). Whilst these results have since been declared simplistic, both of the above researchers have also noted differences

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8 The model has a number of cycles, which explore
- The tasks and goals through the transition cycle
- Pitfalls and problems in the transition cycle
- Strategies and remedies for the transition cycle
- The role of management systems around the transition cycle.
that can be attributed to culture, between learning as influenced by cultural contexts and formal academic learning for Indigenous students.

Conceptions of learning held by students from specific cultural groups have also been the focus of a number of studies (Boulton-Lewis, Neill & Halford, 1987; Klich & Davidson, 1984). Researchers found that the way Indigenous students went about their learning, or the strategies they employ to learn, were incompatible with, that is they did not match, the conceptions they held (Boulton-Lewis, Marton, Lewis and Wilss, 2000a, 2000b). Whilst they held conceptions of learning that were similar in some ways to those found for other university students, there were intrinsic differences including the way these students conceived of learning as understanding and the type of change related to thinking and understanding (Boulton-Lewis, Wilss & Lewis, 2001, p.338). Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996) maintained that there were benefits for the institution as well as the student if institutions embrace culture and diversity, for the reason that a lack of cultural appreciation and inclusion forces students to adopt the dominant culture of the education system in an assimilationist manner and this will often result in students leaving the course.

It wasn’t until 1995 that cultural background emerged as a category in its own right: a comprehensive survey was conducted of all commencing undergraduate students who withdrew from the University of South Australia during the first semester of 1995 (Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner & Barrett, 1996). One of the key findings was that Indigenous students, students with a non-English speaking background and external students reported the highest levels of concern regarding their university experience. External students and Indigenous students who withdrew were least likely to make use of available general support services (McInnis, 2000, p.21). Similar studies have been done in relation to universities and higher education (Bourke, Burden, & Moore, 1996). As mentioned earlier, the issue of culture and relevance of programs for Indigenous students goes deeper than the content level of programs. Student retention or attrition is a very complex issue involving serious interplay between institutional, social and personal factors within a context of social and academic learning. Such a holistic view of the student with concern for their cultural connections appears to be best practice. Studies conducted by the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (FIAEP) suggest that institutional administration and staff should have strong links with Aboriginal community development goals and strategies (FIAEP, 1997). Consideration of such depth of interaction between the powerful
social and cultural learning factors involved will be the cornerstones or conceptual platform for this study.

Research has also shown that timing of support for students is all-important. With respect to the critical first year period in a course of study, Tinto (1995) noted,

*The first year of university is a critical period of many social and academic transitions whose successful ‘crossing’ is important to student success* (p.1).

Similarly, as cited by Arizmendi (2000), Hinton and Tickner (1999) found that orientation, in addition to other initiatives, is an influential aspect of the student experience and Alcock, Anderson, Brennan, Luck, Stehbens and Tennent (1997) reported that

*The orientation in first term provides an overload of information...In second term, students are expected to be independent when realistically they still have a significant level of uncertainty* (p.33).

However this research summary demonstrates that the more quantitative approach, of looking at the issue of student retention and attrition from the aspect of the institution, is the more dominant direction of current research and will be reviewed as part of this chapter. Serious qualitative research, as mentioned above, with a focus on the needs of the students themselves, and particularly with the students being asked for their opinion, is glaringly missing. This is an urgent research priority that this study addresses. Whilst governments and politicians struggle to maintain the desired level of Indigenous success across all levels of education in Australia, this study asks the students themselves what support they believe is needed to be provided by the institution for their success to be assured.

As this chapter will demonstrate, there has been a dearth of studies that qualitatively examine the *lived* experience of the Indigenous student during their learning journey (Ford, 2005). Whilst a few studies, as I will show in this chapter, focused on students in a particular year level or a specific program, research to date has still tended to be based on quantitative statistical data from within the institutions and factors external to the institution, including the voices of the students, has tended to be ignored. As a consequence the student voice has not been a major focus of most studies. This study puts the focus directly on the student and their experiences as they undertake the journey into academia.
As mentioned earlier, there are two aspects to this study. They both relate to the research questions identified in an earlier chapter. One is the social and cultural learning that takes place from the time the Indigenous student first makes contact with the institution. How does an Indigenous student make sense of, interpret and succeed in, a Western-focused institutional learning environment? What adult learning processes and practices contribute to an Indigenous student’s personal view of the world or world view? This term has already been used a couple of times in previous chapters and refers to personal biases, views, preferences and unique place in the world. The other aspect is the academic, social, political and cultural practices of the institution itself. How is this defined and how do they impact on all students, but on Indigenous students in particular? What happens at the junction between the Indigenous student and the institution when they meet and co-travel this academic journey? What support is available to the students and in what form? Institutional focus on assisted transition to achievement is a recent development, having gained momentum in the United States in the 1980’s. The literature has focused almost exclusively on the needs of students with disabilities (Ashman & Elkins, 2002). In Australia assisted transition is a relatively recent initiative (Dempsey, 2001) and is slowly evolving from special to regular settings in educational spheres, often referred to as Abstudy space (Slee, 2003).

Each of these two aspects of the study will be the focus of the research journey in this chapter. It will be about making visible what has been, to date, invisible. What institutional practice has the greatest impact on retention of an Indigenous student and when is the optimum time in an Indigenous student’s academic journey should this occur? What are the critical factors or influences involved here?

In summary, this chapter aims to provide an overview of current research in the field of Indigenous student retention and withdrawal at tertiary level and clarify what the results mean from the student perspective. Gaps in current research will also be identified. A major strength of this study, missing in almost all other studies in this field of research, is the total reliance of the findings on the Indigenous student voice data analysis to enable the social and cultural learning that happens within the tertiary context to be identified and analysed for the resulting picture. Further discussion on this topic will occur in the next chapter.
This chapter will now examine the response from institutions to the results of these studies so that one of the research questions concerning what is happening currently at the tertiary level in terms of Indigenous student support can be answered.

3.2.1 Tertiary Institutional Response to the Studies

As mentioned previously, when students attend institutions they bring with them their own identity and personal and academic background. This is referred to as their own habitus and cultural capital (Prebble, 2004, p.85). We have previously noted that research indicates that minority students in Western-focused or Euro-centric institutions often experience culture loss or culture shock and, as a result, see the institution as alien, isolating and assimilationist (Smith, 1989 cited in Gardiner, 1994; Rendon et al., 2000; Walker, 2000; Prebble et al., 2004, p.85).

Institutions have two choices: encourage students to abandon their cultural background and adapt to the institutional ways of doing (Tinto, 1987) or transform the institution to adapt to the needs of the minority student groups (Kuh & Love 2000).

The story is not so simple though. Two alternative perspectives exist concerning what is socially possible for a student from a minority group engaging with the institutional culture (Rendon et al., 2000, cited in Prebble, 2004, p.85). One perspective cites Valentine’s bicultural educational model, which shows that minority students can be simultaneously socialised in two different cultures whilst the other perspective cites De Anda’s (1984) concept of dual socialisation, possible when an overlap between the two cultures is fostered. As cited in Prebble (2004), Rendon et al. (2000, p.137) recommended the coalescing of the two cultures. Whilst these United States studies have not been duplicated in Australia, it would appear from institutional practice that Australian institutions are adopting that alternate perception, that a coalescing of pathways is a possibility. That is, the recognition that Indigenous culture can be recognised and respected, evidenced by Indigenous enclaves being supported within an institutional campus, yet, in doing so, the Euro-centric institutional culture is changed very little overall. Commonly held standards of operating even within the few Australian Indigenous-focused higher education institutions are still evident and the changes occur at the student interface levels with such examples as the “Both Ways” philosophy of Batchelor Institute in the Northern Territory. Batchelor Institute for Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) has a philosophy and practice of Both-Ways education. While students are learning at Batchelor, they are building on their Indigenous knowledges and ways of learning within Western historical cultural mores.
A philosophy of education that ‘brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts, and embraces values of respect, tolerance and diversity.’ (Batchelor Institute 2007, p.4).

In response to this, Walker (2000) reported that many Aboriginal students found their experience was still assimilationist. This often led them to resist the institutional culture and program content, and to achieve their educational goals without compromising their cultural value or identity (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p.54). Bennett & Flett (2001) found that when New Zealand Maori students exhibited a high cultural identity as Maori, this mediated the impact of academic problems and helped them to improve their educational outcomes. They also suggested that this high cultural identity may give students access to a network of social support that can buffer them against the detrimental effects of stress and problems (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p.54). To consider whether this is a possibility, an examination of the closely connected concepts of institutional culture and student identity will be the focus of the next section.

### 3.3 Institutional culture and student identity

When thinking about institutional environments, it may be appropriate to stress that an institutional setting can imply multiple meanings and are not context free or neutral settings. An institution is a particular type of social setting with its own specific contextual effects involving socio-cultural, ethnic issues and so on. In other words, similar or the same institutional structures in different states may have different contextual effects on students, especially if the focus is on Indigenous students as this focus is relevant to the study. Later in this chapter consideration will be given to the tertiary institutions, including the sub-set cohort of Indigenous students, being considered a community of practice with its associated learning outcomes for the participants. However, this section will briefly focus on what is meant by the concepts of institutional culture and student identity, the latter also being more closely considered later in the chapter.

Educational researchers have recently begun to explore what is meant by the term institutional culture or institutional habitus (Raye et al., 2001, cited in Thomas, 2002). Using a focus group and questionnaire methodology within a Bourdieu Habitus Framework, Thomas (2002) suggests that the Habitus is shown to be instead a useful and flexible way to conceptualise agency and the ability to transform social structure. Thus ultimately one of Bourdieu's major contributions to social theory consists of his development of a new radical form of cognitive sociology.

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10 The Habitus is shown to be instead a useful and flexible way to conceptualise agency and the ability to transform social structure. Thus ultimately one of Bourdieu's major contributions to social theory consists of his development of a new radical form of cognitive sociology.
examines some of the issues surrounding student retention in higher education in a single institution in the United Kingdom. The study provides a conceptual and empirical understanding of the ways in which the values and practices of a higher education institution impact on student retention.

The emerging view of Australian institutional culture and cultural capital connects well with De Andra’s (1984) concept of dual socialization as referred to earlier. Instead of requiring students to separate from their old world and their cultures of origin in order to become an incorporated member in a new one, their culture of immersion, dual socialisation converges the two worlds, allowing students to function effectively and less stressfully in both. Rendon et al (2000, p.136) noted that this required transforming the academic and social culture of tertiary institutions to accommodate culturally diverse students. The comment was also made by Walker (2000) that Universities need to create an environment in which academic staff and curriculum cater for the academic and demographic diversity of Indigenous Australians, foster cultural inclusivity and recognise their distinctive rights and interests (p.3 found in Prebble et al, 2004, p.86).

Higher Education and VET institutions in Australia have responded to this and have been engaged in addressing this dilemma of minority group retention since the recommendations arising from the Federal Government endorsed National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1989). As mentioned earlier, these recommendations suggested ways to improve Indigenous students’ access and success in education. Many institutions have attempted to address the social, academic and institutional levels of culture within their organization as supported by researchers Kuh and Love (2000)\(^\text{11}\). In addition to focusing on the details within the Strategic Plans, the transformation of culture is being addressed at the faculty level and student relationship or encounter level. As Tierney (2000) noted, institutional change or transformation related to norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions needs to venture to the level of faculty appointments, pedagogy, curricula, assessment and relationships at all levels of the organization. It requires staff to be aware of their own identity and value system and respect the student as an individual with their own identity and background (p.224 found in Prebble, 2004, p.86).

\(^{11}\) http://www3.fhs.usyd.edu.au/yg/whatsnew/archive.html The success at the University of Sydney through nurturing by the Yooroang Garang Centre’s Cadigal Program of support.
Institutions have attempted to do this in a variety of ways, previously described more fully in Chapter Two. According to Indigenous teacher and researcher Marika (1998):

*Arguably, the cultural authority and mandate to bring Indigenous perspectives to the curriculum must lie with the Aboriginal people themselves...there is a recursive interplay between education and the social context in which it occurs* (p.2).

Again, the onus is being put back onto the teacher or lecturer who is in a unique position to effect change.

*Policies are played out at the classroom level and the onus is on teachers, as change agents, to interpret 'sound professional practice' in this challenging cross-cultural context* (Marika, 1998, p.2).

Collectively, the tertiary institutional response has been to ensure that all staff appreciate and are aware of the concept of identity and the perceived or actual differences between cultures by participating in a number of initiatives such as cultural awareness training. There has also been an increase in allocation of dedicated spaces for specific students to be able to have time out from the multi-cultural environments within a tertiary institution. This allocation of a physical space into which Indigenous students can withdraw has been described by researchers as likely to have an impact on the learning experience of Indigenous students (Prebble, 2004; Hinton & Tickner, 1999; Ramsay et al., 1996).

There is evidence that tertiary institutions have highlighted the expectation, documented in their respective Strategic Plans, that they will show leadership in the field of Indigenous Education, especially relevant institutions within the Northern Territory. Statements such as “create and maintain culturally rich spaces within which students can achieve success” and “learn in partnership with Indigenous students” are to be found in their Strategic Plans.\(^\text{12}\)

Part of the necessity to consider the concept of institutional culture with respect to this study is to appreciate all of the competing perspectives within the learning journey of the students. As shown above, institutions demonstrate their cultural attitude by documenting their philosophy in a strategic plan and ensure that staff are familiar with the expectations associated with the plan. However, there is also an ever-changing student cultural aspect to the institutional culture and these cultures can sometimes be in conflict with each other concerning administrative, academic

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\(^{12}\) Charles Darwin University, Strategic Plan 2010-2014, p. 7.
or personal issues relevant to the student’s study program. One such area of change in recent years, emerging as a major student issue within the Australian tertiary institutional context is the fact that more full-time undergraduate students now rely on paid work as their main or sole source of income. McInnis and Hartley (2002) conducted a large quantitative multi-institutional survey involving 1563 students and found that students work an average of around 15 hours per week with 18% working 21 hours or more per week. They believe that this new reality of study and engagement with university are not just a matter for individual students but present universities with a set of circumstances that require strategic management.

A brief overview of current practices in undergraduate programmes will support the view that institutions are attempting to create a homogeneous academic learning community largely based on Western historical cultural mores but this study will demonstrate that in reality students have their own individual identities and form sub-groups of communities of practice within the main community of learners. This is potentially a precursor for an argument on Indigenous knowledge inclusion in the courses studies by Indigenous students.

With the view that perhaps the importance of a strong sectoral ethos in an institution may have been overestimated, it is timely to review recommendations for research that have resulted from relevant research recently.

3.4 Institutional Support – Common Themes Emerging

It is clear that more needs to be done to improve our people’s educational opportunities. It is also clear we need to ensure that Indigenous Australian young people succeed in schooling and have the skills to enjoy a more secure economic, social and cultural future (The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELS) ‘Ambassadors’, a group of well known Indigenous Australians).

Without doubt, the dominant assimilation discourse focus in current research shows that institutional practices influence how successfully students integrate both socially and academically into tertiary study. Zepke and Leach (2005) surveyed 146 studies from large, single and multi-institutional samples to smaller qualitative studies in single and multiple institutions and found that, in addition to the above effect, student achievement was also influenced by the

extent and quality of student services. Factors contributing to this dissatisfaction include the whole genre of university life, level of friendliness of staff and students, available modes of study, the impact of study on family life, and vice versa and how well prepared the student is for the academic rigour of tertiary study. Williams (2001) identified seven topic areas influencing student retention in higher education: academic preparedness; the academic experience (teaching, learning and assessment); institutional expectations and commitment; academic and social match; finance and employment; family support and commitments; and institutional support services (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Personalised contact, research shows, is also important to the student. The weight of evidence across many studies suggests that outcomes improve where students have regular and meaningful contact with lecturers, both inside and outside the classroom (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Padilla et al., 1997; Saenz et al., 1999; Walker, 2000 cited in Zepke & Leach, 2005).

It seems also to be significant to attrition as to whether the student has been studying in the year prior to commencing the course (Bourke, Burden & Moore, 1996). Bourke et al. also question the underlying structure of the general education system in universities, believing that this may be a formidable barrier to persistence by Indigenous students. They maintain that overlooking their culture forces students to adopt the dominant culture of the education system in an assimilationist manner which may lead to students leaving courses (Boulton-Lewis, Wilss & Lewis, 2001, p.329).

In 1995 the comment was made that, Courses continue to use pedagogical practices based on an authority derived from their inheritance of Western tradition (Arnold, 1995, p.5). Previous research has suggested that the institutional habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) is fundamental to the decisions many students make about withdrawing or remaining in higher education. Institutional habitus is more than the culture of the educational institution, referring to relational issues and priorities that are deeply embedded and subconsciously inform practice (McDonough, 1996; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001). Tinto (1993) argues that retention is a function of the match between the student’s academic capabilities and motivation, and the institution’s academic and social characteristics. Killen (1994) commented that tertiary students tend to see themselves operating in an environment that is regulated largely by others (p. 199) and that it is reasonable to suggest that the provision of an effective educational program relies, in part, on both the
providers and receivers of that program being adequately aware of the factors that are likely to influence the success and failure of students in that program. Morgan and Slade (1998, p.11) agree when they argue that the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students are largely a consequence of a broader process of cultural domination and exclusion. They consider that a solution to this state of affairs lies in developing a truly multicultural context that provides for the mutual inclusion of all participating cultures (p.12).

Partington et al. (1999) places the blame squarely on the shoulders of teachers, the agents of the dominant culture and believe that they have the responsibility for engineering change to the benefit of the Indigenous students they teach. They make the comment that when Fanshawe (1976, p.19) described the ideal teacher of Indigenous students as one who will, in part, be valuing them as people, respecting their culture, and being free from racial prejudice, he could not have envisaged that many years later the outcomes of Indigenous education would continue to suggest that few teachers meet these criteria, or equivalent ones, in a way that results in effective educational outcomes. It is interesting to note that one of his focus statements was that teachers should have confidence in their ability to achieve demanding but realistic goals set for them and that this was still an area of concern many years later (Zhang, 2006) and a focus of current Indigenous teaching strategies (What Works; Accelerated Literacy, 2001).

Helen McCann (1993, 1995) looked at the issue of teaching strategies and proposed that the adoption of a dynamic cultural model in Indigenous education, which valued difference and took account of it in a non-judgemental way, would place Indigenous students in a position of advantage instead of disadvantage, as with the then-current deficit or psychological model in teaching (McCann, 1995). Zepke and Leach (2005) found that twenty-three studies addressed the quality of teaching. Astin (1993) identified that teachers with a student orientation had more effect on student outcomes than almost any other environmental variable.

Likewise, several Indigenous researchers have emphasised a stronger personal and cultural base to the institutional approach of support and encouragement for Indigenous students. An example of this is Foley (1996) who describes his paper as being about the connotations of ‘support from a student perspective, not an administrative or academic perspective, but from a point of view that is often overlooked (and seldom requested), that being the student’s opinion. He soon moves to the question of why the majority of staff employed in Indigenous student support areas are
academics and not people qualified in the service or support fields who may be able to communicate, counsel and support in a more professional and consistent manner. Foley (1996) sees the issue of support encompassing non-academic factors such as support to attain life skills (ability to survive in the harsh tertiary study environment), housekeeping skills (such as management of one’s time and space), and financial skills because unless a student, Indigenous in particular, acquires these skills either prior to or during study, then there is a high possibility that this will be a major contributing factor to student withdrawal. His conclusion, a view supported by almost 80% of students he interviewed, is that institutions need to look at more traditional ways of providing support, that is “support needs to be personalised, caring and effective (p.55)” and not limited to an array of academic support strategies that predominantly address either improving the student’s academic ability or correcting an administrative shortfall in policy or practice. He goes on to say, Re-think recruitment methods. Don’t set people up for failure just to gain enrolment quota (p.55).

Indigenous researchers take the story straight to the people, the culture:

As a boy, one of my Koori uncles (anonymous for privacy reasons) told me ‘If you only improve the life of one of your people (in addition to your family), the reason for your existence on this earth has been fulfilled’ (Foley, 1996, p.55).

This personalising of support for Indigenous students or personalising the research to include the views of the Indigenous students themselves, as in this study, is a rare commodity amongst researchers investigating the issue of attrition/retention. Almost all researchers use institutional quantitative measures, usually statistical data, or institutional practices, such as academic support. An example of this is a recent NCVER statistical analysis of the key factors affecting the chancing of passing VET subjects (John, 2004). Report conclusions identified that the likelihood of passing is significantly reduced for people who are Indigenous, have a disability, are of non-English speaking background, are unemployed or are aged 19 years or less. Whilst this is a useful tool for predicting when support may be needed in a student cohort, it does little to assist the practitioner in prioritising financial expenditure in the pursuit of support strategies. Very few researchers actually use qualitative measures like student interviews on what does and does not have an impact on their learning. Just asking the question as to whether the institution could do things better might help.
Looking closely at institutional changes that VET providers have implemented to deliver mainstream courses more effectively to Indigenous students, Balatti and Goldman (1996) worked from the premise that some of the reasons for non-completions are located inside the operations of VET providers. They report on a study conducted in four TAFE institutes in Central and North Queensland whose Indigenous student populations range from 7-26% of the total student population. An action research team in each institute investigated practices at a program or institution level that impact on Indigenous completion rates. They reported on practices having a positive impact on Indigenous mainstream training that is, recent changes to organisational practice, such as creating space for Indigenous issues, staff and students, that were effective in providing quality training, and organisational practices that directly or indirectly have an adverse impact on Indigenous mainstream training such as compartmentalising operations.

Similarly to the above example, one of the first significant research studies devoted to identifying factors affecting Indigenous participation in VET listed a number of recommendations (McIntyre et al., 1996). It recommended that VET providers should conceptualise course delivery as a cross-cultural activity; that providers should ensure that every aspect of their course from administration to assessment be culturally appropriate; that providers attend to language and literacy related issues; that professional development programs be developed in consultation with appropriate Indigenous groups and finally that providers should evaluate all aspects of their course delivery (cited in Balatti & Goldman, 2003, p.2). Three years later, a field study comprising 16 TAFE institutes recommended more areas for change (Robinson & Hughes, 1999). The study concluded that, in general, TAFE institutes were not responding effectively to an environment where most of its Indigenous students were in mainstream courses (over 60%) rather than in Indigenous specific courses. Its main suggestions included:

- More effective links between Indigenous education units and other academic structures responsible for course design need to be forged;
- The number of Indigenous staff members in teaching and management positions needs to be increased;
- The Indigenous Education Units need to develop effective strategies to support all Indigenous students and not only those who are doing Indigenous specific courses;
• Better quality data needs to be collected on Indigenous students’ perceptions of courses and on non-completions. Existing data collections need to be utilised more effectively;
• Strategies need to be developed to address poorer pass rates and higher attrition rates of Indigenous students; and
• Importance given to job outcomes by TAFE institutes and their Indigenous education units needs to increase.

Like the above list, there is a range of themes in institutional practice that have been identified by researchers as being critical in the field of Indigenous student support and learning. Institutions, by their very Western nature, predominantly deal with the practice of formal learning. However, inevitably, because of the social and cultural interactions within the institution’s mode of operation, informal learning is also a part of institutional life.

This study looks at raising awareness of this aspect of tertiary study by contextualising Indigenous student learning and development, both formal and informal, within a learning journey. This study looks at the influence of cultural elements on social interaction within the context of tertiary study. Studies discussed in this chapter have, in the main, focused on ways to increase the retention and success of minority student cohorts. Whilst Tinto’s model (1975, 1988, 1993) of institutional departure is central to the majority of these, it assumes that students should be assimilated into the existing institutional cultures – academic and social.

There have been a number of studies concerning students or individuals who move to new environments, such as a college or university, for tertiary studies, are potential candidates for experiencing social loneliness or isolation with concomitant feelings of boredom, aimlessness, and marginality. It was this emphasis on the psychological needs of individuals encountering new environments that made Weiss’ theory a good foundation for studying minority students on predominantly White Anglo-Saxon (American terminology) campuses in several American studies. In brief, minority group(s) support services exist to counteract the possible effects of social loneliness and isolation on college persistence. Social relations have been identified as helpful for reducing fear and feelings of isolation (Taylor, Peplau, & Sears, 1994). Chickering

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14 Tinto’s model of institutional departure defines successful college students as those who are socially integrated into the campus.
15 Weiss (1974) documented six provisions for social relations in which he postulated that emotional and social isolation stemmed from a lack of a peer network.
and Reisser (1994) defined relationships in the context of student development as connections with others that have a profound impact on students’ lives (p. 145). Social affiliation through personal interaction and contact with other members within the college environment is a primary tool in combating lack of integration and isolation, which may lead to institutional departure (Tinto, 1988). Tinto’s model of institutional departure defines successful college students as those who are socially integrated into the campus. However, this integration can occur in “smaller units or enclaves” (Tinto, 1975). Murguia, Padilla, and Pavel (1991) extended Tinto’s premise further by applying the model to ethnicity. They suggested that ethnic clubs, groups, and organisations should be considered social enclaves. Recognising the importance of social relations and social support, Weiss’ six provisions for social relations were used to construct the NCRPA\textsuperscript{16} model. The six NCRPA components were defined as follows.

1. \textit{Ethnic and Peer Attachment}: a sense of security and comfort that can be gained by affiliating with ethnic others.

2. \textit{Social Integration}: an affiliation with other individuals within the college environment who have common interests and attitudes. Social integration is viewed as a central component of this model.

3. \textit{Worth and Competence}: feelings of being academically and socially competent and valued as a member of the campus community. Worth and competence affects students’ level of motivation and provides them with a sense of purpose. Also embedded in this component is the assumption that personal attributes play a role in one’s ability to adjust, cope, and integrate into a college environment.

4. \textit{Reliable Alliances}: knowing that one’s peers, faculty members, and administrators provide assistance and advocacy. Reliable alliances play an important role in reducing students’ fears pertaining to college, and feelings of isolation.

5. \textit{Guidance}: students receive guidance from the faculty and administrators in the form of advising, mentoring, challenging, and support. These functions are fundamental components of students’ development and academic success (Chickering and Reisser, 1994).

\textsuperscript{16} The Necessary Components Retention Program Assessment model provides a conceptual foundation for assessing factors that contribute to minority student persistence at predominantly White institutions.
6. **Leadership Opportunities:** students are provided with opportunities to serve as peer mentors or student leaders. By mentoring or serving others, students feel needed and thus gain a sense of importance, autonomy, and interdependence (Holland and Huba, 1989). The results of this African-American student study suggest that a minority student’s sense of worth and competence can be increased through an assimilationistic campus involvement and a supportive and resourceful peer network.

Recent theoretical and empirical work challenges this assumption. Rather than focus on the individual fitting the institution it suggests institutions should adapt to better fit the cultures of the students (Prebble et al., 2004, p.86). Assimilationist approaches may not be the most appropriate for attrition research (Brunsden et al., 2000; Zepke & Leach, 2005). Indeed, McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001), noted by Zepke and Leach (2005), found that students who indicated high levels of integration tended to have lower grade point averages. This unevenness justifies, in their opinion, researching alternative approaches to the student retention puzzle. Tierney (2000, p.219) captures the idea that integration needs modified to include institutional adaptation:

> Rather than a model that assumes the students must fit into what is often an alien culture and that they leave their own cultures, I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways in which an individual’s identity is affirmed, honoured, and incorporated into the organisation’s culture (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p. 52).

McInnis and his co-authors have noted major changes in the student experience in recent years (1995, 2000). Students now expect institutions to fit their lives rather than vice versa (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p. 52). McInnis et al. (2000) noted that students expect to be able to remain connected with their lives outside of university, such as in areas of employment or cultural responsibilities, whilst studying an undergraduate program. This was confirmed earlier when Padilla et al. (1997) investigated ways to help minority students achieve better outcomes. They identified the influence of two kinds of knowledge on student outcomes. The first was the theoretical knowledge taught in formal programs; the second was local, heuristic knowledge learned experientially and culturally. They concluded that institutions should do more to identify, honour and provide for the acquisition of local, heuristic knowledge (Zepke and Leach, 2005, p.53). Rabbitt (1999), Sanchez (2000) and Szelenyi (2001) also found that minority students exhibited different motivational and learning strategies and that these should be catered for
Institutions did respond and this forms the basis of the next chapter, Chapter Four.

As mentioned earlier, the current practices of educational institutions in their designing of courses, their facilitating and supporting of student learning and their assessing of student efforts are seen to have a direct impact on Indigenous students’ successful participation. In the following section I will investigate the response by institutions to recognition that their institutional practice had an impact on Indigenous student progress.

3.5 Research Gaps Identified

The 1991 Senate Inquiry concluded from the evidence it heard that:

*It is abundantly clear that the main purpose for which Aboriginal people seek education and training is to assist them take control of their communities, to develop and manage those communities in ways consistent with the aspirations of their members* (Commonwealth of Australia 1991).

A comprehensive review of the literature on factors that affect completion in vocational education and training and higher education shows that far more research has been done on this topic, specifically on non-completion, in the HE sector than in VET in Australia and overseas (Ballatti, 2004, p.16) and even then the theory in regard to non-completion is generally under-developed (Yorke 1999). Yorke sums up (McInnis, 2000) the present situation by suggesting that theories will continue to be inadequate without:

*…substantial longitudinal evidence which would enable the various models that have been put forward to be refined with reference to their underlying dynamics. There is too little understanding …of how potential influences on non-completion actually precipitate it* (p.12).

Ramsay et al. (1996) showed that the equity groups which reported the highest levels of concern, regarding their university experience, tended to be the Indigenous and NESB students despite a number of specialist support resources being provided for both of these groups of students. This has been one of the strategic directions in universities across Australia during the past decade. Ramsay recommended further research be conducted into the use made of the afore-mentioned specialist support resources by Indigenous tertiary students and the perceived degree of satisfaction with these resources.
Boulton-Lewis, Wilss and Lewis (2001) recommended that further longitudinal research should be conducted into conceptions of learning for mainstream as well as minority groups: how students go about their learning, their reasons for undertaking their course of study and their informal learning experiences and to conduct relational analysis. Subsequent findings will enrich the body of knowledge that currently exists about the experience of learning and this can be used to maximise learning contexts (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001, p. 339).

Recent theoretical and empirical work challenges the assumption that students should be assimilated into existing institutional cultures. Rather than focus on the individual fitting the institution it suggests institutions should adapt to better fit the cultures of the students. Researchers such as Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby and Zepke (2004) believe that the weight of evidence from recent studies suggest that this emerging view is “worthy of further research and action” (p.86).

However, some interesting intrinsic differences were evident with this group of Indigenous students compared to other university students (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001, p.338). These included the way these students conceived of learning as understanding and also the type of change described that related to thinking and understanding. The findings indicate that Indigenous students conceive of and experience understanding in different ways which means that they may approach learning differently according to the type of understanding they wish to achieve. Conclusions from the study recommended further research into the implications of this to teaching.

Incompatibility between held conceptions of learning and the actual strategies employed by the Indigenous students to learn were also highlighted in the above study. The researchers (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001, p.339) attributed this to inconsistencies between informal and formal learning experiences for this cultural group. Others (Guider, 1991; Hughes, 1987) have also noted differences that can be attributed to culture, between learning as influenced by cultural contexts and formal academic learning for Indigenous students. It is possible that the changed awareness was brought about by a supportive learning environment or they may have occurred in response to their reasons for undertaking university study. These areas of possible further research were highlighted by the study.
Following through on institutional and national policy on student support, Prebble et al. (2004) identified that institutions can influence the assimilation, retention and course completion rates of their students by providing comprehensive and well-designed support services. However, they highlighted that the effectiveness of these efforts will be affected by the context in which the education takes place and, with increasing diversity of student cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, recommended that researchers pay greater attention to retention practices that adapt to this diversity rather than requiring all students to assimilate to a standard set of expectations (p. 93). In line with this attention given to diversity, Prebble et al. (2004, p.93) also recommended closer study is given to, amongst others:

- The impact of student support systems on particular cultural groups (for example, Maori); and
- The extent to which the cultural capital that students bring with them to tertiary study is acknowledged and valued within that institution.

Being a New Zealand study, it’s similarities with Australia with respect to current tertiary level educational achievement of their First Peoples means that the findings can be applied to the Australian context.

### 3.6 The Dynamics of Student Learning

As the section previously has identified, each individual is unique. As with all other human characteristics, learning is diverse and different for each learner. It is well known that learners differ from one another. Learning is comprised of a number of forms including, but not limited to, formal learning\(^\text{17}\), informal learning\(^\text{18}\), incidental learning\(^\text{19}\), problem-based learning\(^\text{20}\), situated learning\(^\text{21}\) and so on (NCVER, 2005). As mentioned previously, most theories of learning tend to concentrate on cognitive rather than affective dimensions of the learning process. That is to say, they place greater emphasis on the mental act or process by which knowledge is acquired than on the kind of relationship within which learning takes place. This

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\(^{17}\) *Formal* learning takes place in situations where there is a curriculum and a sequence of planned teaching and learning activities.

\(^{18}\) *Informal* learning is not normally associated with classrooms or structured learning, but is largely under the control of the learner setting out to learn something.

\(^{19}\) *Incidental* learning is learning that happens as the by-product of some other activity.

\(^{20}\) Problem-based learning occurs through the activities associated with solving a problem.

\(^{21}\) Situated learning occurs when the knowledge being acquired is to be used in the same situation in which it was gained.
seems a shame according to Richardson & Wolfe (2001, p. 97) for relationships and their affective aspects do appear particularly important in all educational endeavours.

Today’s student cohort is drawn from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, a wide range of ages and, in some cases, with a range of challenging physical, mental and social circumstances. It is exactly this diversity that provides innumerable opportunities for expanding learning. However it has also meant that contemporary education and training has moved from being almost entirely instructor-and-provider controlled to being a process where learners are more likely, and are expected, to be involved in planning what is taught and how. Substantial changes in the teaching/learning context in tertiary studies has meant that a wide range of expectations and needs have been expected to have been met.

However, the institutions do not always appear to be listening. An example of this can be found in a recent study looking into pathways and barriers in VET participation in the Goulburn Valley region:

*Hostile and/or culturally insensitive teachers, subjects perceived as either meaningless or unpleasant and a lack of Koori staff and support for Indigenous students...were cited as the main negative school influences* (Alford & James, 2007, p.32).

The orientation of viewpoints related to the diversity of student experiences to be embedded in cultural background is worthy of consideration and will be considered in the next section.

3.6.1 Finding the space

There are various schools of thought on learning from and through everyday experience. As can be seen in earlier parts of this chapter, different writers from different perspectives with different focii have labelled this type of learning with different names but *experience* is the common feature and the base of theoretical development. However, there is an additional aspect to the theories and this is that, whether the learning is called informal or situated or contextualized or transformative, it’s approach includes reference to social networking, social circles and the influence of these on one’s learning as one undertakes trial and error processes to clarify one’s achievement (Billett, 2001; Garrick, 1998’ Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Michael Shapiro (1981, cited in Zhang, 2005, p.60) suggests that in any society or culture, language contains rules that provide boundaries around phenomena and thereby produce the objects and events that are the referents of our speech. However, at the point of contact between two cultures, how is understanding achieved?
One suggestion, from Bowers (1985), posits a transitional phase in the democratic and educative process: a liminal space in thought and social practice where the individual is between established patterns of thought and behaviour. In these spaces new definitions and new concepts of authority can be negotiated. That is, using these spaces as times for development and renewing of the vision or worldview that we may have, the formative learning of childhood, with its inherent cultural values, becomes transformative learning in adulthood (Mezirow, 1991). Unfortunately the significance of transformative adult learning and the nature of its dynamics across diverse cultural contexts, in particular the Australian Indigenous cultural perspective, have not been fully recognised and investigated by the learning theorists and practitioners. It is an intentional aspect of this study that this omission be recognised and that the findings go some way towards addressing this lack of recognition.

The next section will examine the effects of motivation on learning as this is highly relevant to the study. Students arrive from their homelands strongly motivated, in the main, to complete their learning journey and give back into their community. What effect that has on the final outcomes is a consideration for this study.

### 3.6.2 Motivation – effect on learning

Motivation is a rather abstract concept that is not easy to define. It is internal to the person and thus cannot be observed. Three major ideas guide contemporary thinking on motivation (Arendo, 1996). The Need Disposition Theory developed in the 1950s and 1960s (Atkinson, 1958; Atkinson & Feather, 1966) presents the point of view that people are motivated to take action and invest energy in pursuit of three outcomes: achievement, affiliation and influence. A later 1970s proposition by Bernard Weiner (1974, 1979), the Attribution Theory, is based on the premise that the way people come to perceive and to interpret the causes of their success/failures are the major determinants of their subsequent achievement motivation, rather than fixed early experiences. Success or failure can be attributed to four causes: ability, effort, luck and the difficulty of the learning task.

More recently, the work of University of Chicago psychologist and educator Nihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the Flow Theory, has gained support in education with its emphasis on the importance of designing learning experiences that students will find enjoyable and
appropriately challenging. He studied what he calls “states of optimal experience” defined as times in persons’ lives when they are experiencing total involvement and concentration as well as strong feelings of enjoyment. These types of learning experiences he called ‘flow experiences’ because the respondents often reported that they felt like they were being taken away by a current or wave. The flow-on effect of this positive experience will be intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, motivating in the direction of further learning. Such an idea is supported by Mezirow (1991) who proposes that, as adult learners, we are caught up in our own histories and that learning occurs only when events take place that are outside the individual’s “cognitive scripts”. For instance we learn when events affect our personal view of the world. These events or critical incidents as they will be referred to in a later chapter, cause a jolt or halt to how we are ‘seeing’ the situation (Marsick and Volpe, 1999, p.5). This in turn causes the relationship between individual and the context to be tilted off-balance and generate a journey within a journey analogous to a wave pattern. Such significant unplanned and unexpected events result in informal and incidental learning whenever people have the need, motivation and opportunity to learn (Carter, 1995; Menard, 1993). As mentioned earlier, informal learning is ‘predominantly experiential and non-institutional’ as demonstrated in ‘self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring and trial and error’ (Zhang, 2005, p.233).

Motivation as an influencing partner in perception and achievement has been researched from various perspectives over a number of years. From consideration in the late 1940s and early 1950s of the influence of motivation on perceptual processes, a trend later referred to as the ‘New Look’ in perception (Dember, 1960), saw researchers moved onto the ‘warm look’ in motivational research, which emphasized the influence of emotional processes on perception (for example, see Niedenthal & Kitayama, 1994). With this ‘cognitive revolution’ through the 1970s, a number of social-cognitive theories of motivation emerged (Dember, 1974), focusing on self-efficacy studies (Bandura, 1986) and attribution theory (Weiner, 1979). Although there is an overabundance of theories investigating motivation and emotion, general themes emerge that are relevant for application to human performance or effort. Most theories incorporate goals (for example, Locke & Latham, 1990), often organised into hierarchies, as a central driver of motivation and emotional states. Relevant issues include how goals are selected, the
consequences for meeting or failing to meet those goals, and the rate of progress toward goal achievement. Research has shown that students are, in the main, motivated when they arrive at tertiary study, especially the Indigenous students who go onto be successful (Walker, 2000). The fact that they have a reason or reasons for being there keeps the student focused. A clear sense of purpose derived from the original motivation for enrolling has previously been identified as a factor in successful transition to tertiary study (McInnis & James, 1994) When people believe they are able to succeed, they are willing to try new and challenging tasks, even when they are difficult (Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p.35).

However, in an Australian quantitative and qualitative multi-institutional study, Walker (2000) interviewed and/or made contact with 268 Indigenous students and 33 staff whilst exploring the influential factors associated with student persistence and academic success in Western Australian universities. The study found that most students who persisted with their studies held strong personal goals and family – and community – oriented motivations for studying. Many were able to move beyond assimilationist or resistive options of education to acquire the knowledge and skills to achieve their goals without compromising their cultural values and identity. According to Slee (2003), there is a need to recognise that just as learning is a life-long activity, so too is the transition to achievement (Szymanski, 1994).

Successful transition sees an increase in competency, confidence and achievement (Wehman, 1992). In his compromise with reality theory, Ginzberg (1988) proposed that a vocational choice such as enrolling in university can be a developmental process that occurs not in a single moment, but over a long period of time (Rice & Dolgin, 2002). Family involvement in transitions is acknowledged as vital to the success of the student in the new educational environment (O’Shea, O’Shea & Algozzine, 1998). Family enthusiasm can support the transitional period.

For motivation in particular, an often-investigated theme is that of psychological needs that drive behaviour. A particularly useful theoretical perspective that emphasises needs is self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001, 2000, Deci & Ryan, 1985). From this perspective there are three organismic needs that are essential for facilitating intrinsic motivation for task activity and the positive effect that can accompany such states. As referred to above, these needs
are for competence (self-efficacy; see also Bandura, 1997), autonomy (personal agency, not independence *per se*), and relatedness. Colquitt and Simmering (1998) also examined conscientiousness and goal orientation as predictors of motivation to learn. Learners participated in a 6-week course in which an objective performance goal was assigned. Results indicated that conscientiousness and learning orientation were positively related to motivation to learn both initially and after performance feedback was given.

Research on academic achievement motivation has increasingly focused on students' goals. However, most of that research has focused on two particular types of achievement goals: task goals and ability goals. Urdan and Maehr (1995) proposed that a more thorough understanding of motivation and achievement could be developed if social goals are included (defined as perceived social purposes for academic achievement) in addition to task and ability goals.

More recently, Covington (2000) reviewed the directions and recent progress in the motivational dynamics of academic achievement. The author concluded that the quality of student learning as well as the will to continue learning depends closely on, amongst others, an interaction between the kinds of social and academic goals students bring to the study environment and the motivating properties of these goals. It can strongly influence how they react during engagement with the institution. This is particularly relevant to the current study. Closely related are studies conducted in the USA (Foster, 1999) that demonstrate how many individuals have a predisposition which leaves them feeling they are unable to effect a change in their environment. There are many contributing factors behind this predisposition and include but are not limited to: poverty, low self-esteem, environmental impacts, individual levels of motivation, the form of motivation, and individual needs versus group needs. The powerful impact motivational influences have on an individual’s ability to succeed or fail will now be the focus of this section with a brief look at intrinsic and extrinsic motivational influences.

### 3.6.2.1 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Some studies relating to performance deficits have provided a link to the motivational orientation of individuals through concepts such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and by virtue directly implicate how people differ in their locus of control. Rotter (1969) cited in Gleitman (1992) proposed that people differ in their locus of control depending on whether they believe that outcomes generally occur independently of how they behave (external control) or are contingent on their behaviours (internal control). Researchers such as Guay (2001) have emphasized
students’ reasons for undertaking activities and the manner in which they evaluate their performance as important predictors of achievement patterns.

For students with an extrinsic orientation, (defined as individuals who perform activities to please others), the reasons for initiating an activity is based in their external locus of causality, for example, desire for approval, concern over evaluation, or to obtain tangible reward. The outcome is often not contingent on effort but is often explained in terms of a teacher’s mood state or the quality of the performance of peers.

In contrast, individuals with an intrinsic motivation have an internal locus of causality for initiating and undertaking activities because of the inherent pleasure derived from overcoming challenges, and the interest in learning for its own sake. Moreover, intrinsics use self-evaluative as opposed to other evaluative means more so than do extrinsics; for example, extrinsics seek the approval of a significant other to assess performance quality. Intrinsic motivation has been intensely studied by educational psychologists since the 1970s, and numerous studies have found it to be associated with high educational achievement and enjoyment by students. There is currently no grand unified theory to explain the origin or elements of intrinsic motivation. Most explanations combine elements of Bernard Weiner's attribution theory, Bandura's work on self-efficacy and other studies relating to locus of control and goal orientation.

These divergent reasons for initiating and evaluating academic tasks lead to different perceptions of effort-outcome independence. More specifically extrinsics see powerful others or uncontrollable factors rather than effort as the primary reasons for performance outcome. This is an interesting phenomenon in the current study as there could be a degree of blame bias, attributed to the institution that has its roots in the initial motivational influences of the student’s reason for being in the institution, in the first place. A closer look at this later may prove or disprove a potential bias of the study.

Several studies from the United States support the proposition that extrinsics relative to intrinsics attribute outcome less to effort (the cognitive deficit of helplessness) as well as manifesting the behavioural deficits of helplessness; namely, performance decrement following failure feedback (Boggiano et al., 1992; Flink, Boggiano and Barrett, 1990; Boggiano et al., 1993). In intrinsic
motivational terms, the locus of causality must be internal for behaviour to be maintained in the
absence of extrinsic pressure that may be provided in the form of rewards such as bonuses,
awards, promotions, and higher grades that are provided by others to increase motivation.

Given a reasonable level of external motivation, individuals rise to the challenge that such
rewards provide. This illustrates that individuals may exhibit both a propensity to be motivated
by an external force and by an internal force of meeting the challenge (Dunifon, 1998). Boggiano
et al. (1993) confirms that different levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can exist within
individuals at a given time; although other mitigating circumstances such as attitudes play a role
in motivation. Given the cultural background of the participants in this study, it would appear
that these mitigating circumstances are or maybe highly influential in determining the actual
nature of the motivational influences evident at enrolment.

In knowledge-sharing communities and organisations, one example being the Australian
Indigenous society, members often cite altruistic reasons for their participation, including
contributing to a common good, a moral obligation to the group, mentorship or 'giving back'.
This Goal Theory model of intrinsic motivation has emerged from three decades of research by
hundreds of educationalists, and is still evolving (Ames, 1984, 1992; Butler, 1989, 2000; Elliott
& Sheldon, 1997; Locke & Latham, 1990; Thorkildsen, Nolen, & Fournier, 1994; Midgley,
Kaplan, & Middleton 2001). The possible contributions of constructivist perspectives on learning
and instruction are currently being considered as this theory undergoes review. Others are
investigating the way social goals interact with mastery and performance goals (Barker,
McInerney & Dowson, 2003).
Research has, at times, considered that the motivation resulting from the initial reasons for
commencing further education can have a profound effect on the individual during the course of
their study. Perceived changes in conceptions of learning, and in themselves as learners, with
respect to Indigenous students during their course of study, may possibly be in response to their
initial reasons for undertaking university study (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2001).

What has been drawn to the attention of researchers is the influence that the notion of perceived
level of control over events has on the individual’s likelihood to continue. In a UK Business
School study combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, Mackie (2001) explored
undergraduate student behaviour with 450 students, paying particular attention to the complex interplay of forces that lead to students’ decisions to leave or stay. A comparative study is made of the experiences of those who have left and those who experienced similar difficulties but chose to remain. The difference between the two groups is the level of personal commitment to the university experience. In many instances, this commitment originates with the initial motivating force behind their enrolment in tertiary studies. Such connection between motivation and ongoing commitment is also borne out in the results of the focus of this study, a matter for a later chapter.

There can be a negative aspect to motivation as well. With the recently identified change (McInnis & Hartley, 2002) in the Australian tertiary context to more students combining paid work and study and more students working longer hours, a trend has been noticed: McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) found that this demographic change results in less attachment and less commitment to a range of aspects of university life. It could be assumed that this is despite any strong initial motivation to study at the commencement of their course.

In the next section I will look at the possible effect that this change in demographics, and amount of time students have to spend with each other and university staff, could have on student commitment to learning.

3.6.3 Culture – effect on learning
Tertiary students arrive at an institution with particular cultural capital. Differences that can be attributed to culture and that may impact on learning have been the basis of a few studies into Aboriginal learning (Boulton-Lewis, Wilss & Lewis, 2001; Fogarty & White, 1994; MacDonald, 1993; Hughes, 1987). Where culture is valued and fits with the existing institutional culture they are more likely to be fish in water (Thomas, 2002, p. 431) and to achieve. Where their cultural practices are deemed to be inappropriate, incongruent (Berger, 2000), deficient or invalidated (Sanchez, 2000), they are more likely to experience acculturative stress (Saenz, 1999) and to leave (Zepke & Leach, 2005).

*Those students who lack the requisite cultural capital may have a hard time or be unable to fully integrate because their frame of reference is just too different from the organisational habitus and the habitus of the dominant peer group on campus* (Berger, 2000, p. 108, found in Zepke & Leach, 2005, p.54).
Walton, 1993, cited in Zhang, 1997, noted that in the field of Aboriginal education, particularly with the tertiary adaptation model, linguists highlighted cultural and linguistic differences. However, these are now being used to justify and rationalise inequitable educational outcomes (p.43). With the tendency for cultural differences such as Aboriginal world view and traditional learning styles to be used to rationalise what Christie (2006) calls *educational pantomines*, in which students and teachers negotiate coping strategies, the result can be dysfunctional in terms of academic goals (Walton, p.63). Zhang (1997) embraces differences in tertiary education but not at the expense of standards. She refers to the example where some lecturers let students pass under the explanation that *the students are from Indigenous cultures and very knowledgeable in their own society*. That is, non-performers are often passed as a recognition of differences in culture and value systems. They are not required to perform at the same level as non-Indigenous students studying towards the same award. This has the effect of limiting them in their choice of employment and ultimately reducing their level of confidence within the employment market.

Zhang (1997) comments that what is neglected in the process of teaching and learning at tertiary level seems to be the *connectedness* between Aboriginal education and the global picture of the political, cultural and social development of the wider society. More recent studies by Rose (2007), Nakata (2007), Martin (2008) Arbon (2008) and others have explored new learning pedagogies for Indigenous students and the place and meaning of Indigenous knowledge in the Western academy.

This coming together or coalescing of the understanding of the two world views will form part of the discussions from this study.

Management of difference is also referred to by Helen McCann (1993, 1995) when she proposed a tertiary practice of adopting a dynamic cultural model in Indigenous education, which valued difference and took account of it in a non-judgemental way. This would place Indigenous students in a position of advantage instead of disadvantage, as with the then-current deficit or psychological model in teaching (McCann, 1995). Likewise the results of a survey of values and world views conducted by Fogarty and White (1994) involving over one hundred each of Indigenous and non-Indigenous university students with many indicating that they felt caught half-way between two value systems and two cultures. The researchers found that the majority of Indigenous students, in contrast to the non-Indigenous students, placed greater emphasis on values associated with tradition, conformity and security as well as values which generally serve
the collective as opposed to individual interests (Arnold, 1995, p.27). Their research identified that Indigenous students possess a group attitude which conflicts with the individuality that is encouraged in tertiary institutions in Australia.

Building productive learning environments has always been a difficult and complex process for teachers (Getzels and Thelen, 1960) and this study will confirm that a major determinant of Indigenous student learning is whether the learning environment recognises, and supports, the need for a cultural space where Indigenous students can find their place within the combined communities of practice that exist. This study will also confirm such a need as important.

3.6.4 Perceptions on Australian Indigenous learning

Past is a whiteman’s idea. We know that we cannot lose anything that has happened to us. What has happened to our people, is our people. It is what we are (Watson, 1988, p.10).

This comment made at the 1987 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry, focused on a quality of Indigenous identity ignored by mainstream education at that time: that Indigenous students cannot be separated from their cultural history, or in fact, their contemporary cultural lifestyles (Arnold, 1995, p.25).

Culture can encourage or discourage transformational thought. There is an apparent oversight, according to Mezirow (1991), in adult learning theory that has resulted from a failure to recognise the central roles played by an individual’s acquired frame of reference, through which meaning is construed and all learning takes place, and by the transformation of these habits of expectations during the learning process. Sets of habitual expectations or meaning perspectives constitute codes that govern the activities of perceiving, comprehending and remembering. According to Mezirow (1991), the symbols that we project onto our sense perceptions are filtered through meaning perspectives. The resulting loaded perception is objectified through speech. Meaning is an interpretation and to make meaning is to construe or interpret experience and thus give it coherence.

Meaning is construed both pre-linguistically, through cues and symbolic models, and through language. These two ways of construing meaning are interactive processes involving two dimensions of awareness, the presentational23 and the propositional24. The idea that meaning

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23 Presentational construal is perception as a result of interpreting immediate appearance, that is, interpreting cues evoked by sense perception (Mezirow, 1991, p.24).
perspectives serve as schemes and as perceptual and interpretive codes in the construal of meaning constitutes the central dynamic and fundamental postulate of a constructivist transformation theory of adult learning. These meaning schemes and meaning perspectives constitute our boundary structures for perceiving and comprehending new data. Experience strengthens our personal meaning system by refocusing or extending our expectations about how things are supposed to be (Mezirow, 1991, p.5). The theory of communicative action defined by the eminent contemporary German social theorist Jurgen Habermas (1987, 1984) provides the social theoretical context for the transformation theory of learning. The part of his theory relevant to this study is that the inherent purpose of human linguistic communication is to reach an understanding. In this study there are several layers of dialogue and understanding and it will be an interesting exercise in the findings to analyse how misinterpretation or mis-cueing is, in part, responsible for negative outcomes between the institution and the individual student.

A recently documented case study of mis-cueing between cultures (Christie, 2006) relates how in a Fire Ecology workshop, Yolngu scientists, respected as knowledgeable within Yolngu culture, worked with Western ecologists investigating traditional technologies of environmental management using fire. In a number of times and places, Yolngu elders and Western ecologists have come together to share their knowledges. Western ecologists were interested in finding out what happens in the firestick farming and especially what Aboriginal elders know about maintaining species diversity. As Christie (2006) relates, the Yolngu sometimes told stories or made links which seemed irrelevant to the Western ecologists: stories about land, totems and creation. Even with considerable goodwill between parties, these were difficult sessions.

*The embeddedness of environmental management in the practices of everyday Yolngu life was as invisible to the Western scientists as was the possibility of abstracting and transporting ecological knowledge to new contexts invisible to the Yolngu. In this episode, the Aboriginal and academic knowledge traditions simply failed to make themselves recognisable to each other* (Christie, 2006, p.84).

Christie believes that the knowledge was simply not transferable. However, the Indigenous ways of knowing may be. In other words, Yolngu fire ecology research can be summed up, in Christie’s words, as:

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24 Propositional construal is associated with comprehension and involves experiencing things in terms of the concepts and categories that come with our mastery of language (ditto).
You learn to do fire ecology in your place, in the same way as we have learnt to do it in our place. We cannot show you how to do yours, but we can show you how we do ours. In other words, only the integrated collaborative social practices of burning can be said to actually contain Aboriginal knowledge of appropriate fire strategies. Aboriginal knowledge everywhere comes out of the routine practices of life and makes those practices possible. It is not easily, nor naturally, commodified like laboratory knowledge (Christie, 2006, p.79):

Aboriginal knowledge is responsive, active, and constantly renewed and reconfigured. It is eco-logical...Some...formalised, codified and withdrawn from public access...It should be understood more as something that you do than as something that you have, knowing how rather than knowing that.

Like all knowledge, Aboriginal knowledge everywhere is fundamentally local. According to Christie (2006), Aboriginal knowledge traditions differ from place to place. They derive from and enable culturally-specific and context-specific practices. They come from place and relate people to place in their everyday lives. Language, land and identity are interdependent in a unique way in the Aboriginal Australian world, and in a distinctive way in each context. In the fire ecology example, the knowledge surrounding fires lies in a relationship between individuals (human and non-human), their lands, their histories, their languages and the actual time and place of its implementation. Knowledge itself is dispersed in the landscape (Hutchins & Klausen, 2000; Law & Hassard, 1999 cited in Christie, 2006).

In citing this example, I have endeavoured to demonstrate the complexity of the situation when it comes to communication between the Western-focused tertiary institution and the Indigenous perspective or world view. It is expected that some of the crucial issues associated with this study will have this mis-cueing of communication at the foundation of the incident.

With the understanding that cultural aspects are paramount in our appreciation of the complexities surrounding Indigenous student learning within the tertiary context, it is my intention now to review research that has been conducted into various aspects of the impact of Indigeneity on learning. Research into Australian Indigenous learning has been extensive: Harris(1980, 1992), Von Sturmer (1981 1984), Loveday and Young (1982), Christie (1985, 1987, 1998), Weir (1994) and Rabbit (1999). The development and theory of Aboriginal learning
styles has been attributed to Stephen Harris. He identified five major Aboriginal learning strategies (Harris, 1992, p.38):

- Learning by observation and imitation rather than by verbal instruction - learning by looking and copying, not by talking;
- Learning by personal trial and error rather than by verbal instruction with demonstration - or, learning by doing, not by talking plus demonstration;
- Learning in real life, rather than by practice in artificial settings - or learning by real life, not by 'practice'. Closely related to this is learning 'wholes', not sequenced parts, or learning by successive approximation of the efficient product;
- Learning context-specific skills, versus generalisable principles - or learning skills for specific tasks rather than learning generalisable principles; and
- Person-orientation in learning, not information-orientation - or focus on people and relationships rather than on information.

Whilst this brief list of learning styles can be attributed, in the main, to all learners if stimulation and engagement is the focus, it can be argued that Harris' work, whilst recognised recently as limited (Henry & Brabham, 1994) is of great historic importance as it challenges stereotypical notions that Aboriginal people were not able to be educated. It is important to recognise that the impact that this research had on the political scene at the time cannot be underestimated. Acknowledgment of differing Aboriginal learning styles based on the recognition of culture undermines racist attitudes of western superiority and assimilation. As a result of research, learning styles theory has been embraced by educational institutions:

Learning styles theory is now thoroughly embedded into the pedagogical practices of almost every Australian institution with a brief for Aboriginal education (Nicholls et al., 1998, p.37).

Nicholls et al. (1998, p.33) also suggest that a prolonged period in Australian history when educators failed to acknowledge the broader influences that impinge upon educational outcomes has resulted in the maintenance of the status quo where little advancement has been made in Aboriginal education. Research has shown that learning styles are affected by a broad range of social, emotional and physical factors. Bourke, Burden and Moore (1996), in their study 'Factors Affecting Performance of ATSI Students At Australian Universities: A Case Study', demonstrate results indicating that a cross section of variables were found to contribute to the inadequate
level of persistence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bourke et al., 1996, p.xiii). These identified factors that affected the learning styles of the students included: financial difficulty escalated with relocation and accommodation costs, loneliness, being home sick and unprepared. The experience of physical and social isolation due to not feeling welcome in the strange, new university environment was also attributed to the level of student success (Bourke et al., 1996, pp.xiv & 8). The research team found that prior educational levels did not necessarily determine the level of a student's success. Success rates were attributed to positive university experiences such as the level of support, attitudes of staff and availability of career counselling. The study also revealed that on a global level parallels could be drawn between other Indigenous students, for example, the cultural factors that impinged upon the success of ATSI students and Native American students in universities (Bourke et al., 1996, p.8).

The implications of difference between dominant and minority group cultures’ languages, learning processes and methodologies has been widely explored both here and overseas (Fordham, 1988; Gee, 1990 and Walton, 1993). The current practices of educational institutions in their designing of courses, their facilitating and supporting of student learning and their assessing of student efforts are seen to have a direct impact on Indigenous students’ successful participation (Arnold, 1995). Educators now acknowledge that cultural uniqueness is a crucial consideration in the education of Indigenous students. This sense of identity will be referred to later in this thesis and is intertwined with the results of the study, assisting in how to address this issue from an institutional perspective.

Copious documents refer to the degree of connectedness or connectivity between the Indigenous student and the institution and the effect this has on learning. In a document produced by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, “Community Matters” (2001) it says

*Schools are usually aware that, compared with non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students have lower rates of attendance, retention and academic achievement. What schools are often not aware of is that these outcomes can reflect the degree of connectedness that students feel with the school (p.39).*

Connectedness links strongly with the concept of communication and is one of the intrinsic reasons put forward for success or otherwise by Parlington and Richer (1999). Their findings highlighted four main factors as barriers to success: “background” factors, the teacher’s own value system, power relations within the institution and inadequate communication between
parties. They conclude that success could be achieved by a more cohesive and collaborative effort at connecting all relevant parties through better communication (Wilkinson, 2002, p.17). But just what the communication aims for is the focus of Indigenous authors Stehbens, Anderson and Herbert (1999) who researched the “micro controls” environment in “gatekeeper-mentality” educational institutions, lamenting that the aim is to assimilate Indigenous students into the values and mores of the dominant mainstream (Wilkinson, 2002, Attachment 4, p.17). They go onto say *Students are forced to act, behave and relate in ways which are governed* (p.10).

This is borne out with comment by Dr Mandawuy Yunupingu concerning his own education: *…looking back now I can see that the teachers probably saw things differently to me* (2002, p. 27).

In a bid to shift from this assimilationist mentality, Schwab and Sutherland (2001) propose that institutions build Indigenous learning communities as an avenue to address limited engagement of Indigenous Australians with education. As they state, *Learning is a community activity as well as a community responsibility* (p.19).

Creating Indigenous learning communities within institutions is just one of the many researched possibilities for institutions to improve Indigenous participation in education whilst at the same time creating opportunities and addressing equity and recognition of cultural diversity in its practice. Further thoughts will be explored on this topic in a later chapter.

How institutions deal with this research can be seen by examining the programs across the country within institutions that have responded to the preference by Indigenous students to have a more culturally appropriate program curriculum and methodology. One such example, the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) that James Cook University offers is a delivery environment that has proved its appropriateness with its academic success and program longevity. The lecturers incorporate *Indigenous cultures, knowledges and ways of learning in their courseware*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is an emphasis on consciously recognising the knowledge Indigenous students bring to the course. In addition to this, RATEP lecturers have had to incorporate curriculum design features that provide students with the means to control the matching of academic learning tasks with their cultural and individual ways of learning:

*This interplay of multiple cultural contextualisation has been facilitated through the provision of various delivery and pathway modes: the IMM courseware, readings, workbooks, audiovisual materials, teleconferences, on-site tutorial support, email, the*
WWW and facsimile...certain assessment...situates the activities within the students’ interest and culture (Henderson, 2001, p 47).

Relating this section back to the research questions underpinning the study, the study reveals a combination of formal and informal learning that underpins the learning journey for the students. Adult learning theories inform and will be used to examine the research questions. It is timely that these now be considered in this chapter.

3.7 Adult Learning Theories in Western Culture
Throughout history, people have wondered about learning. No one theory covers all the learning that we do. Instead there are a number of theories. There are many different types of learning, some simple, some complex. Some involve the acquisition of knowledge and others the mastery of skills; some can be learned from experience and some need to be taught. In the last century there have been huge advances in our understanding of how learning occurs. Psychologists have introduced the notion of the mind as an active, malleable living thing that grows and adapts in response to the environment (Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p.23). Piaget’s theory placed action and self-directed problem solving at the heart and highlighted specific universal stages of development associated with cognitive functioning. Vygotsky (1962) theorised that human learning is dependent on the social and cultural environment, as well as the mind, and that the deep determinants of human activity lie in the historically developing culture, embodied in various signs and symbol systems. This parallels Bruner and Haste’s (1987) description of learning as ‘interweaving’ language, interaction and cognition. As John Dewey (1963) described it early in the twentieth century, thinking happens when a person experiences a problem understanding something. Learning is an active, dynamic process that requires effort and energy that is both individual and social.

3.7.1 Learning is making connections
The past fifty years of research has made it clear that learning is not a passive process. For learning to occur, there must be a level of consciousness – that combination of biological architecture and self-directed action allowing one to perceive and think about what is happening outside and inside oneself in such a way that it can be evaluated and acted on (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This self-evaluating means that learning is a continuous process of making connections in
both an assimilatistic\footnote{New information that is consistent with prior ideas and beliefs, easily combined with existing knowledge and reinforces the existing views (Posner et al., 1982)} and accommodating\footnote{If the new information is inconsistent or in conflict with existing ideas, then the learner may be required to transform his/her beliefs (Posner et al., 1982).} manner. Arguably the most difficult of these processes occurs when an individual faces challenges to their view of the world (Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p.32).

This view of one’s world has its roots in our early years. Socialisation is regarded as a learning process. Mezirow (1991) believes that, as adult learners, we are caught in our own histories. Formative learning occurs in childhood both through socialisation (informal or tacit learning of norms from parents and friends) and through our schooling. The learning provided by our particular culture and by the idiosyncratic requirements by our parents is the learning that is rewarded. As mentioned earlier, the result of this is that adults take their view of the world, or worldview, with them into other cultural settings. Mezirow (1991) believes that how we perceive of ourselves in society, our identity, a direct result of our culturally approved ways of seeing and understanding, shaped by language, culture and personal experience, conspires to limit our future learning. This applies to all people.

Much debate has ensued over what constitutes the definition of learning. Basically learning is viewed as the process of acquiring new knowledge, skills, insights and attitudes. As mentioned earlier, since the late nineteenth century the major shortcoming of early theories was that the learner was viewed as a passive receiver of information – an empty vessel to be filled with good information by teachers (NCVER, 2005). The history of learning has shown a shift from this notion to one that accepts that the learner already has considerable knowledge and understanding about the world and takes an active part in creating new knowledge. This shift, from the ‘\textit{instructivist}’ to a ‘\textit{constructivist}’ approach, is the direction that teaching, including that carried out in VET, has taken over the past few years. The constructivists (von Glasersfeld, 1991; Fosnot, 1996; Crowther 1997; Dougiamas 1998) suggest that learners construct knowledge and meaning from the circumstances where they have experienced that knowledge, with the construction being viewed as an ongoing interpretive process reinforced by past and ongoing experiences. Abelson, (1976, cited in Arnott, 1994) suggests that individuals possess ‘\textit{cognitive scripts}’ or acquired behaviour, as it is referred to in a later chapter, which are used in everyday
known events. Learning occurs only when events take place that are outside the individual’s ‘cognitive scripts’. Thus, in a simplified version, only when prescribed outcomes do not occur then the tension this creates leads to a need to understand and learning takes place. An extensive area of learning termed ‘socio-cultural constructivism’ was coined to describe the process of learning in a social context (NCVER, 2005). Barer-Stein (1987, cited in Arnott, 1994) also suggests that at its simplest, learning is the recognition of difference. It involves becoming aware, observing, acting, confronting and involving. At the point of involvement, there is a “gradual melding of the new and the old” (p.20) as the learning takes place.

This point of involvement is often the result of interaction with others, within a specific social context, and can be a powerful source of meaning development. It can also mean, in some cases, chaos and confusion, resulting in anxiety and a feeling of helplessness,

We find that our specific points of view or beliefs have become dysfunctional, and we experience a growing sense of the inadequacy of our old ways of seeing and understanding meaning (Mezirow, 1991, p.94)

and so the research surrounding adult learning is very relevant to this study.

Adult learning has many forms and levels with the result that much of the current research tautology is relatively new. Adult education is a complex, social and value-creating activity, one which is shaped by, and which shapes, social structure and culture, and which inevitably involves ethical judgements and choices. Recent research has focused on the empowering, and in contrast, disempowering, facility of learning, which is particularly relevant to this study.

Individuals and groups have different goals and interests in adult learning and education which therefore need to be understood as contested activities, that is, activities around which there is likely to be conflict (Foley, 1999, p. 3). Learning, because it involves something new and unknown, inevitably triggers a range of emotions in adults. New learning often includes a risk of failure and the possibility of discomfort and disorientation, as the learner struggles to make sense of new ideas. As Goleman (1996) describes it, the body experiences an emotional hijacking, where surges in the limbic system capture the rest of the brain. This can result in a feeling of helplessness and a ‘down-shifting’ to self-protective behaviours. It can also trigger ‘flow’, that feeling almost of rapture as one engages in the optimum learning experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, cited in Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p.37). This will be referred to again in a later chapter.
As mentioned previously, adult learning is a complex and diverse sphere of human activity, as central to human life as work and politics. Adult learning and education are also contextual and consist of an ensemble of contested activities in addition to formal education. These include incidental learning, which occurs as people live, work and engage in social action; informal education and learning in which people teach and learn from each other naturally and socially; and non-formal education in which structured systematic teaching and learning occurs in a range of social settings (Foley, 1999, p. 6-7).

The most influential theories of adult learning include:


Recently, more and more discussions focus on theories of learning from life experiences. Among these are discussions:

- That focus on the impact of life experiences on knowledge construction (Dewey 1938, Pfeiffer & Jones 1983, Cell 1984, Kolb, 1984; Brookfield, 1986, 1993);
- That consider the testing of the individual’s beliefs and ideas, and those of their community, in situ as being critical to learning and development (Myers & MacBeath 2004);
- That emphasise the informal approaches to learning (Freire 1972, Brookfield 1986, Garrick, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Wenger, 1998);
- That link learners’ cognitive activities with social and cultural circumstances (context) during which learning takes place (Zuboff, 1988, Billett, 1996; Wenger, 1998); that propose learning involves a process of engagement in a ‘community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991, 2003, Smith 2004).

I will briefly review the fundamental concepts around these theories and the link with this current study.
3.7.2 Self-Directed Learning

Dewey (1938, p. 39-40) saw education as active learning with every genuine experience having an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had. Dewey made the point, and Aristotle before him, that for more than a century our society has given legitimacy to knowledge that is formal, abstract and general, while de-valuing knowledge that is local, specific and based on practice (Garrick, 1998, p.21). Self-directed learning was originally defined by Knowles (1975) as the occasion when an individual takes the initiative to learn: diagnosing learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying the human and material resources needed for the learning to be successful, choosing learning strategies and evaluating the outcomes. Debate over the years has occurred surrounding this concept. Candy (1991) asked if it is just seen as a goal of adult education or is it a learning process in its own right. Until recently, the overriding theme of self-directed learning has been the external management of the learning process (Garrison, 1992, 1997).

What appears to be common to most conceptualizations of self-directed learning is the notion of some personal control over either or both the planning and the management of the learning experience (Zhang, 2004, p.50). That is, consideration of the learner’s action of making learning happen by engaging critical reflection in the learning process. The issue of personal control over the planning of the learning experience is relevant to the present study. The participants are all eager to enter tertiary study with motivation grounded in the image that they have some form of control over their situation. Their reasons for being enrolled will be discussed in a later chapter. However, they each have a strong, personal reason for wishing to commence the journey. In many cases, this reason is steeped in their cultural background and the feeling that they are part of a cultural collective and have control of both their own and the collective’s destiny. This connection between control of their learning context and the learner’s internal reflective praxis sits well with the present study.

Originally explored by Garrison (1992, 1997), the links between self-directed learning and critical thinking were developed into a self-directed learning model which integrates external control and internal monitoring in a learning context. Using Brookfield’s (1986, p.58, cited in Zhang, 2004) definition of self-directed learning, *when adults take action to acquire skills and knowledge in order to effect their actions*, and Garrison (1997)’s learning process model that
integrates self-direction with reflection, the process of coalescing two cultural world views that occurs when the Indigenous participants in this study engage with the institution can be explored in a later chapter (Eight). Prior to that, a consideration of the focus on theories of learning from life experiences, relevant to this study, will continue in the next section.

3.7.3 Impact of experience on learning

The term ‘experiential learning’, according to Fraser (1995) is ...purely pragmatic, and merely refers to the practice of treating all knowledge as based on experience (p.4). The work of Dewey (1963) is generally accepted as being influential in the development of the concept of experiential learning theory, later built on by Kolb (1984). He defines experiential learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This led to the wider educational shift which places the learner at the heart of their own learning process. To implement this innovation and to emphasise the important part that experience plays in the learning process, Kolb (1984) developed his famous experiential learning model which provides the students with opportunities to apply and test their knowledge and skills in the real world environment (Zhang, 2004, p.56). Kolb’s model identifies learning as a four stage cycle: immediate concrete experience becomes the basis for observation and reflection; these observations are then assimilated into a theory from which new implications for action can be deduced and these implications or hypotheses are used to indicate new experiences. In his view of experiential learning, ideas are not fixed and immutable elements of thought but are formed and re-formed through experience. That is, knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner (Kolb, 1993, cited in Zhang, 2004, p.56). Garrick (1998, p.9) highlighted, though, that once informal learning is objectified, classified and measured it is also being, in some ways, reduced.

Questioning whether there is a difference between learning from experience and ‘experiential learning’ had earlier been posed by Usher (1993, p. 169) to highlight that there is a difference: learning from experience happens in every day contexts and is rarely recognised, whereas ‘experiential learning’ is a key element of a discourse which has this everyday process as its ‘subject’. This discourse constructs the learning in a certain way, although it appears to be merely a term that describes the process (Garrick, 1998, p. 9). Experiential learning is based on a set of assumptions identified by Andresen, Boud & Cohen (1995, p. 207-8) which are based on
the premise that learners construct their own experience and this experience is the stimulus for learning. At the heart of this tradition is the role of autonomy and it is this sharing of autonomy as the central notion that makes experiential learning work (Garrick, 1998, p. 23).

This model of learning and adapting gained influence in the late 1980’s with the applicability of its philosophy to VET and the development of competency-based training in the workplace (Boud et al., 1993; Garrick, 1998). It proved a very influential idea within the theoretical tradition of adult education (Miettinen, 2000, cited in Zhang, 2004, p.56). However, it did undergo a period of criticism and revision (Fraser, 1995) in the early 1980’s when experiential learning was linked with self-directed learning. That is, a concept of experiential learning where learning is seen as natural learning (Gibbons, 1990; Smith, 1990) or learning through life, which is the way most people do their learning (Brookfield, 1991 cited in Zhang, 2005, p.57). As this natural learning takes place almost anywhere and at any time as an integral part of our everyday life it is not sponsored by any educational institution, it also became known as informal learning in the 1990’s (Zhang, 2005, p.57). The development of this concept from situated learning to informal learning is very relevant to the present study and will be the focus of the next two sections.

3.7.4 Situated learning
Supposing learning is social and comes largely from of our experience of participating in daily life? Early experiential knowledge forms the fabric of children’s lives and is often very resistant to change (Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p. 38). In subsequent social contexts of learning, adults then test the veracity of their beliefs and their ideas (and those of their community and culture) in situ. This testing process, occurring in social interactions, is important to learning and development. Situated learning theory attempts to establish links between cognitive structures which underpin people’s thinking and acting with social circumstances which shape people’s action. It sees learning as a matter of creating meaning from the real activities of daily living (Zhang, 2005, p. 218). In other words, situated learning occurs when the knowledge being acquired is to be used in the same situation in which it was gained (Smith & Blake, 2005, p. 7).
It was this thought that formed the basis of a significant rethinking of learning theory in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The construction of situated learning theory marks another attempt to explain learning from and through experience. As mentioned above, situated learning attempts to establish links between two sets of perspectives, the cognitive and the socio-cultural. The cognitive perspective sees knowledge as being individually constructed, whereas socio-cultural literature sees knowledge as being patterned by social and cultural circumstances and these circumstances can be quite specific (Billett, 1996). While reviewing the cognitive literature, Billett (1995) observed that although cognitive structures are viewed in cognitive psychology as being individually constructed, the sourcing of these cognitive activities comes from social practice within particular social circumstances. Therefore, learning is viewed as the appropriation of socially-derived forms of knowledge and the appropriation cannot be isolated from social circumstances in which individuals act (Zhang, 2005, p.58).

Situated learning can be traced back to the 1960’s when Oakeshott (1962) developed an epistemology which implied that every science, every art and every practical activity requiring skill of any sort involves two sorts of knowledge: namely technical and practical, the latter only existing with practice (Oakeshott, 1962, p.11). By linking cognitive structures which underpin people’s thinking and acting with social circumstances which shape people’s action, situated learning theory established a basis to explain further that activities and situations are integral to cognition and learning (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1996 cited in Zhang, 2005, p. 58).

Two researchers from very different disciplines picked up on these ideas - Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Their model of situated learning proposed that learning involved a process of engagement in a 'community of practice'. This concept replaced Oakeshott’s term ‘idiom of activity’. Their basic argument is that communities of practice are everywhere and that we are generally involved in a number of them - whether that is at work, school, home, or in our civic and leisure interests. This is particularly relevant to this study, set within tertiary institutional environments. Wenger (1998) uses the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to characterise learning (p.11), proposing that participation in a community of practice results in an identity transformation. This is supported by Smith (2003, p. 1) who observes that learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life. It has its roots in
social learning theory that takes social interactions to account from a primarily psychological perspective.

The recognition of the importance of informal or social networks within organisations can be traced at least as far back as the late 1930’s (Barnard, 1938; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939 cited in Jones et al, 2001, p.81). Indeed Blau & Scott (1962, p. 6) argue that “it is impossible to understand the nature of formal organisations without investigating the networks of informal relations”. Communities of practice are everywhere, an integral part of our daily lives, including multi-level examples in tertiary institutions. Universities and TAFE Colleges can be the site for political and social transformations as a result of ‘cultural affirmation’ and ‘building capacity’ (Walker, 2000 cited in Prebble, 2004). Students participate in the learning environment of an institution by engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities (Wenger, 1998, p.7) and so contribute to that particular sphere of social capital. This participation has the effect of the retention of students too. Yorke and Thomas (2003, p.67) found that the strongest common denominator identified in the Higher Education Institutions with the most success in retaining students from the lower socio-economic groups was a sustained commitment to a broad conception of the ‘student experience’. That is, in addition to the usual institutional culture, there is a sustainable commitment to the relational issues informed by the concepts of institutional social and cultural inclusiveness. However, an Indigenous student may well have a quite separate, culturally based community of practice, where participation results in a contribution to this particular, reasonably separate, sphere of social capital. This is supported in the exploration by Georgina Whap (2001), a Torres Strait Islander from Mabuiag Island in the Torres Strait, into the meaning of Indigenous knowledge and how it is transmitted. Indigenous knowledge is viewed as a living, breathing concept, which reflects the oral tradition that allows ‘life’ to flow through the expression of everyday activities involving the interaction of people (p.23).

In Aboriginal society we have an oral tradition which is very strong, whereas the white community has written communication (Huggins & Tarrago,1990, p. 141).

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27 Social capital is about the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Claridge, 2004)
Sharing in the political, spiritual, secular and communal daily lives of other Indigenous people is essential for the oral tradition to continue, that is the ‘learning’ experience involved in sharing understanding of the world. (Whap, 2001, p.23) confirms this:

Indigenous knowledge is about the interaction of everyday activities...is adaptive, evolving, interconnected and holistic...it’s not taught but communicated.

Wenger (1998) disagrees, putting forward the view that considering culture as a community of practice, whilst seeming to capture the processes of learning that constitute these social configurations, misses crucial discontinuities among the various localities where relevant learning takes place (p.125). He writes that,

It would place too much emphasis on the overarching continuity of a configuration reified by its name (Wenger, 1998, p.125).

This does not sit well, however, with the keepers of knowledge in traditional Aboriginal culture. In the words of several Indigenous researchers:

Indigenous knowledge must stay ‘alive’. By ‘passing on’ this knowledge we will see a continuous process that has no end. Indigenous knowledge is the most powerful tool of any Indigenous culture...Indigenous people are the essence and energy behind Indigenous knowledge, as they make it ‘alive’ (Whap, 2001, p.27), and The Mak Mak family method of maintaining ownership over the cultural knowledge is a collaborative and consultative model...Managing the discourse was a joint responsibility, although Koonie Konie Ngulilkang-Nancy Daiyi, as Senior Custodian of the knowledge, would have the final say (Ford, 2006, p.108).

To do this, a culture of communication, sharing, communities of practice and the ‘passing on’ of knowledge, within the boundaries of cultural protocols, is essential. An example of the sharing being limited to family members and not shared with the wider non-Indigenous community is described by Indigenous researcher Linda Ford (2006) in her thesis (p.108) when she relates a situation where the Senior Custodian of the knowledge said That story (philosophy) is from me to you and to your children, nobody else!:. This experience of learning that comes through everyday activity both within and outside the formal educational institutional environment leads to a consideration of the theories on learning that emphasise the informal approaches to learning, the focus of the next section.

3.7.5 Informal Learning

Informal learning, in contrast to formal education, is predominantly experiential and non-institutional (Garrick, 1998, p. 11 cited in Zhang, 2005, p.57).
Informal learning is not normally associated with classrooms or structured learning but is largely under the control of someone setting out to learn something. It is achieved through observation, discussion with others, asking questions and even making mistakes and learning from them (Smith & Blake, 2005 p. 7). The idea of a community of practice is relevant here (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A community of practice comprises a group of people who work together and who have developed an understanding of the way in which they do their work or the purpose for them getting together. Also associated with this are other processes identified with informal learning such as networking, trial and error, using small groups and the practice of reflection. These will be further examined in this section.

The informal learning process is very important in this study as it underpins the experiences of the students during their learning journey. That is, the study is not just concerned with the formal learning that takes place. It is as important to review the research data through the lens of informal learning. As mentioned earlier, whilst the institution is itself a learning community, the sub-group of Indigenous students are, in their own right, a learning community. This social view of learning is in itself an important aspect of this study and will be referred to throughout this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, a number of contemporary theories of informal learning owe a philosophical debt to Dewey’s views on education and experience. Not only did Dewey (1938, p. 39-40) see education as active learning but he viewed an experience as mis-educative if it had the effect of arresting and distorting the growth of further experience. Informal learning is predominantly experiential, non-institutional and, according to Marsick & Watkins (1990), distinct from incidental learning (Garrick, 1998, p. 10). Whereas incidental learning refers to learning from involvement, learning from mistakes, using trial and error experimentation, informal learning is more self-directed learning, utilising such processes as networking, coaching, mentoring and performance planning. According to Marsick & Watkins (1990), they are not necessarily the same because incidental learning is not planned or intentional as it may be with self-directed learning, or where help is consciously sought from mentors. This is a key distinction between incidental and informal learning for Marsick & Watkins (1990). That is, informal learning is intentional, incidental learning is not (Garrick, 1998, p. 11). However,
general consensus seems to be that theorists consider that separating informal and incidental learning in this way represents a false dichotomy (Garrick, 1998, p. 11).

Informal learning theorists suggest that what we learn and how we go about learning is dependent on a number of factors including context, which is considered to have a high degree of importance in the outcome. Drawing heavily on Dewey’s experiential learning orthodoxy, Marsick & Watkins (1990, p. 8) argue that learning takes place through an ongoing dialectical process of action and reflection. But, to use reflection for learning, one must consciously become aware that one is actually learning. This implies intentionality, resting heavily on a paradigm of consciousness (Garrick, 1998, p. 21).

As mentioned earlier, the processes we use to carry out informal learning, recalling that it is classified as intentional learning, includes observing others, seeking small groups of people to confer with, using trial and error to try an idea out and then reflecting on the result. Unless reflection occurs, and new knowledge is created or underlying assumptions questioned, learning has not taken place. For this to occur, informal learners often seek information and support that they need within their social network. An organic and largely lateral process, networking is an informal means of accessing information, testing ideas, gaining support, promoting a cause or seeking resources (Arnott, 1994, p. 178). In other words, they learn from and through the experience of communicating with others (Marsick, 1988; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Garrick, 1998; Long, 1990 cited in Zhang, 2005). Garrick (1998, p. 1) makes two assumptions about informal learning: that there are indeed rich sources of learning in day-to-day practice situations and that what is learned from experience is dynamic and open to multiple configurations. This is relevant to the present study as it is all about learners ‘living’ the activity and ‘having a go’ (Harrison, 2003). It is social participation of which engagement and awareness influence each other and the nature of the situation impacts significantly on the learning process (Smith, 2003).

As can be concluded from the analysis above, learning is located in a context, which in turn can influence learners’ motivation and identities (Myers & MacBeath, 2004, p.38). Situated learning is based on the notion that knowledge is contextually situated and is fundamentally influenced by the activity, context and culture in which it is used (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1996, cited in Zhang, 2005). Learning is never neutral (Garrick, 1998, p. 17). It is never independent of
sociality, and as such, learning will be influenced by a person’s social positioning. This in turn will influence access to, and experience of, learning opportunities. It will shape one’s identity, leading to different knowledges of “reality”. This link with identity will be examined later in the chapter.

This attention to culture is relevant to this present study as the participants are members of the Australian Indigenous culture and, as such, come to the institutional environment with a background and culture differing from the dominant educational one. That is, they already have an established idiom of activity (Oakeshott, 1962) or community of practice as developed by Wenger (1998), a concept that recognises that all specific activity springs up within an already existing community of practice that has frameworks or structures. It is timely now to expand on this socially constructed view of learning.

### 3.7.6 Critical thinking and transformative learning

Critical thinking has been greatly neglected in educational literature. According to Brookfield (1987, p. ix) the ability to be critically reflective is one significant criterion we use when judging whether a person is mature or whether a society is democratic. Ever since Dewey (1933) interpreted critical reflection as arising out of perplexity and doubt, and involves a search for material that would resolve this doubt, the emphasis in this area has been placed on what might be called “negative triggers” to critical thinking. As evident from literature on transformational learning, the prompts to critical thinking most identified are crises, disorienting dilemmas and anomalies and discrepancies between expectations and actuality in people’s lives (Brookfield, 1987, p. 31). People are said to be precipitated into states of cognitive conflict when, for example, some external event challenges their ideas and the effort to resolve the conflict leads to cognitive growth.

While all reflection implies an element of critique, the term critical reflection is reserved for when we are challenged in the validity of presuppositions in prior learning (Mezirow, 1990, p. 12). We become critically reflective by challenging the established definition of a problem being addressed. With this challenge, and the resolving of this anxiety, comes the production of new knowledge and a new way of looking at the world, or worldview. It is the result of incorporating an informal learning process to test out an idea, such as trial and error or networking. However,
as Brookfield points out, critical thinking is not only occasioned by trauma. It can involve joyful incidents as well. To become a critical thinker involves understanding individual patterns of learning.

Adulthood provides opportunity for this development of such new knowledge and changed worldviews, when personal experiences result in reassessment of current assumptions that had previously given rise to a particular view of reality (Mezirow, 1990, p. 13-14). Our meaning schemes may be transformed through reflection upon anomalies such as running out of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, as a result of this reflection, or questioning, one reformulates one’s personal view, worldview or identity. As Boud et al (1993, p. 9) comment that reflection consists of those processes in which learners engage to recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience, to work with experience to turn it into learning. This implies making inferences, generalisations, analogies, discriminations and evaluations. It requires feeling and remembering, using beliefs to make interpretations, analyses and judgements.

Clarifying what has been said, this ‘perspective transformation’ occurs in response to an externally imposed ‘disorienting dilemma’. This concept is relevant to this study as participants experience a range of events that trigger a repositioning of their cultural identity. As Mezirow (1990, p. 8) points out, if reflection is understanding an assessment of how or why we have perceived, felt, acted or thought, it must be differentiated from an assessment of how best to perform these functions when each phase of an action is guided by what we have learned before. In other words, he makes a distinction between reflection and action, which correlates well with the results of this study. Whereas reflection requires conscious attention to those distortions in our reasoning and attitudes, action is a creative process that involves our prejudices and distortions such as our cultural cues. When this action involves resolution of the above-mentioned ‘disorienting dilemma’ through a ‘perspective transformation’ then critical reflection has occurred.

It is this meaning-giving status accorded to the person which post-modern views of experiential learning seriously dispute (Usher et al, 1997). That is, they draw on Foucault’s (1982, p. 209) research to refute the humanistic discourse of individual ‘agency’ and thus the status of ‘meaning-giver’, as a means of individual empowerment. He believes that one needs to be aware
of the *historical conditions which motivate*, a link strongly associated with the motivational influence in this study. Likewise, Usher (1992, p. 211) claims that learning does not entail teaching or transmitting a body of knowledge to a passive learner. Instead, knowledge is something created in the learning process where teachers, learners, bodies of knowledge and experiential meanings interact. Garrick (1998, p. 27) draws this together when he makes the statement that all parties in such transactions are affected, and to a varying degrees, ‘transformed’.

It is meaningful at this point to elaborate on the concept of this transformation, or change in identity, that occurs as a result of critical reflection and submersion in informal learning processes. This will be the focus of the next section.

### 3.7.7 Identity

Identity and its impact on engagement in social institutions and processes has a significant role in understanding the ways individuals, groups and educational organisations interact. Identity is defined here as an individual’s understanding of self which occurs through social interactions framed in social experience. Whitebrook (2001, p. 4) described identity as ‘what the self shows the world’ with identity viewed as having to be negotiated by the self with the community.

This is in direct development from Erikson’s exploration of identity formation in the late 1960’s (Erikson, 1968) when he describes identity as bringing together psychological and social views. He discussed a personal identity, an individual’s distinguishing personal traits and the ways people interact with society and an individual’s role established through community engagement called the social identity and cultural identity.

At the most fundamental level, we are all different (Ford, 2009, p. 185) and can operate at the individual level yet, as in institutional settings, we seek out groups of people for support, guidance, affirmation, debate, company and often recreation. This paradox of identity operates on several levels. On the one hand there is a celebration of uniqueness and individuality. On the other hand, this is countered by the need to belong, and thus the relations of self with others immediately sets up dualities of same and different.

*Consciousness of identity gains additional power from the idea that it is not the end product of one’s... “audacity” but an outcome of shared...experience tied, in particular to place, location, language and mutuality* (Gilroy, 2000, p. 100 cited in Ford, 2009, p. 140).
Identity and identity politics have brought the notion of self and the individual, the subject and subjectivities, into the debate surrounding the dynamics between and within social groups and shifted sociology into dramatic new directions (Ford, 2009, p. 137). Recent commentary about identity and difference is relevant to this study. Identification with particular social groups can sometimes be problematic within socially understood hierarchies. Brah (1996, p. 118) states that difference in the sense of social relation may be understood as the cultural practices which produce the conditions for the construction of group identities. She creates the link between the difference and identity by drawing on Minh-ha (1989):

*Cultural identities are simultaneously our cultures in process but they acquire specific meanings in a given context* (Brah, 1992, p. 143)

This notion that cultural identities can change over time and through experiences is very relevant to this study. It is well known that research into the effect of Westernised institutionalised education on the Australian Indigenous identity has not always produced a positive result. One such researcher, Linda Ford (2005 p. 1), observes that “the outcomes for many Tyikim Australians of contact...through engagement with Western educational institutions are cultural and identity confusion and dysfunctionality...” There seems to be a tension between the notions of identity as embodied in a single individual, and the process of construction of that identity (Ford, 2009, p. 137). Foucault examined this from a historical viewpoint, focussing on the process of normalisation. Others approached it differently. Echoing Heidegger, Hall (1990, p. 225) attempts to capture the fluidity of shifting identity in this way: *Cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”...Identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned within the narratives of the past.* For Hall the Enlightenment conceptualised self as having a fixed, essential, stable and unified identity but in post-modernism this is a “fantasy” (Ford, 2009, p. 225). Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting, multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with - at least temporarily.

In this study reference is made by the participants to their strong identification to being Indigenous. The question arises as to what this means. In Linda Ford’s firsthand account of experience as a Higher Education research within a tertiary institution, the concept of *identity* is linked with the terms personal, professional and spiritual growth, strength and endurance. Her
connecting worldview is linked closely with her significant relationship with her mother, a senior cultural elder (p. 11). It is important to understand that her identity is defined in her writings by the interaction of three ngirrwats or totems, her ceremonies, the languages she speaks and her custodian rights over country (land). Likewise, Lester Irabinna-Rigney (2002, p.9) comments on the status of Indigenous languages in Australia and links identity with concepts such as culture and being strong. “Education that welcomes Indigenous identities reinforces Indigenous cultural views of the world...being strong is what it means to be Indigenous”. This fits well with an earlier definition of identity (Hall & Du Gay, 1996) as the intersection between practice and discourse that connects individuals’ consciousness to an understanding of themselves as socially constructed subjects of discourses. This ‘discursive’ approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed. Such development can occur within their social networks.

Wenger (1998) uses the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to characterise learning (p.11), proposing that participation in a community of practice results in an identity transformation. This is supported by Smith (2004, p. 1) who observes that learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life. It has its roots in social learning theory identifying that learning will be influenced by a person’s social positioning. This in turn will influence access to, and experience of, learning opportunities. It will shape one’s identity, leading to different knowledges of “reality”.

There is a vast literature in identity in the social sciences. It has been explained in social theory as a way of placing the person in a context of mutual constitution between individuals and groups (Strauss, 1959; Giddens, 1991). This study places identity at the centre of the learning journey because of the potential effect of the Western institutionalised learning journey undertake by the students on them as individuals with their own unique identity. Understanding the contexts in which learners operate, the role and implications of learning practices, means understanding the role of identity in learning (Falk & Balatti, 2003). It is expected that student views on the effect of the learning journey on their identity, on the tensions that arise as their journey progresses, will be heard in the data of the study. As Wenger (1998, p. 215) found in researching in educational environments, learning is an ‘experience of identity...a process of ‘becoming’ or avoiding becoming that necessitates both a place and a process.
3.8 Conclusion
Following an overview of current research informing institutional support for students, this chapter commenced with a consideration of the meaning of institutional culture and student identity, two major platforms on which this study is based. How tertiary institutions in Australia historically responded to the low levels of Indigenous student retention completed this section. The body of the chapter composed of an investigation into the dynamics of student learning, with a focus on Indigenous student learning to provide the link with the study. The third and final major section of the chapter provided an overview of adult learning theories and processes in Western culture, linking concepts strongly with elements of the study.

The nature of the underlying research associated with this study has required a broad coverage of many issues within the Indigenous and Western institutional learning contexts. This chapter has addressed some of these issues and has also utilised research results from recent quantitative and qualitative studies within non-Indigenous and international contexts because of the dearth of Australian studies focusing on Indigenous students, particularly of students studying VET programs.

In conclusion, from a historical perspective, the conceptual background and many issues related to this study have been explored in this chapter. By doing so, the background to the methodology of this inquiry has been explored, partly justifying a qualitative approach. The next chapter will follow on from this and discuss the investigative methodology used in this study.
Chapter Four
Research Design

4.1 Introduction
Chapter Three provided an examination of the current studies of institutional practice and the research concerning institutional support for Indigenous students. Consideration of what is meant by institutional culture and student identity was followed by a brief investigation of the dynamics of student learning with a focus in particular on the effect of cultural context and initial motivation on learning. Widespread perceptions of the issues surrounding Indigenous student learning were considered prior to addressing the third focus of the chapter, adult learning theories and processes. In particular, informal learning theory and its processes provide a major element around which the study was constructed and analysed.

As this was to be an exploratory study involving the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students cross three Case Study sites, a qualitative methodological approach was undertaken. The main section in this chapter will justify the phenomenographic naturalistic enquiry approach used in this study and explain how this method links well with the other methodology used in the study, the case study approach.

4.1.1 Study Approach
Whilst acknowledging, like Patton (2002, p. 76), that qualitative inquiry is not a single, monolithic approach to research, but an exhilarating and at times exhausting proliferation of types within the qualitative paradigm… (Page, 2000, p. 3), the phenomenographic approach was chosen because it is one of the qualitative methods concerned with the relationship between people and their world. This seemed an appropriate choice because it provided a process for exploring differing conceptions of the world (Marton, 1988, p. 145).

Considering the main purpose of the present study, an investigation into the views of Indigenous students on elements they consider critical for their continued success as they undertake their learning journey, a qualitative methodology is justified for the following reasons. Firstly, it fits well with Cresswell’s (1998) definition of the qualitative researcher building a complex, holistic picture, analysing words, reporting views of informants and conducting the study in a natural
setting. Secondly, it fits well with Ragin’s (1987) comparison with quantitative inquiry when qualitative is characterised as a researcher working with a few cases and many variables compared to quantitative’s few variables and many cases. Thirdly, it fits well with other characteristics referred to in Cresswell’s overview (p. 16, Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Eisner, 1991; Merriam, 1988). These characteristics include the researcher as the key element of data collection; data collected as words or pictures; research outcome being a process rather than a product; analysis of data conducted inductively, paying attention to particulars; and lastly a focus on participants’ perspectives, the uniquely individual experiences and thoughts of the Indigenous participants as they engage with their academic learning journey.

Whilst defining the current study as qualitative in nature, the task is then to decide on the appropriate perspective. There are four distinct sociological paradigms which can be utilised for the analysis of a wide range of social theories (Burrell and Morgan, 1982, p. 22-23). The relationship between these paradigms labelled ‘radical humanist’, ‘radical structuralist’, ‘interpretive’ and ‘functionalist’ is illustrated in Figure B. They define four fundamentally different perspectives for the analysis of social phenomena.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Radical Humanism</th>
<th>Radical Structuralism</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<td>Interpretive sociology</td>
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<td>Functionalist sociology</td>
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<td>· Phenomenology</td>
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**The Sociology of Radial Change**

**The Sociology of Regulation**

Figure B: Four paradigms for the analysis of social theory (Burrell and Morgan, 1982, p. 22)

With the main focus of the research in mind, the study employs a predominantly interpretive sociological perspective. Whilst its intellectual roots can be traced back to the work of the early German idealists, the interpretive paradigm has been most decisively shaped and influenced by the works of Dilthey, Husserl and Weber (Burrell and Morgan, 1982, p. 234). For the most part,
it can be regarded as a twentieth-century phenomenon with the paradigm being considered in terms of four distinct but related categories of interpretive theory with one of these, phenomenology, occupying the middle ground of the paradigm. Theorists make a distinction between the *transcendental* and *existential* strands of phenomenology (Burrell and Morgan, 1982, p. 235), the latter approach owing much to Schutz (1967) who articulates the essence of phenomenology for studying social acts (Swingewood, 1991). Schutz was interested in how ordinary members of society constitute the world of everyday life, especially how individuals consciously develop meaning out of social interactions. What the various phenomenological and phenomenographic approaches share in common is a focus on exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning. Using this approach to explain the interpretations of events that Indigenous participants *have directly experienced* fits well within the qualitative interpretive perspective. However, this study also implements the practice of combining some perspectives as a means to understanding the complexity of the issues involved. The historical perspective was employed to gain a full understanding of the current national system of Indigenous support in tertiary institutions. In addition to this, the political scientist’s case study perspective was employed to value-add to the phenomenological approach in order to focus on three geographically separated and academically and administratively differentiated tertiary institutions in the Northern Territory.

### 4.2 Phenomenographic Approach

The study initially investigates past and current strategies employed by tertiary institutions specifically to assist Indigenous students during their participation in the Western system of education. The historical realist approach, which uses multiple sources of evidence to develop, what Yin terms *converging lines of inquiry* (Yin, 1994, p. 92), is utilised in order to reach conclusions that are likely to be convincing representation of the situation. Data is obtained from institutions themselves, from electronic sources such as their websites, from the printed media and from open-ended interviews with institutional representatives. Similarly to Clark (1999), the use of multiple sources of evidence provides *multiple measures of the same phenomenon* thereby contributing to the accuracy of conclusions drawn by triangulating with several sources of data (Yin, 1994, p. 92). Using this method, a summary of equity of access strategies employed by tertiary institutions was provided as background material to the study in Chapter Three.
4.2.1 Phenomenology: a naturalistic enquiry approach
The ontological status of the social world is viewed as extremely questionable and problematic as far as theorists located within the interpretive paradigm are concerned. Everyday life is accorded the status of a miraculous achievement. Interpretive philosophers and sociologists seek to understand the very basis and source of social reality. They use approaches such as phenomenological analysis to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience (Patton, 2002, p. 482), often delving into the depths of human consciousness and subjectivity in their quest for the fundamental meanings which underlie social life (Burrell and Morgan, 1982, p. 31). Such qualitative design is naturalistic to the extent that the research takes place in real world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest (e.g. particular group of people). This phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally in that there is no predetermined course established by and for the researcher (Patton, 2002, p. 39).

It became clear that such a naturalistic enquiry strategy was applicable to the study, providing overall direction and a naturalistic framework for decision-making and action. This naturalistic enquiry approach is discovery-oriented (Guba, 1978), emphasising the importance of the face-to-face approach rather than remote forms of data collection. Often it requires a significant amount of time to be spent in the field becoming familiar with the phenomenon under study, collecting data, understanding what things mean for people in situ and representing the social world in which people live and interpret their lives. Denzin (1971, cited in Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 132) talks about naturalism implying a profound respect for the character of the empirical world. However this is not without its risks especially related to the exposure or inadvertent disclosure of information or practices related to the individuals or groups being studied. Somekh & Lewin, (2005) note the special effort that must be made to maintain confidentiality and guarantee anonymity (p. 133). In this study this has been of particular concern as the number of Indigenous students studying at tertiary level in the Northern Territory is still quite a small population overall. Particular diligence on the part of the researcher, as well as seeking advice from the Indigenous Reference group, formed for the purpose of professionally and culturally advising this study, has been critical in order to ameliorate this concern.
In understanding others, naturalistic enquiry tries as far as possible to keep close to the language, meanings, thoughts, activities and contexts of the people who are participants in the study and to represent them in commonplace ways they would understand and would be understandable to others (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 133). This fits well with the study which, as well as analysing the historical and current institutional context of Indigenous support, aims to investigate those elements of the institutional learning environment considered critical for course completion by the students themselves. That is, it is set within the ‘natural world’, ‘grounded’ in the everyday lives of the participants in the study and relies on in-depth description to report social or cultural events (Denzin, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Zhang, 2005; Somekh & Lewin, 2005).

According to Howells (2003, p. 1), the advent of this phenomena-based methodology to study students' approaches to learning has given rise to an important shift in perspective where student experience is the research context. This is supported by Clark (1999) with the view that this methodology retains the contextual component, thus facilitating an understanding of the relationship between (the issue) and those experiencing it. This is in direct contrast to behaviourist methodologies that validate experience from the researcher's perspective and use quantitative measures such as examination results or retention rates as indicators of success.

The naturalistic enquiry also raises questions about representation. That is, how people are portrayed by the researcher and whether they are represented in ways that are fair, accurate and reasonable. Somekh & Lewin, (2005, p. 133) are concerned with how the poly-vocal many-sided nature of social life is captured, represented and read in narratives and believe that whilst many people have the capacity to understand and empathise with others, there is likely to be limits and these should be acknowledged. This present study acknowledges this concern to a large degree with the existence of an Indigenous Reference Group. In terms of reliability, there may be an element of subjectivity involved in the interpreting sense in this study as my account of the situation is a second level interpretation of events. This can be checked by a number of mechanisms. One of these is triangulation.

The early roots of mixed-method social inquiry are found partly in the construct of triangulation, which involves the use of multiple methods, each representing a different perspective or lens, to assess a given phenomenon in order to enhance confidence in the validity of the findings (Denzin, 1978; Somekh & Lewin, (2005). That is, the cross-checking of views and facts using, in
the case of this study, interviews and conversations. In this study the use of open-ended questioning to collect data meant that checking and verifying statements during conversations and focus group sessions was critical. This resulted in a strong level of reliability and validity to ensure that the findings represented the reality of the participants’ lives.

Representation is an equally tricky concept (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 44) especially in relation to focus group sessions. Many people who agree to become involved in a focus group or discussion around a particular topic may well have their own agenda. This proved an issue on at least one occasion during this study and it was necessary for the role of gatekeeper to be employed to keep the conversation on track and focused on the purposeful task to hand. The next section will address the issue of how the data is collected in this study.

**4.2.2 Case study approach**

Because of the importance of context, naturalistic enquiry is often best conceived as a case study. It is not possible to pre-specify in detail the design for a naturalistic enquiry. The naturalistic enquirer has to go with the flow of social action, so to speak. The design of a naturalistic enquiry unfolds as the study progresses. The preferred methods of research are observation, interview and the collection of documents (Somekh & Lewin, 2005, p. 133).

Case studies tend to be holistic rather than deal with isolated factors (p. 31). There is a tendency to emphasise the detailed workings of the relationships and social processes, rather than to restrict attention to the outcomes from these. According to Descombe (1998), *a good case study plays to its strengths*. That is, end-products or outcomes and results all remain of interest to the case study researcher, but if attention were not given to the processes which led to those outcomes then the value of the case study would be lost (p. 31). This is the real value of a case study approach – it offers the opportunity to explain why certain outcomes might happen more than just find out what those outcomes are. As (Yin, 2003) states, the case is a *naturally occurring phenomenon. It is not a situation that is artificially generated... (it) already exists*.

In the current study each Indigenous student interviewed is enrolled in one of the three widely geographically separate institutions in the study, each institution being treated as a Case Study site as part of the study’s research design. A case study approach is a realistic compromise (Clark, 1999) when it is not viable to sample all tertiary institutions in Australia or even the Northern Territory. The institutions chosen to be the three Case Study sites were chosen with
care. They had to have similarities and differences. Their similarities included: they needed to be a tertiary educational institution based in the Northern Territory and have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in a Health Science course, either at Higher Education or VTE level. It so happened that all three institutions, probably due to the very nature of education in the Northern Territory, had study campuses or representatives in regional and remote areas and this provided an opportunity to interview students on three regional campuses as well as at the major centres. The institutions also needed to approve the study via an ethics application.

However, it was essential that there were also differences between the institutions. They were to be geographically dispersed enough as to be demographically representative of the Northern Territory. To this end, one institution is located in Alice Springs and two in the Top End of the Northern Territory. They also needed to be sufficiently different to ensure the study encompassed multiple realities of experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41). One institution is very small, one is quite large by NT standards, although not so by national standards, and one is an Indigenous-focused institution with a Both Ways 28 philosophy that is not so socially and academically evident in the other two institutions. Because of the small population in the Northern Territory the issue of confidentiality was given high priority and strategies approved by the ethics committees ensured this priority was maintained throughout the study.

In preparing the research design for this study, it was considered critical to engage in dialogue with Indigenous Health Science students early in their learning journey. Central to this study was the process of capturing the voices of these students (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson and Wurst, 2000) and analysing their interpretation of their own individual institutional experiences. In the words of Patton (2002, p. 104), they have ‘lived experience’ as opposed to second-hand experience. This approach also aligns well with recommendations by Balatti, Gargano, Goldman, Wood & Woodlock, (2004, p. 33) that stressed the importance of better understanding the learning experience as it is lived.

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28 Two principles underpin all aspects of the Institution’s life: a ‘both ways’ approach to cultural interaction and cross-cultural learning.
4.3 Focus of the Study

The focus of this study involves an investigation into the Research Question:

*From the students’ experiences, what needs to be in place from an institutional perspective for Indigenous students to be successful in tertiary study?*

In researching this question, it is expected that the following sub-questions will inform the overarching research question.

- What are the general institutional support structures in place for Indigenous students at tertiary institutions in Australia?
- Using Indigenous student’s perceptions, what are the factors influencing their reaction to the range of incidents and issues that affect their progress through the course of study?
- With the benefit of the findings, what are the elements of the institutional learning environment critical to their successful completion/ongoing progress in their course?

There are two dominant foci in this study to investigate:

(1) To investigate adult learning processes within a cross-cultural environment, particularly focusing on the Indigenous student’s experience and world-view, and

(2) To review the issues related to Indigenous students making sense of, interpreting, and succeeding in Western-focused institutional learning environments. The imagery associated with a journey will be used in reference to the Indigenous visual world view.

The research design involves recording the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students in undergraduate and post-graduate health sciences courses across three Case Study sites about the elements of the institutional learning environment they consider critical to their successful completion/ongoing progress in their course. Results of this investigation will inform the development of an institutional model for a sustainable learning environment for Indigenous students.

As previously mentioned, the study also involves an historical analysis of the institutional support structures in place at the institutions attended by the Indigenous students.

4.4 Structure of the Study

One of the strengths of the case study approach within the naturalistic framework is that it allows the researcher to use a variety of sources, a variety of types of data and a variety of research
methods as part of the investigation. It not only allows it but *invites* and encourages the researcher to do so (Descombe, 1998).

As mentioned previously, this study is located in three geographically widely separated institutional Case Study sites in the Northern Territory. The initial phase of the study included a literature review which was followed by a series of convergent interviews and survey sampling and case study analyses which informed the critical elements for course progression or completion with respect to Indigenous students in Health Science courses.

As a qualitative study it focuses on a number of Indigenous students across three Case Study sites, all of whom are surveyed, some of whom are invited to participate in a follow-up interview. These students are studied in depth for factors influencing behaviour during the learning experience.

From the initial discussions with students to the focus-question-type interview to the follow-up focus group sessions and sometimes telephone interviews, the participant voices provided information that corroborated points made in the literature but also provided further clarification as well as new insights. This approach is supported by Patton (2002, p. 106) when he refers to the confusion that exists when researchers discuss qualitative methods. Within the phenomenological inquiry approach, there are several dimensions or perspectives that differentiate it from other approaches: one is the subject matter, that is, getting to know what people experience and how they interpret the world, and the second is a methodological difference, that is, the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves. As Patton (2002) confirms, this leads to the importance of participant observation and in-depth interviewing. The final difference is that this approach assumes that there is an essence or core meanings to shared experiences. Hence it is important in a study such as this that shared, common understandings are assumed and acknowledged yet, on the other hand, each individual has a unique set of experiences which are treated as truth and form part of the analysis towards understanding the participants’ behaviour. To this end, the interviews formed a major part of the data collection.

In line with the recommendations from Lincoln & Guba (1985) (cited in Farrington, 2000), procedures were followed to ensure that the *trustworthiness* of the study was secured by the
provision of an audit trail of all notes and materials collected from the data collection and analysis. Social construction and interpretivist perspectives have generated new language and concepts to distinguish quality in qualitative research (Patton, 2002, p. 546). Lincoln and Guba (1986) emphasised that naturalistic inquiry should be judged by dependability (a systematic process systematically followed) and authenticity (reflexive consciousness about one’s own perspective, appreciation for the perspectives of others and fairness in depicting constructions in the values that undergird them). The thread that runs through discussions concerning credibility is the importance of intellectual rigour, professional integrity and methodological competence. A qualitative analyst returns to the data over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations and interpretations make sense (Patton, 2002, p. 570).

4.5 Initial hurdles to overcome
Research into institutional practices is obviously complex. Research into Indigenous approaches to learning is equally complex. The multi-faceted research methodology used in this study was necessary to create the most complete picture possible. However, it raised several hurdles that had to be overcome as part of the initial setting up strategy.

Gaining access to potential participants is a practical issue. As there were three geographically separate tertiary institutions involved in the study, access to students had to follow required institutional protocols for each Case Study site. Once the ethics applications had been approved at each institution, a known Indigenous staff member was contacted and the study discussed. Students were canvassed through the contact person either in person or through a letter asking if they would be interested in volunteering for the study. Once the students responded, a follow-up call began the process and the interviews were initiated. In some instances, whole classes were approached and both one-on-one interviews as well as focus group sessions were the result.

4.6 Data Collection Strategies
The interviews were conducted in each of the three case study sites over a 12-18 month period based on two stages. During the initial meeting with the participants, a brief survey was presented with the intention of gauging the type and frequency of use of support strategies at the tertiary institution in which they were enrolled. There was available space for the student to comment on a range of general areas of interest in the study. These questions were used as a
framework for the interview and, later, also provided the basis for questions put to the focus groups. These proved invaluable for reflecting back on topics and ideas gleaned from the interviews. Some participants volunteered to be involved in at least one follow-up in-depth interview based on a series of semi-structured and unstructured questions. As a result, most of the participants were involved in at least one interview and one focus group session with twelve participants agreeing to further follow-up interviews. The visits to the sites were managed in conjunction with the key members of the Indigenous Reference Group who provided appropriate dates for when Indigenous students would be available. The research was conducted more intensely with the institutions geographically a distance from Darwin compared to the interviews held in Darwin.

The unstructured and semi-structured interviews provided opportunities for the participant to speak freely on the issues raised around the research topic. Care was taken to ensure that the participant remained on task and kept focussed on the general direction of the interview. As Cresswell (1998) advises...asking appropriate questions and relying on informants to discuss the meaning of their experiences require patience and skill on the part of the researcher (p. 130). Some interviews, on analysis, required further clarification from the participant at a later date. This further clarification involved a shorter interview at each of the case study sites. However, in other cases, a focus group session was held, especially when a whole class had agreed to discuss and reflect back on a topic. These sessions took on a whole morning or afternoon approach and involved an informal setting, perhaps outside under a shady tree and discussing issues and story-telling, a method favoured by Indigenous people when relating personal experiences.

Further practices were implemented to ensure a well-balanced, rigorous approach in both the data collection and the data analysis. A small Indigenous Reference Group was set up to advise and support the study and their advice proved invaluable. Due to the difficulty of getting the members together, meetings were held with individuals over the course of the data collection. Collegial support and advice, internet access to forums and current studies and library research assistance was well utilised over the course of the study.

Overall, this study involved 47 participants in at least one interview across three Case Study sites from Alice Springs to Darwin in the Northern Territory. Twelve of those participants were also
involved in follow-up interviews throughout their course of study. I also held three focus group sessions involving a further 36 students in at least one focus group. There was a mixture of Higher Education and Vocational and Technical Education students. All interviews were audio-taped with permission and later transcribed. For establishing credibility, a number of methods related to triangulation were used. In some cases transcripts were sent to the respective participants, in other cases I read and confirmed the transcript to the participant in a face to face situation, and in other cases I confirmed what had been said with the participants prior to the end of the interview or focus group session. All students involved in the study identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and were currently enrolled in one of the three Case Study tertiary institutions. They were all volunteers in the study and keen to tell their story about their experiences, an essential component in such a study as confirmed by Farrington (2000, p. 4):

*Rather than focusing on inputs and outputs, qualitative research strives to describe the middle step, the “environment”, with a particular focus on students’ experiences of that middle step.*

### 4.7 Data Analysis

Phenomenological analysis *seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people* (Patton, 2002, p. 482). However it has taken on a number of meanings and encompasses various traditions with associated modes of analysis. In this study, the phenomenon is considered to be the experience of tertiary study as an Indigenous person in the Northern Territory.

An aspect of one approach to naturalistic analysis is that taken by Douglass and Moustakas (1985). Their outline begins with a first step called *epoche* (Patton, 2002, p. 483). Epoche is a Greek word meaning to *refrain from judgement...from ordinary ways of perceiving things*. It is an ongoing analytical process requiring a new way of looking at things. In taking on the perspective of *epoche*, the researcher looks inside to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material and develop a different way of looking at the investigated experience.

*The researcher examines the phenomenon by attaining an attitudinal shift...known as the phenomenological attitude.* (Patton, 2002, p. 485)
Following *epoche*, the second process is phenomenological reduction where the researcher *brackets out* the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions. Bracketing is Husserl’s (1913) term. In bracketing, the researcher holds the phenomenon up for serious inspection. It is taken apart and dissected. Its elements and essential structures are uncovered, defined and analysed. Once the data is bracketed, it is then organised into meaningful clusters and invariant themes identified. Using expanded versions of the invariant themes, the researcher moves to the textual portrayal of each theme, an abstraction of the experience that provides content and illustration but not yet essence.

Naturalistic analysis then involves a *structural description* that contains the *bones* of the experience for the whole group of people studied. The final step requires *an integration of the composite textual and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience* (Moustakas 1994, in Patton, 2002, p. 486).

In summary, the primary steps of the Moustakas phenomenological model are *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis of texture and structure. Such an approach is the aim of this study.

### 4.8 Ethical Issues

Regardless of tradition of inquiry, a qualitative researcher faces many ethical issues that surface during data collection in the field and in analysis and dissemination of qualitative reports. In this study, the usual ethical processes and procedures were adhered to. Participants received a Plain Language Statement and agreement form to sign prior to agreeing to participate in the study and the method of data collection and analysis was fully explained. The anonymity of the participants is protected by assigning aliases to data storage and no identification in the writing occurs at all except generic details concerning gender and certain characteristics that may be of interest to the reader but which fail to identify the participant.

The study involves Indigenous students and it involves interviews. People are involved who will lay open their thoughts and relive past issues, both positive and negative, sometimes referring to people or places known to the researcher. Care was taken in the interviews to stress that preference was for names of people to be omitted and the exercise be one of reflection and not problem-solving. As Patton (2002, p. 407) warns, because qualitative methods are highly
personal and interpersonal, because naturalistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people., care was taken to consider the power of interviewing and maintain focus on the purpose of the interview.

As mentioned earlier, the study has an additional consideration because all of the participants interviewed are Indigenous and the researcher is non-Indigenous. Consideration of cultural issues is paramount in the study. However, the possibility of status distance (Mishler, 1986) between interviewer and interviewee and its effect on the power dynamics of the interview were given careful consideration prior to the first interview. Steps were taken by the researcher to ensure that an Indigenous person, aware of the researcher’s background working on Indigenous communities and subsequent sensitivity to Indigenous issues and culture, acted as the point of contact between the researcher and the participant prior to the participant agreeing to be involved in the study. It was hoped that this would alleviate any concerns the participants may have concerning perceived bias on the part of the researcher.

4.9 Conclusion
The qualitative research methodology suited the research topic well. Data from qualitative analysis typically comes from fieldwork and the researcher spends time observing, interviewing and analysing. The voluminous raw data is organised into readable narrative descriptions with major themes extracted (Patton, 2002, p. 5). Discussing everyday events, reflecting on changes that occur as the participants experience issues and incidents as the year progresses, all within natural settings and quite picturesque tropical environments means the task of cross-checking and ensuring procedures and processes are followed is not an onerous one.

The results of the data collection and analysis and the interview abstracts generated in the research will be presented in the following chapters. It will first be presented to show the Voices of the students through the three stages of their connection with the institution, followed by a critical analysis of the results from a personal perspective.

In the following chapter, the motivational influences on the participants’ decision to enrol in their course will be discussed followed by their initial views concerning the commencement of their learning journey.
Chapter Five

The First Few Days

*Programs which encourage Indigenous participation in education, while simultaneously being responsive to family, community and cultural commitments, have been powerful tools for bringing students into educational settings.*
(Schwab, 2000, p. 11)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background context of the participant voices with an analysis of the initial motivating influences on the Indigenous students as they engage with the institution. This context provides a lead-in to the commencement of their journey with a description of their first impressions. Following this, the chapter will then focus on a detailed look at several issues that arose during enrolment and attendance at classes or workshops in the first few weeks. A brief analysis of the broad diversity of effects of the learning environment on the lives of Indigenous learners and some of the strategies they used during this period will conclude the chapter.

The study depicts a journey: Indigenous adults embark on a learning journey where the initial motivation is soon subsumed in the opportunities and challenges presented by the context in which they travel. In this study, the students were asked about their experiences. In keeping with the planned methodology, this study begins and ends with the student. As mentioned in Chapter Three, central to this methodology is the process of capturing the voices of these students (Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson and Wurst, 2000) and analysing them for individual experiential interpretation within the policies and practices of the Western-based tertiary institution attended by the student. Sherwood & McConville (1994) supported this strategy when they identified Aboriginal people as the greatest source of knowledge of their own needs, their learning process and the ways in which learning takes place and the most effective way and environments in which... (they) learn. It is the way in which students define their initial aspirations and ambitions, prior to enrolling in a course, that characterises their world, or world view, and assists in developing an understanding of the motivational forces at play.
The student participants in this study are Indigenous adults motivated to enrol at one of the three case study sites. As Smyth et al (2000) notes, most research in the field of Indigenous tertiary education has been focused upon those students who are ‘failing’, or have failed, with the intention of finding the underlying reasons for this situation. This study took the opposite approach. By undertaking research involving a diverse group of Aboriginal students in a field of tertiary study, and following their journey revealed by their own Voices, specific and powerful factors may be revealed which influence such students to succeed.

It is a focus of this study that the behaviour and reactions of the Indigenous students to the institutional context provides clues to assist our understanding of the underlying learning processes in operation. In the process of establishing the institutional context, several concepts will be referred to in this chapter and followed up later. However this chapter is primarily concerned with the initial motivational forces at work within the individuals prior to enrolment which was identified as an important aspect to this study. Further consideration will be given to the Indigenous students’ initial perceptions of their institutional study context and the characteristics emerging from this situation, including factors such as personal expectations, personal aspirations, level of comfort, engagement with the institution, and so on. Studying both informal and formal learning that occurs within the institutional context leads to an exploration of a number of factors considered by the participants to be critical for making their journey a worthwhile experience. In turn, these factors will inform the model of Indigenous student support that develops from this study. This journey begins with a brief look at the background context of the students.

5.2 Engagement with the Institution
The decision to undertake further study is a major step, a very public activity, for an Indigenous mature-age person. This is especially so if, in fact, it is their very first experience of studying in a Western context tertiary institution. Whilst this was not the case for all of the participants, it was the situation for the majority of the participants. The initial process of getting enrolled is often a complex and bewildering experience for all students so it is appropriate to consider who the students are in the study, their academic and employment history and why they made the decision to enrol in tertiary study. What stimulates a student to undertake tertiary studies, the motivator, can be a strong incentive to overcome obstacles as the learning journey progresses.
Many participants in this study recall the community or family support they received to enter the learning journey. This proved to be a strong external, extrinsic motivational influence on their progress, that is, their community’s belief in their ability and likelihood of success. This has the direct result of the students believing within themselves that they are capable of achieving, producing an internal locus of control motivational influence in each individual. An example of this is a young male participant who recalls how he was approached by the community to do something with his life:

*Uncle ____ was worried about me. I came back from Darwin after time there and he wanted to know what I was going to do now...You know, he feels responsibility; he needs to sort me out. He told me it was important for the community for me to have a good education. He told me that these old people won’t be around for long time and he wanted me to be there for the younger fellas, those Aboriginal boys. I did think about what he said. It was true. That is our way. I need to be there for them young boys.*

Another student likewise looks back and sees that family support and expectation helped keep the dream alive:

*I just knew that my family were so proud of where I was going. It helped me, you know... I knew they were proud of me and so I stuck it out.*

With this background knowledge, the purpose of the next section is to examine the participants’ response to a question asking them to consider the motivators or motivating influences related to their involvement in their course of study. That is, what were the circumstances, issues or personal momentum propelling them to enrol in a tertiary program? Evidence is strong that there exists a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators within the decision-making context.

### 5.3 Motivators: External

Extrinsic motivation refers to motivation that comes from outside an individual. It drives a person to do things for tangible rewards or pressures, rather than for the fun of it. The motivating factors are external, or outside, rewards such as money or grades. These rewards provide satisfaction and pleasure that the task itself may not provide.

This section will demonstrate that participants in the study displayed a degree of extrinsic motivating factors such as, amongst others, improving their employed position, increasing their salary and improving their academic knowledge and skills.
5.3.1 Improving employment opportunities and income

In some instances the study participants had spent many years out bush and/or on a community and felt that they needed a refresher in their skill and knowledge areas. This was particularly relevant to those participants who had spent a lot of time working in their community as Health Workers. For one student, a 31 year old urban-based woman, the lack of a qualification was limiting her employment aspiration:

*I really enjoy my job...it is needed in my community...but I want more...I enrolled to receive a paper so I can qualify for a job in Nutrition.*

Many participants in this study showed ambitious employment plans as their motivator such as one young female participant who strongly expressed her ambitious plans for when she is qualified:

*I have a fulltime job now as a Health Worker in private practice (Queensland). I have a senior over me.. I want to know how to be that senior person.*

But differences ranged from that to this motivated respondent, a student in her late 30’s currently based in Katherine:

*I always wanted to be a nurse but my sister did the training and we both couldn’t go so I chose to work doing something else. However, she’s qualified now and it’s my turn.*

And then there was a 40 year old, single father from Alice Springs who firmly knew where he was headed:

*I want better job prospects and better wages.*

Other respondents just wanted to improve their skills so they could perform better in their current job. Such was one comment from a mid-30’s female student from a remote community in Queensland:

*I want to just upgrade my knowledge and understanding for my job. There’s lots I just don’t understand. I don’t see how it works.*

Whilst an external male student in his mid-20’s from Sydney simply said:

*I want to enhance my qualification for work purposes.*
A typical response for this particular motivational influence comes from a 31 year old mother of four who said:

*I am studying to get more skills and qualifications. I want to do my job better... and be able to bridge the gap between Aboriginal and other knowledge.*

Many students felt similarly motivated to improve their level of Western-recognised academic knowledge. As mentioned earlier, respondents stated in their own words, that they needed to:

- *Enhance my qualifications* (male, urban-based);
- *Get that bit of paper* (female, remote community);
- *Develop research skills* (female, urban-based);
- *Enhance my qualification for work purposes* (male, urban-based); and
- *Upgrade my knowledge and understanding* (female, regional community).

Whilst one female, remote-based participant in her second year of the course added that she wanted to *upgrade my knowledge and to help my community*. This seems to substantiate the possibility that many students possessed a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors.

### 5.4 Motivators: Internal

As mentioned in Chapter Three, intrinsic motivation has been intensely studied by educational psychologists since the 1970s and numerous studies have found it to be associated with high educational achievement and enjoyment by students. There is currently no ‘grand unified theory’ to explain the origin or elements of intrinsic motivation. Most explanations combine elements of Bernard Weiner’s attribution theory\(^{29}\), Bandura's work on self-efficacy\(^{30}\) and other studies relating to locus of control (Devlin and Hanrahan, 2005) and goal orientation (Sanusi et al, 2008).

As also previously mentioned, the participants in this study often displayed motivational influences that could only be described as a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic factors, which will now be examined.

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\(^{29}\) Attribution theorists argue that attributions engender emotional responses, expectations for future performance, and behaviour (Weiner, 1986). For example, attributing success to one's own effort should lead to happiness and pride, the expectation of future success, and the expenditure of future effort. On the other hand, attributing success to good luck should lead to happiness but surprise, little expectation of future success, and little change to current behavior J.Scevak & J.Archer (1995).

\(^{30}\) Self-efficacy: is the belief in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the sources of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1982, 1994)
5.4.1 Improving family or community prospects

The term *Indigenous* has a number of usages that differ from the Concise Oxford Dictionary definition *to be born in a specific place* (Allen, 1990). These usages tend to define Indigenous by the experiences shared by a group of people who have inhabited a country for thousands of years, which often contrast with those of other groups of people who reside in the same country for a few hundred years. The concept of *community* or concern for family or community has been a significant part of the Australian Indigenous persona according to anthropologists studying this unique group (Lee & De Vore, 1968; Hamilton, 1979; Altman, 1982; Chase, 1984; Edwards, 1991). This intrinsically-motivated social goal, a concept alluded to earlier in this chapter, was mentioned by many study participants. For example, a third-year student in her mid-40’s, currently urban-based, said:

*I chose to study to better my life, the life of my family and any community that I select to work in.*

Whilst another student, a male student from Katherine, N.T. replied:

*I want to improve the health of our people.*

One particular example, a female urban-based student in the third year of her degree, has an interesting background and several current motivators:

*I guess the reason that I wanted to study is because I have a goal that I want to work towards...I would like to become a Principal of a school and ultimately an Indigenous school...ESL is my background...my mother is Aboriginal and went to Grade 3 and my father, my biological father, is Croatian and my step-father is Aboriginal...all ESL learners. I dropped out in Year 10. I attempted Year 11 but I kept dropping out. Only because I didn’t know what the hell was going on. No, I just didn’t understand school...now I want to set an example for my children. Basically I am sick of being in a position where I’m unable to progress because I don’t have the qualifications to be anywhere. I have felt unappreciated for the work that I was doing...and thought – how do I get that appreciation. OK maybe I need to progress and with the support of my husband and the encouragement of him, I then went on to do some education.*

But concern for community can go deeper than the individual. In several instances, higher order thinking was evident in a participant’s reply, such as from this regionally-based female, a parent/carer for eight children:

*I have concerns with our community e.g. itinerants, youth. I was hoping to enhance my knowledge of local current issues, develop research skills and learn how to implement policy to create better outcomes for our community economically, socially and positively.*
An overpowering sense of responsibility, of social obligations and connectedness can be appreciated from these students’ comments. The complexity of Aboriginal social systems, in particular of kinship, is well known to anthropologists and linguists who have long documented these systems for various groups of Indigenous people (Keen, 1988; Wafer, 1982). The following quote from an Indigenous website clearly reflects the strong focus on kinship and social support in Indigenous society:

Learning the intricate pattern of kinship is part of every Aboriginal child’s education. The system of classes or skins puts everybody in a specific kinship relationship. All of these relationships have roles and responsibilities attached to them. This kinship influences who one could marry and it governs many other aspects of everyday behaviour. Once adulthood is reached the person knows exactly how to behave towards everyone he or she meets, and what type of behaviour. Many of these forms of behaviour are considered necessary to show politeness and respect to certain relatives. Kinship has thus brought with it a set of obligations that one had to perform when relating to others. These obligations form a part of Aboriginal Law. (Frog and Toad Indigenous Australia website, http://indigenousaustralia.frogandtoad.com.au/social3.html)

Eades (1988:98) also notes that among Aboriginal people place of residence, travel, social networks, leisure activities and personal loyalties all revolve in some way around one’s kin. Anthropologists (Eades, 1988; Edwards, 1991) note that patterns of kinship and knowledge are not part of an objective reality but are constructed and conceptualised by cultural groups. People across various cultural groups develop categories and schemas for various aspects of kinship and may map these kinship conceptualisations onto other domains.

For instance, with the instance of a mental health issue within a family group, the whole family take on the issue and see it as their responsibility to work with the clinician on a solution (personal account Dr Mark Sheldon, 1997).

More responses will be evident later in this chapter. Collated participant responses predominantly convey a desire to improve both personal knowledge and understanding and, as a result, improve the overall health of the Indigenous community in Australia. However, there are deeper, underlying reasons behind their decisions. For many, this deeper level reasoning appears to be in response to the frustration they feel, either with their working conditions or with their position as an Indigenous person in Australian society today.
5.4.2 Improving community health and/or working conditions

We feel comfortable with our own people so I need to learn more…and return to my community. (Female student, mid-30’s, from a remote community in North Queensland)

This is typical of the responses from the participating students. Indigenous health continues to be an issue of concern in Australia and widely scrutinized in the media (Rothwell, Weekend Australian, 16 June 2007). Indigenous Health Workers have first-hand knowledge of issues and practices. As many of the participants in this study are practising Health Workers, it is clear that they intend applying their upgraded knowledge to improve the conditions, both socially and medically, on communities. One young female student, in her early 20’s, from a remote NT community in Arnhemland, is typical of many responses:

It takes a lot of effort, big mob time away from family and community. But...I have this holistic community goal to make a difference. To help my own people to be educated and skilled up so the white man can’t control our health.

Such answers confirm ideas hypothesised by Schwab (1996) that Indigenous students are not only driven to catch up on skills and confidence needed in their career aspirations but also to be driven to minimise cultural costs and acquire cultural capital of value in their own communities, i.e. they tend to do courses for their people in fields such as education and health\(^{31}\).

I want to be able to discuss what is wrong with them...with my own people. (43 year old female who had been a Health Worker for seven years)

In the Northern Territory specifically, this has cultural value ‘at home’. These qualifications align with perceptions of need in Indigenous communities and provide a form of cultural capital which is valued in those communities. As one participant, a male student from Sydney, states:

Dire straits Indigenous people are in; only way we can change status quo is by knowing what people are talking about; walk that talk; be able to mediate for Aboriginal people.

Similarly, in many instances participants in the study confirm that commitment to further education or a formal education is just a part of the whole cultural commitment, or pro-social behaviour, exhibited by the Indigenous students in this study.

\(^{31}\) In 2002 and 2006 the fields of study with the largest numbers of Indigenous student enrolments were Society & Culture (35%, 24%), Education (20%, 26%) and Health (13%, 21%) (ABS 2002, 2006).
5.4.3 Providing role models
There were examples in a few of the responses where participants were keen to provide the Indigenous community with role models beginning with being an example for their own family.

Two such examples were:

- *I want to...give back to the community.* (Male, remote-based single parent); and
- *It’s important to me...I want to...be a role model for my kids and the community.* (Female, remote-based)

Whilst others said, with a slightly different focus:

- *My passion is community development...I’m here for what I can do when I return to my community.* (Male, regionally based); and
- *I’ve got an inner commitment there, an inner strength..I feel it most of the time.... I want to show my kids how to get there.* (Female, mid-40’s, urban-based)

This determination to succeed, whilst strong at commencement, is often challenged as they progress on their journey. In the next section, impressions gained by the participants during the first few days of their attendance at their institution of choice will be examined.

5.4.4 Frustration
An underlying negative intrinsic motivator is capable of undermining this initial sense of purpose. This is evident in many of the participant responses. Many were employed as Health Workers at the time of their decision to take a HE or VET course. Their background is one of committed hard work. Their employed position on the community or rural/remote town is well-recognised and, in their own words, they are very hard workers, often being called out for emergencies at all hours of the day and night. However, they are limited in their level of responsibility in their professional lives even though they may have high levels of responsibility within the cultural context of their community. One female respondent from an isolated community in North Queensland commented:

*I have worked in health for a number of years. There’s some frustrating practices. I have to further my education to work in different areas. I need to get that bit of paper.*

This frustration factor is intimately related to the improvement of one’s status in the Western-focused world of work. By climbing up the knowledge ladder one can gain a position of decision-making in the health sector and be suitably remunerated for the position’s responsibilities. This prospect appeals to many of the participants. As one female respondent,
employed as a Health Worker on a rural Top End community for the past seven years and who feels strongly that an injustice is occurring here, recalls:

*Health Workers have a very hard job, especially in the communities...they are working 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, that’s the reality. When people present at the health centre they know those people, they know who they are. When they get a result of some test that has been done, they are the ones that look at it – somebody that’s got a terminal illness could be a member of their own family. I would say that Health Worker business in most communities would be the most important role, but I don’t think they get the community support they should have. They get a lot of stress, a lot of blame. And a lot less money than a nurse.*

Medically, Health Workers often do the same work as a professional nurse. However, politically, they are not given adequate recognition, both in status and financial remuneration, for what is expected of them. Another female participant in the study, a Health Worker for the past ten years on a remote community, recalls the unrecognised demands of the job:

*We didn’t work to a set time, we worked to the movement of the people, not because “it’s morning tea time or lunchtime”. We would come in the afternoons because you knew where everybody was.*

This same respondent recalls that they had a sister-in-charge who always supported them with responsibility that recognised their abilities but even she was powerless to remunerate them for the job they did:

*When she finished for the day or had to go somewhere she would say it was time for us to take charge. We did it all, the clinical side and all the other stuff, looking after the whole person...people would say these things were outside our role, but you can’t just cut yourself off and look at one area without looking at what other things are happening in their lives...*

Frustration produces a mix of hopelessness and anger as evident in the voice of one respondent:

*I’ve been a Health Worker on a remote community in Qld for a number of years. I enjoy my job but I’m tired of always having a nurse in charge of the Clinic when we Aboriginal staff do so much. And we live here all the time. I want to be the nurse in charge. I want to be paid for what I know.*

Collectively the students in this situation recalled the real difficulties working as a Health Worker – with their financial remuneration based on the Western concept of academic qualification. They can go no further in their official positions on the community unless they are prepared to undertake further study. Hence, for many, their journey begins.
As mentioned previously, there were many participants who were particularly frustrated that they could not receive recognition for their Indigenous cultural knowledge, in terms of workplace acknowledgement and remuneration, and the Voices would seem to indicate that there were instances where this was the motivating force. However, whilst the workplace may be the underlying source of frustration-based motivation, in many instances it proved to be encouragement from their workplace that was the stimulus for the initial urge to become the reality of enrolment. This will be given some consideration later in this chapter.

In summary, so far in this chapter consideration has been given to the initial motivational forces at work within the participants prior to enrolment. The next part of this chapter will now consider the Indigenous students’ initial perceptions of their institutional study context and the characteristics that emanate from this situation.

5.5 First Contact with the Institution

Earlier in this chapter the motivating influences on the Indigenous prospective student’s decision to undertake further education and/or training for the purpose of achieving a qualification have been examined. These have included employment frustrations, upgrading of skills and knowledge, and higher-level aspirations to improve the health and welfare of the Indigenous community in Australia. This next section will look at the effects on the individual as they attend the institution during the first few days. Comments are included from participants on the administration and academic process as well as what effect these have on their experiences during their journey.

The students were asked to think about what happened, how they felt and how they coped with incidents at this point in their journey – when they were new to the experience and the place. Their answers further informed the current intellectual debate recognising the requirement for successful learners, in a cross-culturally unfamiliar context, to both acquire mastery over knowledge and processes of reasoning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as well as engaging in a community of practice (Tennant, 2000; Zhang, 2005).

The importance of this first interaction with the institution is demonstrated by the following external student, a 26 year old interstate-based male in the second year of his degree, who felt
much removed from the process of enrolment. He felt no engagement with the institution at all. In fact, he still feels quite removed from the institution after almost two years into the course:

*I had no contact with the teachers and the Aboriginal Support workers. I just filled in forms and sent them off and then my materials arrived. It wasn’t until after several weeks that a package arrived to tell me that there was in fact Aboriginal Support staff there to help me. Even then they didn’t contact me. I waited but they didn’t. What was I supposed to do? I didn’t know. Why didn’t I make a move to contact them? Well, I don’t know really. I think that I just assumed they would contact me and ask me if I had any worries. I don’t think that I really understood how it all hung together, how it all worked. Who did what? Then I thought I’d better ring them up and talk about what troubles I was having with materials, books and everything. But I couldn’t get anyone to really understand me. Every time I rang up I got another person on the phone. It was OK though, once I made contact with the Indigenous Support person. She was great and worked through some issues with me and even went and talked with one of my lecturers! Later on that happened.*

Linking or making contact with administrative staff, approaching, either in person or by telephone, a complete stranger and *telling their story* has the effect of making the students feel very uncomfortable. There were many replies from participants that indicated such uneasiness:

*I tell you I was just shaking like...I didn’t want to go up them steps and sort out my problems with enrolment...actually I didn’t know they were problems then, I just knew that there was where I had to go. It was very hard for me.*

This student was a very experienced community worker and a mother of three. But still she found the process very daunting and fearful. Perhaps the issue lies in the fact that often the process involves the student speaking with administrative or academic staff members who are not Indigenous, who are not even associated with the course they want to do. This is in direct contrast to the Indigenous way of communicating. Shyness is a common response and can usually be distinguished from guardedness by the extreme avoidance of eye contact and absence of hostility (Sheldon, 1997).

In the next section I will elaborate on student reaction to the first few days of institutional life and seek to find evidence as to whether this is grounded in a cultural repertoire of responses.

### 5.6 Administrative Issues

Across the three Case Study sites there were mixed reactions to those first few days. A few students found that everything went reasonably well, as one female student from a regional town said:

*Things went really smoothly. Forms came and I had to supply my previous qualifications. Because I had Certificates 1,2,3,& 4 then I got into the course straight away.*
However, for many students, the experience of the first few days during enrolment caused a great deal of personal anxiety and the students had to learn how to cope with the elements of the institutional environment, particularly in the more Western-focused institutions, that upset their cultural equilibrium. There are several instances or incidents that clearly identify the issues of concern raised by the study participants.

An example with serious repercussions was given by a 41 year old female student now in her third year of a degree course. She explained that when she first enrolled, the enrolment officer recommended that she go straight to a specific faculty for an Enabling program. Not understanding what an enabling course was, she attended that course, only to realise that she was not an ‘enabling’ student. She had worked (in the public service) for many years and had held quite responsible positions. However, all of her training had been in-house. She had entered tertiary studies on the recommendation of her work supervisor, achieving Mature Age Entry to the degree-level course. She believed that she did not have any way of showing that she was capable of a higher level of study. She did not have the personal self-confidence to argue against the system. However, personally, she now felt quite insulted and believed that she had wasted twelve months. At the time of her interview she was finding it difficult to throw off her negativity towards the institution and move on with her studies:

You know, I’m finding it really hard to keep going. Like, I’m very disappointed. I’ve talked it over with my family...they feel the same way...we are all sorry. Like I have wasted twelve months. How can I go on now? I know I can do it but...

Many students experienced sheer incompetence on the part of the administration in all of the institutions in this study. In some instances, students were not fully aware of the expectations of the course. One female student, in her mid-thirties and a sole parent to two small children, was aghast to find when she arrived for a two week study ‘block’ at the Indigenous-focused institution in the study that the course went for much longer and that there were more blocks of study later in the course. She had made lots of family arrangements to be able to attend the first ‘block’ and then she thought she would be able to finish the course by studying on her home community with a tutor just like she had done in an earlier course (Remote Area Teacher Education). However, this student found support amongst the rest of the Indigenous student cohort at her institution. She relates how they brainstormed a solution for her:
That’s OK though. I talked about it with other students on the ‘block’ and they said to just bring ___ (children named) with me next time, that’s what they did. We all work together when we have a problem. I got over it. I just had a bit of a fright for a start.

But this fright and feeling of powerlessness, confusion and low self esteem continues close to the surface and is hard to recover from.

5.7 Cultural Elements during communication
As referred to earlier in this chapter, many students felt intimidated by having to deal with perfect strangers while undertaking the first few processes associated with enrolment and beyond:

*I didn’t know anybody. I had difficulty explaining myself to them, about my situation.*

This fear of not being able to relate to anyone at the institution is ever-present in their stories.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the students are accustomed to belonging to a community-based culture where non-Indigenous people are in the minority, regardless of whether they live in an urban or remote environment. Later in this chapter a student will be referred to who was horrified upon realising that *I was the only black face!* Collectively and individually, participants identify as Indigenous and are immersed in cultural connections and relationships. As the foundation for their existence, they naturally seek comfort and support from its members in any complex or difficult situation in which they may find themselves (Sheldon, 1997; Bourke, 1993).

However, unlike the way Indigenous society runs, institutions set up barriers to communication. This is well researched (Kuh & Love, 2000). Whilst students expect staff to be approachable and open communicators, this is not easily achieved during the enrolment process because of the numerous administrative barriers set up by institutions to prevent academic staff from being overwhelmed by enquiries. Unfortunately, this does not help the student who is trying to learn the due processes and procedures associated with enrolment.

One female student, mid-40’s and studying for the first time away from her community, and with an underlying personal motivation to improve the health of Indigenous peoples, had to ask for help over a number of issues when she first arrived at the institution and found it a very daunting task:
When I first arrived I just couldn’t connect with anyone…with anyone who understood…it was weeks later…I just couldn’t make myself understood. It’s just not right you know to be feeling like that. I felt exhausted going from one person to the next. In the end I had to ask for help. I don’t understand why it was so difficult for me.

She experienced problems in all aspects of the enrolment process – filling in the subject choices; completing the form, which was returned to her three times; timetable issues; not being able to understand the process; obtaining computer access (in order to access the timetable in the first place); and transport to and from the institution. She remembers walking around in a daze for several days feeling very uncomfortable, very insecure, until she finally asked for help.

This same student later encountered a major problem when she was offered a tutor on her community. A work colleague offered to be her tutor and was accepted by both the student and the institution, but within a short period of time this arrangement caused a problem. The student again felt uncomfortable with this person (tutor) being able to see to what level she was learning, reading, writing etc and also viewing her reports from the institution, such as assessments. The relationship had crossed the boundary from a previously professional one to a more personal level. At the time of this study, the student relates her concern with the comment:

*I now don’t know how to get out of it (the tutor contractual obligations).*

She did not know who she could approach within the institution about resolving this issue.

### 5.8 Academic issues

Support for the academic side of enrolment proves difficult for all concerned, both for the student and for the academic. As one Indigenous Support academic admitted during the course of this study, even for the most pro-active, inclusive lecturing staff it can be the month of May in the new academic year at their institution before an Indigenous Support Lecturer can access the statistical information that tells them who, and where, the newly-enrolled Indigenous students are in the institution. One student relates how he felt going through the elongated enrolment process:

*I would have withdrawn myself out of this institution to find another institution; it was my feeling at that time…I have never felt so alone in my life. I felt like I was in another world. I got so angry at times ...I think because I just didn’t understand the whole thing, how to go about it. You know I remember feeling totally out of control of my life...in this new place.*

After starting the journey to further study with such high hopes for an enjoyable and rewarding experience, it was becoming a humiliating one.
Other students from another Case Study site also felt disappointment concerning their inability to access the lecturers, and hence academic information, easily. They list issues such as not being able to get in touch with the right staff to sort out things, about being sent all over the campus to get things sorted out or signed when they didn’t know where to go, and generally getting the feeling that they are not a priority in this educational institution:

*I am an external student... They really don’t want to know you... Teachers need to think about their external students and try and keep in touch.*

With their own cultural perspective holding personal relationships as essential for meaningful communication, participants in the study often said that they were keen to get to know their lecturers, to understand where they came from, what family they had. This is one of the focii of Indigenous culture and is viewed negatively when lecturers are not open enough with the students because of their own personal reserve or cultural bias to act more ‘closed’. Such was a comment from one female student for whom the process of getting to know her lecturer had gone well:

*This place is great for encouragement, for keeping the culture. Teachers let you get to know them, they tell us where they come from, what their family is, we share stuff like that. Happy times.*

5.9 Personal Issues

Many issues troubled the students during the early stages of their involvement with the institution. These range from a lack of contact with academic staff, having to communicate with complete strangers during the enrolment process, accessing correct information, experiencing feelings of complete isolation from peers and family, and stress about getting their lecture timetable organized. The issues are many and varied and sometimes, but not always, short-lived. However, they each add to the stress levels and feelings of inadequacy that the students will share in the next section where some of the main issues are explored in more detail.

5.9.1 Institution of choice

Familiarity with the institution through a third person contact was a high priority for the majority of participating students prior to enrolment. Many respondents indicated that they actively sought an institution where they had friends or relatives studying or working. An example is given by a first year student, a 21 year old male student from Katherine:
I’m enrolled at ___. Auntie ___ works there and she encouraged me to study there. She said she’d keep an eye on me and I felt much better about applying to get in there. You just don’t feel so alone, so worried about not knowing what to do.

Similarly another student, a female 26 year old single parent responded:

I had a relative apply for a job at ___. She really likes working there and suggested I join the course there.

This seeking of the ‘familiar’ will be discussed later in the chapter but it seems to originate from cultural predisposition to seek out relationships with the place and its people (Berndt & Berndt, 1981, 1988; Edwards, 1991; Ford, 2006). However, these connections to the institution do not ensure everything else will go according to expectations. Many issues concern the students during the first few weeks of study as the following sections will attest.

5.9.2 Fear of failure
Participants recall vividly the fear of failure. After arriving and expecting to get on with the planned study, they are met with a myriad of things to organize and sort out. At the back of their minds is the fear that something will go wrong, that they will forget a deadline or a piece of paper essential to their success. One student recalls:

I knew I had to get myself organized…I knew there would be assignments but how to work out when they were due…that was a real worry to me.

Whilst this was an organisational fear, that he would not be organised enough or know when deadlines were looming, there were other students experiencing more personal concerns as the next section will explore.

5.9.3 Fear concerning loss of identity
Some participants express a fear concerning what institutional life experience will bring. They fear that perhaps it will change them for good and they will lose their cultural identity. Their families fear them changing. One young male participant summarises this feeling amongst the participants:

I really value my cultural heritage. Although I have been brought up in ___ [urban area] mainly, I value who I am and I value my large family. I spend all of my time with my Indigenous family and friends and now I must work and study with people I haven’t known before. How will this change me I ask myself. How do I remain true to me?

Likewise, as the next section will show, students have other equally concerning personal fears.
5.9.4 Fear of communicating

As described earlier, participants were reticent and fearful of meeting with complete strangers and *telling their story*. Making contact with administrative or academic staff had the effect of making them feel very uncomfortable. One student summarises this fear amongst the participants of speaking publicly to a complete stranger about academic issues:

*I didn’t realize that the whole process was so time-consuming and difficult to understand, from the forms to choosing the subjects and then to actually knowing where to go with what. It was absolutely terrifying! I wasn’t used to explaining about myself and what I wanted in such a public place before.*

However, they are not easily discouraged. A young male participant remembers those first few days:

*I was just so happy, you know. I just knew that my family were so proud of where I was going. It helped me, you know, to be able to walk right in there and get it sorted. I was worried, sure I was, but I knew they were proud of me and so I stuck it out.*

5.9.5 Accessing correct information

The inefficiencies of the actual administrative processes was of concern to other students. As one male student studying externally recalls:

*I had my enrolment form returned to me three times…I really felt alone…nobody looks at how it impacts on that particular individual.*

This view is also supported by another student who found the process so frustrating that he almost withdrew his application:

*I don’t think that I was well prepared. I’m the youngest in my family and I thought that there would be some support there that would just get it happening!…I’m concerned at how slow the system is to get Indigenous students together.*

Getting their lecture timetable organized is a huge issue to students participating in tertiary studies for the first time. Sometimes the information is easily available on a pin-up board, usually within the VET sector. However, in Higher Education, the onus is often on the student to access the information via a website and this can prove very difficult for the new student. They clearly sought assistance in this from their peers as a number of voices indicate. Some found other students to assist them:

*I just didn’t know where to go for this information but I knew ___ [an Indigenous fellow student in a higher level] and she sat with me in the library and we worked out my timetable together. I don’t know what I would have done without her.*
While others found staff to assist them:

*I met the most fantastic lecturer by the name of ___ and she stayed back a bit and helped me work through how to do my timetable. I really needed her help and she gave it to me. I won’t ever forget how happy I felt to have a friend, a lecturer, help me with this big problem.*

5.10 Identifying with the ‘Place’

In their comments, the degree of connection with place is referred to by many participants irrespective of whether they are attending one of the two more Western-focused tertiary institutions or the more Indigenous-focused institution involved in the study. However, there are differences in participant comments depending on which institution they attend.

At the more Western-focused institutions, students invariably comment about the lack of connection with place. In their initial experiences, there seems to be little institutional support for overcoming their fears, assistance in finding out what is expected and even how to cope with the expectations once they find out. A typical comment is:

*I was the only black face!...I couldn’t find someone who understood what I had to do... it was very stressful.*

One group of students recall their feelings during their first few days on campus at the beginning of a study block of two weeks in duration, the first of many throughout their course. They recall feeling strangely isolated and cut-off from their home and their culture. One person in the group recalls:

*I really missed my family when I first arrived here. It all seemed so different to what I was used to. I’m a long way from home. But I just struggle on, as this is my final week and I just want to get it over.*

This typical comment indicates clearly that this student has felt very little connection with the institution and will be glad to return to her home environment. This feeling of disconnection and helplessness is articulated by another female student, aged in her mid-40’s who is employed in a responsible position within the government and who is studying at one of the Western-focused institutions, when she comments:

*I’ve been studying on and off for eight years now and each time I return and try again I come to this point where I am now – it’s getting on top of me again. I don’t know how it happens, no-one seems to help me until I’m at the point of leaving again and then it’s too late. How do you learn how to cope with all the expectations in your life?*
However, the perception was different for participants studying in the Indigenous-focused institution located in a rural area. Participants there appeared to find the experience less daunting during the initial few weeks than their counterparts at the other two institutions. This is because although they still had to learn the processes, both administrative and academic, the students had an inner confidence, a pre-conceived belief, that they would be supported through it. A typical response received during a focus group session is:

*Students feel really good here, can help people out and share the burden of study. Makes you feel strong...*

Participants indicate that within this institution there is a greater understanding of, and attention to, their concerns.

Also at the Indigenous-focused institution, many participants spoke of being able to relate to the place, the surroundings and feeling comfortable when dealing with Indigenous staff during the enrolment process. One such example, a 42 year old woman from an island off the Queensland coast, describes the sense of trust she felt immediately on entering the place:

*The first time I came to ____ I was made to feel really welcome. It makes you feel welcome to have someone there from your own culture, Aboriginal-like. Immediately you feel that they will try and help you. There’s no barriers to get through, hurdles to jump over before you can find things out.*

Other participants are effusive with their comments about the peer support they received on first arriving at the institution. A female student from a remote community in the NT, attending tertiary studies for the first time at this Indigenous-focused institution, comments:

*When I first got there, I got the feeling “You can do it!” I just felt so much support from the other students. It’s a community in itself.*

The importance placed on being made welcome by Indigenous staff is noted by other students as well, one such example being a typical comment from a male student in his early 40’s from a remote area:

*I just knew that I would be OK when I enrolled coz I’m Aboriginal and so are most of them who work there.*

The students’ pre-conceived belief, even prior to arrival, that they would be supported because of the philosophical foundation of the institution permeates their attitude and creates the belief that issues will be sorted.
Whilst comments considered above focus on the personal connection with others during those first few weeks, other students comment more on the physical environment when speaking about their enrolment experiences with the Indigenous-focused institution. As one female student typically comments:

\[ It’s peaceful (here), lots of grass and trees; when you feel good and whole, then you can study more. Makes you very strong, being an Indigenous person here. \]

There is a feeling of calm amongst the students as they recall their experiences. An external student from Queensland recalls:

\[ I didn’t have any problems in enrolment. I enrolled. The forms came. I had to supply copies of my Certificates to the Administration. I had a phone call from one of the people there. They checked some details. No problems. I hadn’t seen the same atmosphere in tertiary institutions over there (Queensland). \]

Part of the reason for differing attitudes about participants’ sense of place once they arrive to enrol may be the attention paid by institutions in making their contact with students more comfortable and stress-free. As one female student based in a remote community remembers, the institution had visited her community prior to her commencing her study journey:

\[ I felt that fear lifting off me and I knew that I could do it! You know it helped that they had come out to our community before. \]

Yet not all of the participants at the Indigenous-focused institution found dealing with issues easy or comfortable. One external student found that she had to adapt her ways to what was expected, even though she was dealing with Indigenous people at the end of the telephone:

\[ I don’t have to use the 1800 number as much now as I used to. I was very shy about ringing up and I kept putting it off. But he was friendly and supportive. Told me how to get an extension on my assignment. Told me what I should do but I don’t. I’ve had to learn to be more pushy, tell them what the problem is. \]

Another student, a female single parent, told a story of how supportive the other students were when she had to bring her children to the study block after her baby-sitting arrangements fell through, when she stated:

\[ I just felt so much support from the other students. They were community for me. \]

Differences showed in comments concerning the three Case Study sites. At the Indigenous-focused institution, the students, Indigenous themselves, expected to have some form of support and actively sought it out:
... my Auntie ___ has worked there for a while now. And she told me that they look after us, and, you know, that is so true. I didn’t know just what to do but there were those people there to help and they sat me down and told me about what I had to do and I felt that fear lifting off me...they made it sound like there was a chance for me to improve myself and get an education.

That is not to say that these participants did not experience other problems. Some students experienced the same or similar problems with respect to administration issues like enrolment as the participants at other institutions did. It appears, though, that there were less students experiencing problems with enrolment and those that did experience problems demonstrated a greater resilience to overcoming the issues. The reasons for this seem to be found in the personal contact domain. Comments like students feel really good here and I just knew that I would be OK appear to be related to who made contact with them early in their first encounters at the institution. This aspect of personal connectedness will be explored in a later chapter.

Summing up, another participant, a male who had taken a long time to make the decision to attend the particular institution in which he was enrolled, summarised the feelings of the participant group who were discussing their first arrival at the Indigenous-focused institution for a workshop:

Collectively we achieve! People just give you that encouragement!

This positive attitude did not appear to be the general perception at the other two institutions. However, while this was a typical attitude from the Indigenous-focused institution, concerns related to personal issues were still a major part of all participants’ lives. The next section will consider an issue that is mentioned by many students, irrespective of the institution in which they are enrolled.

5.10.1 Worrying about the community back home
Moving away from their community to an institution to study, even if it is only to attend workshops for a specific period, added to the student’s level of anxiety and bewilderment because of their concerns about the general stability of the community itself and their family’s welfare. The following comment by a 47 year old female community elder demonstrates this:

As soon as we started going to ___ institution, our community lost all of our Health Workers for a period of time... People would disappear to town, the women would go there without their husbands because the husbands weren’t allowed to go and that would cause
tension in the community. Then the men would go and wouldn’t turn up to the course. We got worried sick.

This fear and worry about the community was evident in several participants’ comments. One woman’s daughter was currently well but had been prone to suicidal tendencies and had been attacked whilst in a protective situation on the community. The woman spent much of her time away from the community worrying about what her extended family were doing. She felt torn between the community’s need for her to gain a professional qualification and her family’s need for her continuous protection. In her words:

_I can only do what I think at the time is right. I’ve been through a lot last year with my daughter but things are getting OK in that direction. I had to go back home and not do my study then. I had a break from study. But now I’m back. And do you know, there are other things to worry about and all the time I’m here I just worry, worry. You do your best. I need to learn more for my community but the worries are there._

The study journey is one fraught with anxiety and frustration not only in the early stages but returning whenever the student has to leave the community. The ties with the community and family and the sense of responsibility can be a burden on the student. The _double workload_ mentioned by Margaret Weir in an earlier chapter, indicating the stress associated with having to work across two cultures, emerged in the stories and Voices of the students.

### 5.11 Conclusion

*Being Indigenous and studying at university is somewhat of a dead end for many people. The two concepts are wide apart and unlikely to be easily bridged. Many of us fail to get there.* (Male, external student)

In summary, the overall impression gained from the student participants in this study is that their initial motivation to succeed is strong, is often culturally based on their desire to improve the situation for their community as a priority, and would appear to have a strong influence on their reaction to situations in which they find themselves during the first few weeks of their study journey. In the analysis of this study these early weeks will be noted as the _arriving_ stage of the journey. Late stages of the journey have been labelled the _surviving_ and _sustaining_ stages and these will be described as the next two chapters progress.

An interesting point of difference in comments about early engagement with the institution is that participants at the Indigenous-focused institution noted a different level of cultural comfort
when compared to participant’s at the more Western-focused institutions. Research has shown that engaging with the institution in a positive way is a priority in the early stages of study (Howells, 2003; Lane, 1988). Upon arrival, the student has to work out how to engage with the institutional rules, social mores and academic delivery. They have to work at trying to understand what it is that is expected of them. Somehow a balance has to be reached between social, work, family and academic obligations and expectations.

Like most other students, there seems to be little institutional support for Indigenous students during their initial contact with institutional life. They tend to seek support from their Indigenous peers to overcome their initial fears and confusion. One study found a student buddy or mentoring system only really worked once students were linked with other Indigenous students (Sonn, Bishop & Humphries, 1999, p.95). In fact, even though there is a level of institutional support offered for the commencing student across the three Case Study sites, the students do not seem to access the full extent of this support until further into their course of study.

Indigenous students bring a wealth of skills, knowledge, life experiences and determination to the learning environment (DiGregorio, Farrington & Page 2000). Emerging from the initial investigation in this study of their background, the students interviewed:

- Have a background in Indigenous health;
- Are keen to gain further qualifications in this field of work;
- Are disappointed with the lack of official recognition for their knowledge and experience across two cultural worldviews, and
- Have higher level expectations concerning how they can positively contribute to the Indigenous health field at both family and community levels.

As mentioned previously, central to the methodology of this study is the process of capturing the voices of the Indigenous students whilst they are undertaking their own individual study journey and analysing their interpretation of the impact of this on their lives. Despite inhibiting factors, Indigenous students have many compelling reasons for undertaking further studies. This study and previous research has shown that these include such themes as education and personal development, security through future employment, a desire to contribute to their own or the
wider community and role model consciousness (Ellis 1996; DiGregorio, Farrington & Page 2000; Mills, 2002).

The way forward for the participants, working their way through the *arriving* stage and managing incidents as they arise within the institutionalised world of Western study, will be the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter Six

Surviving after enrolment

I’ve been studying on and off now for eight years and each time I return and try again I come to this point where I know that community obligations and that kind of stuff is getting on top of me again. I hold various committee positions, so I’m very busy. When I do study I get lots of support from the Indigenous Support lecturers at ___ and I like mixed mode but I don’t put the time into it – too many community commitments. It’s hard to balance! I find that the best thing I can do is go and sit with my Indigenous family and friends, sit out there under a tree and talk about what’s important in life, where I should be going with my life and how I can help my family. That’s what it is really about, how to get that balance right. My Indigenous background means I need to think about us all, all of us are family.

(Female Indigenous student, aged 34 years, mother of three, working and studying)

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Five commenced with an examination of the initial motivating influences behind the participating Indigenous students embarking on their study journey. The chapter then focused on the participants’ first impression of entrance into the Australian tertiary education system with a detailed look at a few of the initial issues that arose upon enrolment and attendance at classes or workshops in the first few weeks. This unfamiliar, Western institutional system combined with the personal anxieties associated with leaving their community, their family and in some instances their community role as Health Workers meant the students could be, in many cases, easily upset or disappointed by the seemingly insensitive atmosphere surrounding their first few days on campus.

This chapter investigates some of the transitional issues and incidents that participants are likely to face in the first few months after enrolling, followed by a sample of the participant’s voices outlining the coping strategies and influence of others during this time. It becomes obvious through the participant voices in this chapter that the students, on the whole, experience a bewildering series of life crises and transitional issues as they adjust to university life. After bringing their past experiences and beliefs as well as their cultural histories and worldviews with them on their learning journey, how they manage what happens in the institutionalised world of Western study will be the focus of this chapter.
Comments and stories will be presented from the students as they enter what has been termed their survival stage when they settle into their study and use their survival skills and knowledge, in conjunction with relevant informal learning strategies, to continue their learning journey. This is a fragile stage in their course of study as shown by the 2003 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth which indicates that Indigenous students are more likely to withdraw from study during their first year compared to non-Indigenous students. The 2008 data confirms this as a continuing issue (ABS, 2008). Compulsory schooling has not fared much better over the past decade with the 2008 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy and the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study indicating clearly that the Northern Territory has the lowest performance of all Australian states or Territories (Pearson, 2009, p.29). Noel Pearson’s view that the Aboriginal education-achievement gap is a history of failure that has defied reform attempts for decades summarises the current state of Indigenous education in Australia.

How to put the learning back into the Western educational experiences of Indigenous students continues to be a focus of research today. Over the past decade research has focused on the empowering and, in contrast, disempowering facility of learning which is particularly relevant to this study. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the participants’ learning is a process of human adaptation to the social and cultural institutional environment. Learning, because it involves something new and unknown, inevitably triggers a range of emotions in adults. New learning often includes a risk of failure and the possibility of discomfort and disorientation as the learner struggles to make sense of new ideas. As Goleman (1996) describes it, the body experiences an emotional hijacking where surges in the limbic system capture the rest of the brain. This can result in a feeling of helplessness (They didn’t take any notice of my asking...It was very frustrating...) and a ‘down-shifting’ to self-protective behaviours (My most support comes from my family). Participants in this study refer to this feeling of alienation and helplessness (Being Indigenous and studying at university is somewhat a dead end for many people). But this feeling of helplessness can result in action. It can result in new knowledge on how to cope with the incident or issue of significance that has occurred. According to Adler (1975), the more people experience the new and different dimensions of human diversity, the more they learn about themselves.
These features of informal learning are evident in the present study. From the participants’ descriptions of their learning experiences within the tertiary institutional environment, it is apparent that their learning is incidental, dependent on the ad hoc nature of critical incidents, and quite disparate in nature. Most of the participants’ learning as described, apart from the more formal academic aspects, is situated within the institutional context, experiential and informal, and concentrated around their real-life every-day communication with others. This immersion in a tertiary education system has infinite possibilities for the student to have both positive and negative experiences, particularly with respect to cultural understanding between parties and personal cultural retention. Their uncertainty and anxiety around how much this change will affect their life, particularly their cultural relations with their family and community, remains a concern for many of them as the chapter draws to a conclusion. In summary, this chapter will consider the informal learning that takes place as the students manage incidents and issues as they arise and will conclude with their concerns about how they may have personally changed during the learning journey. Each of these factors emerged during the analysis of the interview data as important considerations in understanding how students felt about their learning journey experiences. This new knowledge gained about themselves and their changing world view provides a platform for commencement of Chapter Seven, the sustaining stage, when students can reflect on those influences they consider to be critical in shaping their learning journey.

Whilst the factors discussed and issues raised during the learning journey are considered separately and are divided between these three chapters, Chapters Five, Six and Seven, it is important to state from the outset that personal and social factors, inclusive of cultural heritage, were unlikely to operate in isolation independently of one another. In much the same way, the academic and administrative issues raised by the students were found to be quite interrelated during the whole learning journey. Complex interplays amongst personal and social factors must be considered to be acting together, in concert. To an extent, the division of factors into personal and social dimension is artificial but it serves the purpose of ordering the data into manageable portions (Alloway, 2004).

### 6.2 The Institutional culture
Once the participant gets past all the issues related to leaving home and settling into a new environment, starting a new programme of study can be very exciting at the beginning. However,
uncomfortable experiences occur quite quickly as students are confronted with a variety of different practices in a Western institution compared to what they have previously experienced. This difference is lessened for many participants as they attended the Both Ways case study site, the Indigenous-focussed tertiary institution. The previous educational experiences of the participants in this study were many and varied. In many instances they were not prepared for the rigorous operational expectations of a tertiary institution. Nor were they prepared for certain Western institutional cultural issues such as the reliance on the individual organising themselves and the attitude of some of the lecturing staff.

One comment from a male, regionally-based student who found that he had difficulties relating to his tutor was that:

*Some lecturers too high upon words.*

He had experienced several initial administrative problems connected with his travel plans, but then he found out he had been offered a tutor to assist him with his assignments. As he was going to be a bit late in meeting assignment submission deadlines he thought this would be *really good*. However, after having just a few sessions with the tutor a *bad feeling* seemed to arise between them. At the time of his interview, he was not sure why this happened but he blamed it on the words used by the tutor. He simply did not understand a lot of what the tutor had to say. He felt the tutor was using his own words in the assignment and not the student’s. The student’s perspective on this is that it has become *too big for me* and he is unsure where to go with this. His comment that *there’s nothing to help me here with this one* showed his level of frustration.

Expectations of students concerning a tertiary environment are embedded in their interpretation of the term *culture*. That is, the organisation’s culture. This term is a common term used by a wide range of people and means many different things. It is a socially constructed term and as such is open to shifts in meaning over time and place (Ford, 2009, p.17). It is therefore not enough to assume that when the term is used that there is common understanding of what it means to each individual. In this sense culture is not owned but acts as both a generic for a range of social identifiers and for quite specific sets of practices (Ford, 2009, p.26). The participants in this study used exasperated comments such as:

*I can’t work out what is the way to do it right here; and*  
*What is their story here?*
In the majority of cases, students expected institutional staff to fix any of their problems related to aspects of the institution’s administrative or academic operations. Whilst one assumes that negative comments made about staff such as he’s never there when you want to ask him something, were referring to academic staff, further questioning revealed that the students were also referring to administrative staff. Although there is enough evidence to indicate that the students still felt academic staff were in some way connected with the issues and frustrations they had as students.

6.3 Underlying issues

As mentioned above and in earlier chapters, Indigenous education at all levels in Australia is in a parlous state. Reports and strategies on Indigenous education have reached similar conclusions about the systemic failure of education systems and the need to take urgent action (Pearson, 2009, p.10). Pat Dodson’s statement echoes from the past as a reminder that the state of Indigenous education has not changed fast enough if the same kinds of statements are repeatedly being made:

I would like to join my voice with the others, and perhaps make the chorus a little stronger by bringing to it the conviction that it is a fundamental human right that Indigenous peoples be guaranteed an education which respects and strengthens our cultural heritage. A right and not a privilege. (Dodson, 1994)

When participants in this study were asked about the early months of their study journey they enthusiastically recalled the issues and feelings as though they were still there inside them waiting to be told, as their story to be shared. There seemed to be a sense of spirituality about the session, of listening to an exposure of feelings. Experiences were related as a story which is the way Indigenous people express themselves, the way they feel most comfortable:

In Aboriginal Australian society, storytelling makes up a large part of everyday life. Storytelling is not only about entertaining people but is also vital in educating children about life. Storytelling is used in a variety of ways. ...Stories are... used to explain peoples' spirituality, heritage and the laws. (http://www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/family.cfm)

This chapter engages with their stories. In some cases, snippets or glimpses of their journey are told. In other cases, disclosure takes a narrative form as the moment in history, their history, is related to the listener with an energy that grows as the story is told. There are many stories of transitional issues or crises affecting the participants’ engagement with study. All of these issues have the potential to cause a critical incident between the student and the institutional
representative. Stories are told of initial feelings of hope and optimism being followed by feelings of isolation, disappointment or anger and the whole spectrum of these feelings can occur over the course of a single day.

Analysis of the interview data reveals that the issues invariably relate to at least one of the following: administration, academia or personal circumstances. In many cases, it can relate to all three. The students’ Voices need to be heard as being central to the current situation in Australian universities so that the range of potential causes of tension and angst between the two worldviews be examined. In the recent Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth noted above (Marks, 2007; LSAY Research Report 51), it was highlighted that Indigenous students were still the least likely amongst the population to complete their program:

> Indigenous university students have substantially lower completion rates or higher attrition rates than non-Indigenous students. Martin et al. (2001) estimated that only 40 per cent of Indigenous students completed their course compared to 63 per cent of non-Indigenous students. Non-completion appeared especially prevalent among male Indigenous students.

But there is evidence in the Voices presented in this chapter, and the one to follow, that the students in this study are reflecting on the issues and working through how they relate to them as an Indigenous person. They are coming to an understanding of what they have to do to succeed but there is also a growing awareness that this may change who they are. As mentioned earlier, this chapter will examine their continued engagement with the institution, the issues that arise and how they manage them and conclude with the underlying concerns that they take into the next stage of the journey, the sustaining stage.

### 6.3.1 Administrative

It was briefly discussed in the previous chapter that many students experienced tertiary institutional practices which ‘jarred’ them culturally. In turn these produced personal feelings of discomfort, anxiety or frustration, the result being that students are propelled into action in order to alleviate these feelings and regain control of their lives. One administrative practice in Western institutions which the study participants found personally intimidating, also alluded to in the previous chapter, is the need to discuss personal details or matters of concern with an administrative person who is generally non-Indigenous and not known to the student. Participants found it difficult
to speak with perfect strangers about personal aspects of their lives such as their course choices and, in particular, their literacy levels. Chapter Five relates the voice of one participant feeling very uncomfortable when expected to approach the administrative arm of the tertiary institution to *tell my story*, a method of communicating considered by some to be culturally inappropriate in Indigenous society. The comment was made that:

*I didn’t know anybody. I had difficulty explaining myself to them.*

Sheldon’s (1997) confirmation of this inappropriateness is mentioned in Chapter Five whilst recalling the *how to communicate* protocols in community-based Indigenous society:

*Too much eye contact makes the patient feel as if they are being judged…there is a tendency to talk side by side* (page 7).

Trudgen (1983), likewise points out that asking questions is considered bad manners in Aboriginal society. He points out one notable, and significant, communication difference between the two cultures:

*Aboriginal people have been waiting for the Western society to come and teach them the foundation laws of our society, but Western education sits and waits for the people to come and ask for the information they want* (1983, p.21).

This identification that there could be a communication issue is supported by Philpot (1990) who asserts that difference between cultures can create stress on both sides which acts as a barrier to making positive adjustment, causing the response to be one of reaction rather than adjusting. This reaction will be further discussed in the next section.

As explained in the previous section, the early days of the *arriving* stage is fraught with both minor and major administrative issues for most of the students affecting them to varying degrees of discomfort. In some cases, the effect lasts well into the next stage of their learning journey, the *surviving* stage. The student arrives with their cultural perspective and *ways of doing*. They are immediately confronted by the unique *ways of doing* of tertiary institutions. This familiarisation process of understanding institutional protocols and mores seems to be difficult to navigate. At this stage of their journey, the *surviving* stage, the participants are starting to appreciate the level of personal commitment involved in participating in their course and begin reflecting on the
reasons behind the miscommunication that has occurred between them and the institution. Examples include students realising that they have been enrolled in an inappropriate course for their level of qualifications and experience and, in another instance, students having to withdraw from some of their units of study because of a failure to completely comprehend the information given at the time of enrolment (*The person I spoke to spoke really fast and I did not really understand...*). This exasperating environment continues to produce feelings of frustration and disappointment during the surviving stage.

Participants continue to refer to this feeling of helplessness with respect to various aspects of the enrolment process. In many instances it involved criticism that they either did not receive consistent and reliable advice, or that the institution’s administrative procedures appeared not to be empathetic to their needs. Some students used the word ‘incompetence’ in their judgemental statements, a common reaction to frustration. Evidence showed through in such comments as:

*It took three weeks after uni started for admin to finalise my enrolment, so I didn’t have a password and so couldn’t use (online platform) or the computers. I have no idea why it happened but it seems to be quite common. It really added to my stress as a new student... in a strange environment.*

Another participant expressed the difficulty she had with a degree of amazement and a hint of exasperation in her Voice:

*A problem I also had – well, you know the benefit of paying the $500 (fees) before the due date, well I was sent a bill just the other day saying no fees had been paid [and she had done so] and so now I have to go to administration about that...I have receipts, but again, I have no idea why it happened. I just have to get onto them again.*

While yet another participant remarked:

*I did at one stage this semester say I’m over this with study and I just felt like I couldn’t see the light and it was mostly because of the false promise that was made. I just felt like I was sick of fighting. I just want to study my degree and move on.*

All three institutions in this study were criticised for having a confusing enrolment process including having too much information and too much detail with too little practical advice.

With regards to student dissatisfaction with administrative procedures, two main administrative issues appear to be the main cause of upset. In the first instance, their actual unit or subject
enrolment caused much anxiety. Then other issues that seriously concerned the students were connected with how to enrol correctly so that their subjects aligned with completing their course requirements, how to successfully enrol through the administrative system and how to interpret the timetable and find their lecture rooms on the right day. It seems that this process is complicated by the students’ belief that they do not receive consistently correct advice. One such example is a young male student who brought his family with him to campus. His initial fears were confirmed in the first week:

_I had a whole lot of stuff on my plate. I can see now that I needed someone to show me what it was all about. I needed someone who would understand me. My family were all upset at the changes and so was I really… I couldn’t find my way around. I went from desk to desk and building to building and finally got a person who really helped me… You feel like it is so different you don’t know where to start… He worked with me on all the things I had to do. Like getting on the computer. Being able to work out the lecture rooms to go to… Working out how to make sense of the timetable was really hard._

Secondly, the timetabling of their units or subjects is of major concern mainly associated with how these link with other responsibilities in their lives i.e. work, children, type of accommodation, transport available going to and fro from home, cultural obligations, carer responsibilities, hospital or doctor appointments. One female, community-based student related the story of her fears concerning the accommodation in her first year at the Indigenous-focused institution. As there were no ensuites to the rooms, the women had to go out in pairs to the bathroom at night (they woke each other up). This going outside of the room at night frightened her. She held the belief (unconfirmed) that there had been an assault there _a while ago_. She used the words _inconvenient_ and _anxious_ when relating her story. She believes that the bathrooms were not cleaned (unconfirmed) and that, as a result, she caught scabies from the bathrooms. _I’m anxious during the day_ (at the workshop). She then compared the accommodation in which she was staying in another regional town, where her current studies were based. Whilst it was _a better study environment_, the main point she wanted to make during the interview was that:

_We’re studying health and we can’t be provided with healthy accommodation._

The practicalities of study and the study environment appear at this point in their journey to be the main issue for students. One example of their responses:

_I have major transport problems. I can’t get to class any earlier than 9am because I have to walk my children to school and then catch two buses to
campus and often it is later than 9am. And, in the afternoons, I worry about the children getting home from school so on my uni days, I have to get [a relative] to pick them up. And she gets to have to walk there….It’s not easy, you know. All this organising. I just feel sometimes that all I do is worry about things that are not to do with my study but in a way, they are…I have to tell you that sometimes it has just got too much for me…I felt like giving it all up but I’m still here I am and that is all that matters [when asked to explain what she meant]. I keep remembering in the front of my head that I want to be a role model for my kids. (Mother of four now in her third year of study)

Other issues raised included the poor level of availability of student counsellors and the confusion regarding where to go for what advice. Participants noted the high level of reliance on paperwork in an age when online information and action is supposed to be available. One institution was criticised for the fact that there were across-faculty differences with regards to Indigenous support and almost non-existent support for external students, in particular Indigenous students, as relevant to this particular study.

One female student, aged 36, from a regional community, had moved to a larger urban centre to study and had gained entry to a degree course through Mature Age Entry. When asked whether she had experienced any difficulties since starting the course, she answered in the affirmative, stating:

I really felt proud that I had arrived in my course. I had to put my family through a lot just to get here. But it all went wrong soon after in the first semester. (When asked to explain what she meant by this) I had to pull out of several subjects due to lack of support during my enrolment. I really feel that I was let down when I enrolled as I had no idea if I was in the right course for me and you know, I wasn’t in the right course and then I couldn’t do the units I wanted to do because it was the wrong semester for those subjects. I was just so confused with it all. The person I talked to spoke really fast and I did not really understand when I signed the paperwork and now I have wasted some of my time here.

Similar sentiments were received from other participants who described themselves as frustrated with the system. They interpreted their frustrations as being due to an intercultural communication issue and a lack of support with comments such as I did not really understand and I was just so confused with it all.
Students consistently reported feeling helpless and ignored. This led to anger and frustration, as felt by this first year student from a remote area who commented that:

…they should be accountable for the advice that they’ve given me. It’s not relevant to my goals and they’ve got me doing what is not the right thing. I will make it an issue, like, I will make sure that they listen to me and not cause me more sorry business.

Such stories from the participants are many and varied. Similar to the above example, many Indigenous students interviewed for this study voiced strong concern that the institutional information provided to them on enrolment failed, as in the case mentioned above, to provide enough information for them to make an informed choice on their study program. Prebble et al (2004) identifies this as one of the major academic needs of all students and identifies it as a major factor associated with the likelihood, or otherwise, of the student to continue in the course. It is closely aligned with institutional practices that aid integration (Prebble et al, 2004).

In summary, many students remain unhappy about the administration of their course of study during this surviving stage of their journey. Initial enrolment issues and frustrations, included previously in Chapter Five, provide ample evidence of the depth of this continuing problem. It is interesting to note that some students appear to keep returning to this subject and using it as a source of frustration even when the matter has since been resolved but other issues have taken its place. An example of this could be the following male student from a nearby regional centre:

I really couldn’t make my way in all this. You know what it’s like. You just don’t want to get up in the morning. The bus travel costs money you haven’t got. You still haven’t sorted out the timetable, I didn’t know where to go on most of the days I went to uni. I had to ask at the window desk in the faculty office because it seemed different all the time. I was starting to get behind but I wasn’t sure what it was I was getting behind in! …I felt like giving it all up…things really got on top of me.

In all participant comments where there were minimal or zero references to issues with administrative practices, the students were enrolled in the Indigenous-focused institution. Comments such as the following were more the norm for this group of study participants:

I’m really happy at ___. Being an Indigenous institute they’re very culturally sensitive. When I first went to workshops, I loved it. Wouldn’t have stuck it at ___ but ___ (Indigenous institute) was different. I haven’t seen the same atmosphere in tertiary institutions over there. a Queensland student)

Similarly, another student noted:

They treat people as if they’re real people, special.
6.3.2 Academic

The world of academia lends itself to a myriad of stressful experiences for the neophyte student viewing the institutional processes and procedures from another worldview. Like many students in their first semester, one participant in this study, a male in his mid-40’s with a number of years of employment experience, reacted with panic when undertaking his first assignment. He recalls suffering extreme anxiety at the thought of doing it. Whilst initially panicking at the amount of work involved in the assignment, his stress prevented him from actually starting it. What he did not realise was that it was a double credit point unit instead of a standard unit and that, because of this, students had been given more time to complete the unit. To his detriment he had not comprehended the full facts associated with the assignment:

_I was really freaked out. I went to start this assignment and then I saw that there was a lot to do. It didn’t seem so much when we had talked about it back at the workshop. I had to go and talk to people in my community and write their stories down on the computer. I didn’t really know how I was going to do this when I didn’t have a computer at my home and so I was really worried. I went to the Arts Centre and they said I could use their computer if I needed to but by then I was really behind and my lecturer was ringing me and asking for bits of my assignment and I hadn’t got started and then I thought that this is all too hard really. It seemed OK at the workshop but once I got home I didn’t feel OK about it then... and there was the issue of not being able to talk to family that I was going to talk with ...coz of the ceremony...they were all away from the community and when I got back they were gone to ____ and I didn’t know when they would be back and...things really got on top of me._

From this student’s perspective, there are more issues involved than just a lack of understanding of the assignment parameters. They began mounting up once he returned to his community and, as can be seen from his description of events, there were just too many issues for him to manage. One appears to be his lack of preparation for commencing the assignment. Further issues adding to this were concerning the lack of appropriate facilities available on his community and his low level of confidence in communicating with his lecturer. Coupled with these issues was the anxiety produced as a result of realising, upon returning from study, that his support network had moved away for an indefinite period of time. He was not confident in his ability to cope with all of these stressors at the one time. This perspective is typical of participants at the surviving stage of the learning journey. The next section will investigate if other students experienced similar issues regarding academic requirements.
6.3.2.1 Study Skills

A reasonable knowledge of English literacy is essential for a smooth academic transition to successful tertiary study. At this level of study, literacy includes academic writing skills in critical thinking, academic reading and writing, and information and computer literacy as well as personal organisational skills required to meet deadlines and manage multiple demands. It is widely acknowledged that the progress of Indigenous students is sometime limited because of their level of English literacy skills on entering tertiary studies. Institutions now have available tertiary enabling programs.

These programs prepare students for higher levels of study. One student interviewed for this study was both an Indigenous student and a part-time employee of the tertiary institution and her opinion is that Indigenous students are doomed to fail if they do not complete a VET Certificate III or IV program prior to embarking on a undergraduate degree program. She mentioned Aged Care as a pre-requisite for the nursing degree. When questioned about this viewpoint, she commented that the students have to get the study skills and science background otherwise they are set up, meaning that suitable academic preparation pre-empts them facing unnecessary anxiety at the beginning of their course as a result of which they are more likely to withdraw or fail. The participants in this study strongly expressed the view that academic support in study skills was necessary. They seemed ambiguous when asked whether it was needed so much for the skills itself or for the raising of self esteem that improvement in such skills brings. Perhaps it is a combination of both as this example shows:

I think you need to hang out the message. The message that you have a background in school that said you are dumb. Not that you are dumb. I realise that now. But that you just think you are. Because you just couldn’t get the hang of it at school. Once you start failing in school then that’s it. There’s no turning back. So hang out the message and tell them that the system has failed you and you need to make a new start. That’s what I did... I said I need a new start. I told them I’m here to make a new start... I knew there must be things I don’t know about writing and reading and what libraries are for. So I went to ...and learnt them. I found out from ... that I could have a tutor so I got myself a tutor and he explained lots of things and ...enrolled me in some short courses at uni to learn the things I didn’t

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32 The Tertiary Enabling Program gives students the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge they will need for successful achievements in tertiary studies. It is suitable for students who wish to enrol in study at a diploma or degree level but who have not achieved an adequate Tertiary Entrance Rank and/or lack the confidence to achieve academically. Successful completion of the program will allow students to meet the minimum entry requirements for most VET Diplomas and Higher Education Bachelors Degrees. For example: http://eagle.ntu.edu.au/ntu/apps/coursere.nsf/P_Course_Select/C7D06219C169B874692572AB004C9B73?OpenDocument
Some students were participating in an identified mentor program at their institution and generally found this very useful in having a contact person to go to when they needed assistance. One Darwin-based female student referred to her mentor as:

*Much younger than me but we just clicked...she is an old soul I think...gorgeous person; and We got on...we support each other.*

This student identified that improving her study skills was the first priority and she felt *very grateful* to the tutor/mentor for the improvement in both her skills and her belief in herself. Another student, a young male from Qld, referred to his tutor/mentor as being able to:

*Make sense (for me) of what’s being said.*

This confirms one of Fiedler’s (2004) factors essential to student retention and success at Curtin University of Technology: *access to tutors.*

How and where the interaction occurs between the tutor/mentor and the student and, more holistically, the appropriateness of the overall study environment of the tertiary institution were topics raised by many participants in this study. Student reaction to this issue will be the focus of the next section.

### 6.3.2 Pedagogy and environment

By this time in their study journey the students are beginning to respond to the anxiety and the feeling of helplessness and seek ways to address and resolve the matters to hand. Some show a tendency to depend on their tutor or mentor and others on family and peer support for advice. However there are continuing academic issues with which they are coming to terms and they find out that the answers cannot always be found within their current support system.

Additionally, issues continuing to cause incidents are being linked to a cultural aspect of their lives. For instance, a few students commented on the very Western-focused curriculum at their institution with very little reference to Indigenous practices (*There is (limited) examples about Indigenous knowledge or situations*). One student from the Kimberley commented that:

*...they could do better...bring in more cultural stuff to the course...they try but there is just so much... that could be included.*
Other students expressed discomfort answering questions or presenting assignments anywhere but in small group situations. One female student presented what was the typical reaction to the question on how she prefers to learn:

...in small groups and one-on-one tutorials. That’s my preferred way to learn and answer questions. Too much shame-job in big group. Too many people you don’t know.

Students identified that they felt uncomfortable sitting with large groups of students in windowless lecture theatres. At all but the Indigenous-focused institution, they strongly protested at the small number of Indigenous academic lecturers. Comments such as the following supported this view:

We feel better when we are all the same colour; and
Should have an ATSI [student abbreviation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] lecturer in class.

Participants preferred to work where the practical basis for knowledge sharing was in small groups. This is consistent with Henderson (2001) who observed that there is a potential for mismatch between Australian Indigenous methodologies of teaching and understanding and the traditional Western ways of teaching. One example cited by Henderson (2001), where a student’s response may be misinterpreted, is the asking of “why” questions. According to Henderson (2001, p4), this Westernised teaching and learning strategy is not incorporated into the more traditional Indigenous teaching practices.

Another issue previously mentioned briefly is the concept of Time, a focus in the next section.

6.3.2.3 Time management
The concept of time and how we manage our time is not specifically an academic issue but is closely related to academia due to its link with personal organisation and submission of assignments. It is a relevant issue at this point because it can be viewed from different cultural perspectives. As one student comments:

The changing of one world to another is for many English as a Second language or English as a Foreign language a confusing aspect of tertiary study. Such as turning up on time is somewhat a western aspect yet turning up when culturally appropriate is one method that is not considered. (Male Indigenous student, external and Sydney-based)

Berndt & Berndt (1988) refer to an alternative cultural perspective on the concept of time in terms of oral stories from traditional Aboriginal society. Culturally, Aboriginal society uses time
in a less tense or speed-oriented way than in an industrialised setting and so the transposition from an oral to a written tradition is taken seriously, with lingering appreciation and expansive comments. Participants in the study mentioned positive outcomes from the implementation of this more traditional approach, and appreciation of, time. They were effusive in their comments about how one of the Case Study sites, the Indigenous-focused institution, appeared to have a relaxed approach to learning. When this was investigated through further questions requiring elaboration, the students referred to the fact that the institution (as they perceived it) had given them time. Time was given to grasp understanding, time to discuss concepts with their peers and time to complete work. This was acceptable practice from the process of enrolling through to developing an understanding of concepts in class. It was a practice seemingly embedded in this specific institution’s practice demonstrating an underlying respect for the Indigenous way of doing. One female student from Alice Springs expanded her views on this:

*Lots of places don’t allow for questions and questioning but [institution] allows time; good two way understanding is promoted and supported and really forms a part of the uni life. Students are given time. Much of the study is hands-on too – practical - good for indigenous people.*

It is worthwhile noting that this need for time, for working at one’s own pace in the completion of work, was supported by students in the Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP), James Cook University. Following student evaluation interviews, the highest rating feature of RATEP was, *being able to proceed at one’s own pace* (Henderson, 2001).

However, participants appear reticent, perhaps a little frightened, to discuss this topic. Whilst focusing on the difference between the Indigenous approach to the concept of Time and the more Western institutionalised approach to Time with its associated deadlines and late penalties, it was acknowledged by many participants that the two different approaches could not stay apart for the whole of their learning journey and that eventually the Indigenous student would need to be able to manage the expectations of the institution. A student summarises the feelings of the majority when she says:

*Making the time for assignments and topic tests is difficult. It really stresses me out. It goes against how I feel and what is right with the world for me....Managing myself so that I manage the time to get things done is really hard because I don’t have enough sleep. It is really hard like that.*
6.3.2.4 Academic staff friendliness

Whilst this is not an academic issue from the view of the student, for the organisation of this thesis, this issue is placed here because it relates to how the academic staff are viewed by the students. Approachability of staff and culturally sensitive teacher attitudes are extremely important issues in relation to tertiary level attrition and retention (Fielder, 2004, p.19). The term *staff friendliness* is mentioned by students in this study as a major concern or irritation if interactions do not go well, and as a positive benefit if an easy, harmonious relationship develops between student and lecturing staff. The students appear to gauge quickly who is likely to assist them and who is likely to be difficult to get to know or communicate with. Quite negative statements like the following show the potential for a student to feel that they are not supported or cannot go anywhere for assistance:

*You know he’ll never be in his office; and*

*The door to his office is always closed so I don’t bother, he really doesn’t want to know students.*

In other instances, though, the open door policy of some staff is mentioned as being very welcoming.

Reference to staff matters in this study is often answered with a comment by the students, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, concerning the limited number of Indigenous academic staff on campus. At two case study sites the students were critical of the very Western curriculum with limited input from either Indigenous lecturers or Indigenous issues. As one participant summarised:

*As an Indigenous person working on remote communities, I find it difficult to understand why there is not more examples about Indigenous knowledge or situations in my course. It is very Western-oriented, even the questions for the essays and exams. But the students are preparing to work, mostly, in the Northern Territory and so we should be able to think of examples from all areas...Perhaps it is because we don’t have many Indigenous lecturers. I have an Indigenous tutor but not many lecturers. Only one this year I think... I do have a comment to make about staff in our course. Sometimes people think they are Aboriginal and they’re not... Aboriginalism is a term we use for those people.*

Similarly, another female student, an experienced professional in her own right who had entered tertiary studies to get the qualification to back her many years of experience, lamented the fact that in her program there were very few Indigenous lecturers. Mostly she felt they were welcomed as guest lecturers by the institutions but did not seem to have permanent positions.
This situation was not the case at the Indigenous-focused institution which employs a majority of Indigenous staff.

This now concludes a brief look at the various academic issues still prevalent in the experiences of the participants in this study. It should be noted that during the surviving stage the participants are changing in the depth of their awareness of the issues and their willingness to reflect and consider options compared to when they first started (the arriving stage). The next section of this chapter will focus on the personal issues pertinent to the surviving stage of the journey.

6.3.3 Personal Issues
After administrative and academic issues of concern, descriptions of incidents related to personal issues dominate the participants’ comments and their anxiety is notable. For example, one student in his mid-30’s, shared that he felt very confused:

I’d never been to places like this…I felt like I was running around all the time, not sure of anything... I didn’t know what to think.

This is not a new phenomenon in the study of retention and attrition at tertiary level study. Fisher and Hood (1987, cited in McInnis et al, 2000, p.34) found that irrespective of background, all tertiary students showed evidence of raised psychological disturbance in the first few months. Much of the small body of VET research on non-completion identifies personal factors beyond the control of the vocational college as reasons for the exodus. Cohen and Brawer (1996), for example, cite evidence that:

The reasons why students drop out are quite varied, but, in general, most of them are related to situations beyond the college’s control. (p.63)

This is supported in a recent (2003) Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (Research Report 40) where it was found that Indigenous students reported conflict between study and caring for children or other family members, as well as financial difficulties, more often than other students. Foley (1996) also found, in his study concerning perspectives on effective student support for Indigenous students in a tertiary institution, that 85% of the students interviewed, who had discontinued studies, stated that it was not their lack of academic ability rather it was their personal or situational problems that were the catalyst for the degeneration of their grades and subsequent withdrawal. Whilst this study supports such a conclusion to some degree,
evidence would suggest that, again, factors are intertwined and explanations not as clear cut as they seem. The next section will look at several of these.

6.3.3 Feeling shame

The study participants invariably felt under pressure time-wise very early in their program of study (*It's hard until you get your head around it – actually having the time to think about it more*). At the commencement of their course, they did not appreciate the actual amount of work involved, what was expected in all the units of study (*I have to work really hard at it...I don’t just do the work and understand it straight away*) and how long it was actually going to take them to complete in years, especially if they were doing it on a part-time basis. Comments such as the following were not uncommon:

*Sometimes I find it a bit overwhelming; and
I’m thinking OK you are just too stupid.*

They only became fully aware of their personal situation once they had gained knowledge and understanding about the tertiary institution, its processes and mores through conversing with each other.

At one of the case study sites, students were not aware that the Tertiary Enabling Program (TEP) into which they had been enrolled actually did not go any way towards their degree. It was a program to bring their skills up to a degree level. Once they grasped the reality of their situation, a few thought that they would have been better doing a VET program as that gave them credit into a degree program and was more practical than the TEP course (*I'm thinking 'Am I doing the right thing?*). One female student, a youthful grandmother in her early 40’s, who made the move from interstate along with her extended family including all that entailed, strongly expressed her disappointment and her feelings of shame concerning her lack of understanding of the system and its impact on her study:

*I feel like I’ve not been given the right information about my study. I came here from Queensland to become a nurse and I thought I was studying my degree. I knew I hadn’t done any study before (she had learnt Health Worker skills on-the-job), but I thought that’s OK I’ll learn about how to study and everyone will help me. I didn’t know that I had to do the TEP before I started my degree and here was I feeling proud of what I was doing and so was my family. Proud of me. But that’s not right. It’s not how it is. I feel let down. I feel really dumb. I’ll be finished it soon and then I can get going. Like I feel that I’m just getting going again! Not right really. I should have had this thing explained a bit better than that.*
This instance of miscommunication between administration staff and the student could be the result of the differing worldviews of the players, and in particular, the differing expectations of the communication between the two parties. It would seem that the institutional representative who was advising this student made the assumption that it would be in her best interests to enrol first in the TEP. This was possibly based on the fact that she came from a remote area in another state and little was perhaps known of her educational background due to incomplete paperwork. However the full implications of studying TEP, such as making the course duration longer, was allegedly not part of their conversation. As a result the student was under the misapprehension that she had begun her planned program of study. Once she realised the actual situation, the student felt ashamed that not only had she misinformed her family about the circumstances of her study program but that she was educationally not up to the standard she had expected.

It is interesting to note that such instances of miscommunication appear to surface in the conversations with the participants on a regular basis. The students often referred to them as *incidents*. They appear to be cyclical in nature along the learning journey with periods of crises followed by periods of calm when things appear to be going well. More will be made of this noted cycle in another chapter.

The next section will consider an aspect of their learning journey that also made the study participants feel a level of personal inadequacy.

### 6.3.3.2 Juggling commitments

Maintaining a study commitment as well as working to sustain financial commitments means students increasingly feel the stress of juggling their time and energy to keep everything in balance into the *surviving* stage:

> *I work 25 hours a week during term time, when I have lectures, Monday to Friday. And when I don’t have lectures I work fulltime.* (Single female student); and

> *It’s a lot of hard work. It gets stressful as I only have evenings to do my assignments.* (Young family man)

Reflective comments (*I have to stay focused. I get very tired*) are commonplace in this study.

Like all tertiary students, Indigenous students experience similar juggling issues in their daily lives. However, they have the added dimension of a cultural commitment, in summary, the
double workload identified by Margaret Weir (2001, p. 17). That is, their lives involve juggling family, study and work commitments in conjunction with the realities of cultural commitments that they may also have. The students have plenty to say about their commitments. In many instances family commitments proved a major area of stress.

One external Indigenous student from Queensland related his frustrations in this way:

*Family and parental commitments: Yet another vital area of importance if one is a sole parent. The onus is totally on you to complete your work and study commitments and parental and family commitments. Without support this can be detrimental to your health, your emotional status... increase your stress levels to breaking point... and your children resenting you going further with education... putting study first and not them.*

Whilst a female student, regionally-based, mother of five, had this to say:

*Family commitments: we are all too familiar with these. Unless you come from a family that understands the pressures and the time you need to put into it... then the further pressure of not being around the family... can be a major load.*

Employment does not always just mean extra stress juggling the hours of paid work with academic pursuits. The extra stress can also come from within the workplace itself. One male external student living in Sydney, commented that if you are studying then the workplace may view this as the individual learn[ing] too much and feel threatened that the student, their employee may opt out to a better situation. He centres this comment around whether the workplace is mature enough to see this as part of employment in general, but he obviously has had situations arise, as he continues on to say:

*For some, being educated is a threat as they can keep you in the dark somewhat like a mushroom hoping you will not be educated in your rights and stand up strong and self righteous. Many places will use this against you and many will not support you in your educational prowess if they don’t like the path you have chosen.*

Added to this possible cause of stress in the juggling of their time, as mentioned earlier, the Indigenous student may also have cultural commitments to fit into their schedule. Cultural commitments and the effect on their study weighed heavily as an issue with some students. As one male external student commented:

*Cultural Commitments: This is one aspect which I believe is not considered enough in relation to Aboriginal and Islander people. Whilst living in Darwin and Alice Springs I have seen many leave study due to having to take out time for cultural issues and have a hatched (his word) educational history. For Indigenous people we are faced with the aspect of such things as ‘Sorry Business’ which can be for a minimum of three months at*
a time. And in this time it is disrespectful to leave the community and the ‘Sorry Business’ camp until all is done.

Research shows that juggling work and study is the most commonly nominated, major area of difficulty across all students (Hillman, 2003) at 26%, with a greater proportion of university students than TAFE students reporting that they had difficulty juggling work and study commitments (50% compared to 35%). The Euro Student 2000 study highlights the contrasts between Australian and European students:

- 80% of Australian students were employed which is high by comparison to the employment rate in Europe, which ranged from 48% in France to 77% in the Netherlands,
- Australian students received 51% of their total income from employment which is at the upper end of the range found in Europe, which extended from 24% in Belgium to 54% in Austria.

Indigenous students reported conflict between study and caring for children or other family members, as well as financial difficulties, more often than non-Indigenous students (Hillman, 2003). One of the psychological effects of this overwhelming feeling of not coping is the sense of shame associated with the whole experience. Such a reaction was mentioned by participants in this study.

6.3.3.3 Financial concerns
After administrative and academic issues, participants in the study cited transport issues, childcare and all the complexities of responsibilities associated with childcare, family issues and cultural commitments as being major causes of anxiety. However, the issue given greatest prominence, and which dominated most conversations, were all the matters associated with finance. The basis of many critical incidents involves students trying to keep themselves afloat financially throughout the term or length of the course. In terms of difficulties faced during their first year of tertiary study, research shows that students from remote or isolated location backgrounds nominated paying fees or other study-related costs as their main source of difficulty more often than other students (Hillman, 2003). This is also consistent with Foley’s (1996) results in his Australian study which showed that three distinct areas of support are required by Indigenous students: housekeeping skills, life skills and financial skills.
Costs associated with study, text books, childcare, rent, transport, food and clothes were mentioned on many occasions by the study participants. Being of mature age, in the main, and having previously been employed in the health sector, the issue of established financial commitments and family responsibilities was of concern. The issue of working to supply these basics and the effect of this on study and how much time was left after all of these needs were met was often referred to and included as a high stressor in the process of finding a balance between personal responsibilities and personal aspirations.

Participants referred to recurring instances when financial concerns have forced them to reconsider their enrolment. Not surprisingly, 86% of participants in this study listed financial concerns as looming large in their areas of difficulty and an area where they have sought support at some stage during their course. Their stories are similar. One student, a 27 year old male in his third semester of a degree, studying externally from interstate, summed up the general feelings of many of the students interviewed:

*The financial support that is offered for one is a catch 22 situation if you are in the low income bracket. For most of us we have to work to survive so if we need or would like to study to get a better life chance and or educational prospects so for this group we are put in a catch 22. If we have to work full time and if we want to study, to be eligible for any financial assistance we have to fulfil 3 units as a base for getting financial support. This pressure along with work and family commitments is a deterrent in itself. Let alone the prospects of when you have finalised the study, employment in your area may have changed drastically and your position may be obsolete. The other deterrent would be the financial debt of HECS debt and taxes.*

The catch 22 comment was explained further by this student as meaning he had to work almost full-time to *survive* in order to get *a better life chance* but to be eligible for study assistance the student had to be enrolled in a greater than half load and so this added to the pressure. When he added work commitments, study load and family commitments together, and this included cultural commitments to his community, he felt enormous *pressure* that he considered was a *deterrent in itself* from studying and trying to improve himself. Again the cultural influence is an additional aspect to the life of an Indigenous student.

American studies (Cabrera, Nora & Castenada, 1992) found that there were both tangible effects of student finances, i.e. whether the student received governmental financial assistance or not, and intangible effects, i.e. the extent to which students assessed their financial needs as being
met from financial aid and other sources, on student persistence. Tangible and intangible components were found to be intertwined with strong indirect effects on persistence in their study (McInnis et al, 2000, p.35). The participants in this study were certainly concerned with both the tangible and intangible effects of student finances. Financial concerns certainly dominated conversations as participants in the study complained that the limited Governmental support, high rental market and cost of living in the Northern Territory meant they had to find employment but if they did so, this meant it had to fit around workshops and lecture times and so it usually happened that they worked after hours in the evening. If they were dependent on public transport this meant work hours had to fit the last bus time and so on. As a result, many things had to be juggled.

The next section will examine additional issue that students had to manage and which were potential underlying causes of incidents that arose over the course of the learning journey.

6.3.3.4 Transport

In this study, several students cited transport as an issue for them and one that took up a lot of their non-studying time. When they were questioned further on this, it was a multi-faceted problem. In some cases it was simply that as they did not understand the system for catching buses. In other instances, the transport to their study site involved several bus journeys both to and from the institution and this seemed very time-consuming and they often missed the morning bus that would get them to the site on time. This spilled over into a financial issue as they did not know about weekly/monthly passes and often ran out of money by the end of the week/month and so couldn’t afford to travel on public transport.

Other students, in particular VET students, found their course was delivered, in the main, at a campus other than the main one, where some were living on-site, but without institution-supplied transport between the two campuses although this used to be available. Students were now expected to make their own way between campuses. This caused a lot of angst as the trip was quite lengthy due to the route taken by the bus and on some shifts it again involved two bus trips one way. This issue will be referred to in a later chapter concerning implications for institutions. Other issues of significance will form the basis of the rest of this section.
6.3.3.5  **Feelings of Isolation**

Whilst the above-mentioned issue of significance is of a practical nature, in the main, other issues mentioned were more of a psychological nature. One example of this is the feeling of being alone or isolated which were a common occurrence:

> I came here, and the whole semester I was an absolute mess- I was crying all the time, making silly decisions and wanting to go home.

The participant’s fear of failure has been previously mentioned (*I am here for my family...I understand what obligations I have to my community...I won’t let them down*) or shame (*I feel let down...I feel really dumb*). In many instances the stressor causing these feelings of inadequacy came from a family crisis, or several, as is often the case. Descriptions of family issues of significance often involved comments such as:

> All of a sudden my world came crashing down; and
> I was really devastated.

The outcome of this turbulent period in the learning journey, characterised as psychological effects in the form of *misfitting, degrading and grieving* (Nicholson 1990 p.90), results in not only a specific feeling of aloneness and sadness but a general one of fear itself. Some students expressed fear concerning loss of identity:

> …now I must work and study with people I haven’t known before. How will this change me...?

The issue of personal control over their lives (*…I really value my cultural heritage...*), and especially the planning of the learning experience, is relevant to the present study. The participants in this study are all eager to enter tertiary study with motivation grounded in the image that they have some form of control over their situation. As explained in earlier sections, they each have a strong, personal reason for wishing to commence the journey. In most cases, this reason is steeped in their cultural background and the feeling that they have control of their destiny. In the process of new learning, self reflection and gaining in understanding about themselves, participants acknowledge that they felt that they were changing. This added to their feeling of isolation and aloneness.

This fear proved a major cause for concern for many of the participants. Prior to embarking on their learning journey many of the students had been employed as Health Workers and so leaving that safer environment and entering one where the protocols and social mores were mostly
unknown meant they needed to immerse themselves in the institutional environment, both socially and academically, in order to survive. Weir (2001) refers to this as participants devising adaptive actions that result in additional workloads and mental and emotional stress (p.354). One single female student from a regional area was feeling the change in herself at the time of the interview:

*I have many work friends in my home town but now I find myself spending a lot of time with my uni friends as we need to talk about things...it’s really a kind of off-loading...they really understand when I find it hard to do things such as...getting work in on time...pay for everything that has to be paid for. In my home town I feel different now because I have left...isn’t that a strange thing to say. I never thought going to study would do this.*

Another student commented that she found:

*I get really stressful seeing where you fit in.*

Summing up, participants in the study continue to feel isolated at this point in their journey. They express the isolation in terms of aloneness, feeling outside everyone else and I feel crying inside. Students reveal many instances when they felt real pain of separation, pain of being away from their loved ones and their Indigenous homeland. However, at the surviving stage they are beginning to reflect at a deeper level and work at resolving some of their issues utilising informal learning strategies such as networking. One student, a young male from a regional town, reveals

*I came here wanting to get on with it...I quickly realised that I didn’t have my friends there for me...I really needed them when I was on my own...weekends are really bad...so I looked for help...I went and found them... other Indigenous students, even though I didn’t know them before I came here, we have an understanding... I know them now...we support each other in class and outside too. They’re my brothers and I feel real support from them. I’m beginning to like being here now. We do lots of fun things together. I have support that is very important to me...from my Indigenous friends here.*

Another student, a young female, has a slightly different strategy:

*Family is very important to me. I am here for my family and my people. I understand what obligations I have to my community and I won’t let them down. So when I feel alone, I make like I have real family here and go and visit my Indigenous relatives, even though I am not as close to them, I make them my family while I am here. I have to have someone to spend time with...I remember in one of my classes a girl came and asked me if she knew my mother from ___ [remote community]. I did and so we became friends... It’s interesting to think about this...about getting people together. (When*
As can be demonstrated, enough time has passed by the surviving stage of the journey for issues to have arisen both on site where they are studying and back on the community with respect to their family. There are many balls to juggle in their life and in some instances, matters can become so serious that their only option seems to be to withdraw or take leave from the course. The escalating issues of community family violence, substance abuse and the high rate of incarceration (four times the national rate) of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory (Jackson & Hardy, 2010) means that these issues affected many of the participants in the study several times during their learning journey. They seemed to be coping with more than a double workload (Weir, 2001, p. 17). How they managed to take control of their learning experience and stay engaged in their study is the second half of this chapter.

6.3.3.6 Cultural difference
Before looking more closely at how the students manage to cope, an issue was raised by one student that could well be described as cultural in nature. Because it was very personal to her it is mentioned under the heading of Personal Issues. The student, a young, single Indigenous woman, indicated that she had found the commencement of her course difficult because there was different people from different places. Whilst wanting to attend the Indigenous-focused institution because of its Indigenous origins and focus, she found that the presence of so many Indigenous people from different groups and different parts of the country caused her difficulties. She felt intimidated and restless and longing for home.

*I just felt like uncomfortable. I’m not sure really why...perhaps because I was expecting it to be much better. More grouped I guess. But I think that the problem is within me, not what they were doing.*

Perhaps it was simply homesickness or her overwhelming sense of isolation but this personal sense of discomfort and claustrophobia was mentioned several times by her. Perhaps, as an Indigenous researcher wrote (Cook, 2004, p.2) *something cultural is going on.* Understanding her reservations would require a deeper insight into the cultural implications for her but, no matter the cause, it was certainly a troubling aspect of the student’s experience and links into the sense of ‘place’ that some students found overwhelming during their learning journey.
6.3.3.7 Sense of ‘place’

*Place* is an interesting concept as it can be as much in the mind as in a physical setting. Psychologically it can be a place to where one withdraws in order to find safety or peace. The physical setting was referred to by a student in the previous chapter concerning the Indigenous-focused institution as being *peaceful (here), lots of grass and trees; when you feel good and whole, then you can study more*. As can be seen from his comment, there is a strong link between the physical aspect of a place and the spiritual aspects. But it was not always a positive experience for students when there was not a comfortable balance between the two concepts.

During conversation with several of the study participants there were frequent references to the fact that the ‘place’ or ‘set up’ was not quite ‘right’ culturally and there was a level of discomfort associated with this. One student, an Indigenous male, now a professional living in Sydney, places a high degree of importance on the institution paying respect to Indigenous cultural practices when he states:

*Payback and the spiritual side of Indigenous people is too readily ignored in view of a Western ideological world view. If there are spiritual issues…they need to be discussed…without fear of being locked up in a mental institution if (it) is seen as a mental health issue and not as a spiritual cultural issue.*

He goes on to say that institutions fail to consider the issue of *having two arch rival community members in the same room or taboo kinships…in-law taboo relationships* between students. As this student is recalling, because of the current theories concerning the nature of tertiary learning, often students are placed in small groups for tutorials or assessment work. However, as can be seen from his comments, this can be the cause of some anxiety to more culturally traditional Indigenous students.

In other cases, however, small groups can be very supportive and provide just the right ‘place’ for students to support each other. One example of a student being very positive concerning small group work was a remote-based student who travelled a long distance to enrol and study in the Indigenous-focused institution. He relates how the group quickly got to know each other, appreciating the uniqueness of the moment, and perhaps ‘place’:

*We are all aware that this is a unique experience in a unique institution and we support each other in the group as we get to know each other. There is a cultural basis to our relationship that is a positive thing to start with.*
The need for a Sense of Place was identified early in the study by the students and continued to recur during the data collection phases. Students seemed to be searching for a place to settle, a place to identify as related to them and where they can feel culturally safe. A comparison between two Case Study sites showed differences in respect to institutional attempts at creating an Indigenous space. One site had an opening to the outside where the building was surrounded by trees and a few chairs scattered about amongst the natural environment. In the other, students were provided with a space created with a few desks and computers but with no facilities and no access to the outdoors and which was only accessible by walking down a corridor past glass-fronted staff offices. Needless to say this space was rarely used and with little comfort on the part of the student. This little comfort has the potential to increase anxiety and feelings of isolation with respect to the students and provides minimal opportunity for cultural networks to be forged.

The second half of this chapter will look at where there are opportunities for support and will reflect on how the students manage to cope with the incidents as they arise during their learning journey.

### 6.4 Strategies for Learning

To date, the Indigenous students in the study have heeded motivating influences and embarked on their study journey. They have coped with their initial experiences at the institution including, in some instances, an enrolment period fraught with difficulties. By coping, this indicates that learning has taken place. They have attended formal classes or workshops for a few weeks and are now attempting to fully engage with the informal aspects of institutional study such as resolving conflict and incidents. Their determination to continue in the course is examined in this part of the chapter in terms of coping strategies and the informal learning that occurs during this surviving stage.

Initially, early in the learning journey, the study participants cope with the incidents and difficulties that arise by falling back on using known previous experiences and combining this with seeking the knowledge and support of familiar networks, usually family and community members. However these processes sometimes are not enough, for their networks may not have the knowledge or the understanding of the different institutional cultural settings to assist them. This adds to the student’s stress and frustration rather than alleviate it. It is worthwhile noting
that many students do not get past this point of contestation. While it is outside the focus of this study to fully investigate the reasons for attrition by Indigenous students from tertiary programs, it is considered later in terms of further research as an important point to consider. The focus of this study is to hear from the students who remain in the journey about what proved important and critical to ensure their perseverance.

At this point, the surviving stage of the journey, participants come to a better realisation of themselves as Indigenous learners and what they have to do to remain engaged. Informal learning opportunities envelop each critical incident that occurs and participants try a range of coping strategies to remain connected with their journey. One major strategy, networking, is the focus of this stage of the journey and will be discussed in the next section.

6.4.1 Networking
As mentioned above, one significant support strategy mentioned by the participants in the study as being highly successful for them in their early stages of their course was making use of their ties with family and friends or, commonly termed in balanda (Western) culture, networking. As I referred to in the last chapter, amongst the most important influences on the students’ decision to undertake further study was their work colleagues or seniors, their family members, friends and teachers. This section will discuss further the students’ effective learning through interaction, as reflected in their networking and communicating with other people, in particular, their face to face interactions with local people in both formal and informal settings.

Networking is a natural process in which people seek information and mutual support from other people when they enter a completely new context. The concept of networking is not new. It is a web of free standing participants cohering through shared values and interests (Lipnack & Stamps, 1986, p.2; Zhang, 2005) and shared needs (Arnott, 1994). Networking is an informal means of accessing information, testing ideas, gaining support, promoting a cause or seeking resources. It is recognised as a normal process in adult education and learning (Cranton, 1996; Shaw, 1999). However, the Indigenous students tended to look, in the main, to their Indigenous family and friends for their networking support (Ford, 2006).
Research clearly demonstrates (Saunders, 1999, Zhang, 2005) that much learning about self-identity and techniques for survival is dependent on interaction with other people. This is particularly significant with respect to Indigenous people as their cultural practices are based on family interconnectedness as referred to by Wadjularbinna Doomadgee, Gungalidda leader, Gulf of Carpentaria, 1996:

*All people with the same skin grouping as my mother are my mothers... They have the right, the same as my mother, to watch over me, to control what I’m doing, to make sure that I do the right thing. It’s an extended family thing... It’s a wonderful secure system.*

This area of support provided by family or community members was clearly identified by study participants. As one female, urban-based student comments:

*Friends and work colleagues are very supportive. They’re interested in my degree and study but I suppose they’re mostly interested in socialising and stuff. If I was to rank them, my friends are not really on my wavelength about studying and usually want to party on all the time, so really my most support comes from my family.*

As already described, in many instances in this study students were motivated to commence studying because a family member had done a course, or the course, before and became a role model for the student to have the courage to take the next step. In some cases, the student had family members employed at the institution and they encouraged the student to enrol. Once enrolled, the student sometimes received positive assistance from family members. A few students had been bought computers for home use by their families so they could do their assignments at home at night. Another student explained how her husband supported her leaving work and commencing study even though they dropped income:

*Because no Abstudy – husband earns just over the limit.*

Similarly, when another female student with family responsibilities was asked where she had sought support, she replied:

*Family members, grandmothers, work friends have been my support. Don’t worry about anything if you have family there.*

There were instances, however, when some students in the study looked for family support but it was not available. A female student in her third year of a degree, aged 41 and a mother of five children, would have liked more family support but she had come from interstate to do the

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33 http://www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/family.cfm
course while all her relatives remained in Queensland. The second year of her course was difficult as one of her sons got into trouble but she was over that now. She explained that she used local support:

*I used my contacts through the school where the kids go; we like it here now. It’s those community contacts through the school that helped me!*

However, some students in this study had too many problems associated with ‘family’ such as arguments, marital break-ups, children getting into trouble and finances out of control. They voiced the opinion that family or relationship problems had a negative effect on their studies and that they had eventually sought help from their institution in order to cope and continue in the course. One student is happy to acknowledge:

*I come from a remote community in Queensland. I could have done my course on my community but I did not want to have to put up with the humbug and sickness…it’s a big problem. It’s too much for me...(some confidential details given about family)... so I sorted it out...and moved my family, my wife and children to Darwin so we could have a bit more peace. Too much humbug and people killing themselves and each other...I’m not too comfortable here as I am away from my country but it is OK for my study.

Participants in this study spoke quite openly of the need for support from both their family and the institution if they were to continue and be successful in their course. Usually the family or Indigenous community support was sought earlier in their course, as indicated elsewhere in this paper, while in most cases it was quite a while before the student learned about support available from the institution for Indigenous students. Apart from drawing on families, some students reached out to friends, usually from the Indigenous community, to help them to overcome an issue or problem that was worrying them at the time. This directly supports the use of the term ‘capital’ for the social exchanges (Stone, 2001) that take place under the institutional circumstances of this study. As a direct result of the social exchanges that occur between two Indigenous students who assist one another through a vexing academic or administrative or even a social problem, the measure of the economic value of the social exchange is greater than just the benefit to each individual. It is of economic benefit to the group of Indigenous students as a whole, even if the whole group is only the two students.

Students at the Indigenous-focused institution seemed to focus on the benefits of being together as a collective and developing a rapport amongst their group for the benefit of their studies. One male student in his mid-30’s, quite a strong communicator during the focus group session, spoke
privately after the session and wanted to relate his views on studying at his institution. He related how he:

*Felt at one with the group when they started together because they were all Indigenous. Not from the same place, of course, and some of us are urban and some are from 'country' but we are learning from each other; and If you don’t learn from other persons especially then you’ve got nothing!*

He went on to say that he had:

*Seen everybody’s views and differences of opinions; and had even Come home talking about it because it was a new experience for him.*

Similarly to Alloway’s study (2004) in which teenagers perceived school to be an ‘unattractive…a less palatable option’ (Alloway, 2004, p.147) if they did not establish a network of friends, this study noted students comments were laced with references to their reliance on friendship and support from their Indigenous peers even if they were not studying at the same institution. Comments such as the following were common when discussing their need or reliance on friends:

*My friends are important to me; and They are someone to communicate with; and They don’t talk over my head.*

And reliance on friends eased the stress for many:

*My grandmother recently passed away and I spent some time with her when I knew she was going soon... My friend _ helped collect the notes and everything from the lectures as I was away for a couple of weeks. You can always pick up your books again but you can’t replace time with family... I was so happy to have such a good friend at this time...*

Likewise, the influence of lecturing and tutoring staff on student success was mentioned during conversations. One very experienced middle-aged, female student in this study felt the improvement of her self esteem was directly related to the links she has with her lecturer:

*I’m hanging in there and I’m feeling better about myself and study-wise because I’m with a lecturer who is fantastic and I feel like I’m learning something again.*

This drawing together of networking links provided the necessary support for students to maintain their motivation and manage incidents as they arose. Through such informal learning approaches the students attempt to resolve the incidents as they occur. In some instances reflection on alternative ways forward challenge their own assumptions and encourage them to
seek ways to understand more broadly the situation in which they find themselves. In so doing the students increase their understanding of the Western cultural institutional milieu. As mentioned earlier, this does lend itself to anxiety concerning a potential change in their worldview. In interviews it was often referred to as surviving through sheer grit and determination:

*I’ve got an inner determination to get there. The greater the negatives against me, the stronger I am.* (Male student, father of four)

### 6.5 Personal Perceptions

Students feel a sense of helplessness when things just do not go right. The stress of actually beginning a course of study when it is so different to anything they have experienced before sometimes means misunderstandings or impatience makes them feel that they have not been treated fairly. In a typical scenario of a critical incident in the academic journey, one student found that her relationship with a lecturer became too difficult and her enrolment in a unit had to be changed. Without going into the details with her, it appears that it was based on a miscommunication:

*I started everything internally but I had a problem with a lecturer and I ended up doing one class externally and that problem was due to the lecturer not reading her emails and it caused her to write me an email that wasn’t quite right.*

The students can get very ‘shamed’ and depressed over these incidents. One male external student in this study commented:

*Being Indigenous and studying at University is somewhat a dead end for many people.*

He obviously felt that the experience did not always succeed in raising personal esteem:

*We Indigenous peoples are in many cases lacking confidence and surety that we can do study. Let alone the linguistical differences, the cultural diversities such as the ontological and epistemological variances.* (Male, external Sydney-based Indigenous student)

Students have a strong sense of what is fair and just, as the following quotation from a student shows:

*It’s disheartening at times. I’ve heard stories about other people who have had promises made to them and they never come through and I think how did you let them get away with it because I like to make people accountable.*
A thought-provoking comment was made by one of the study participants and it opened up a number of issues. One of the urban-based, female, mature-aged students, a mother of four and well advanced into her degree, commented during an interview that:

*Hidden agendas and hidden systems are not there if people understand them.* (When asked what she meant) *Just about having to prepare for assignments or exams and things that people have to actually train themselves for and if you don’t have that in your home or you don’t have it in your friends then you don’t have it and you don’t know what you haven’t got.*

She was then asked when she came to this realisation about the value of education and also that academic skill requires training and putting pressure on oneself to learn the skills. She replied:

*Yeah, well, at first there is no comprehension of any of it. I just didn’t have it. That was the same with my friends too. We just went to school to hang out…we would walk off the school grounds and not think twice about it. A lot of my friends have, not necessarily worked towards a degree, but have progressed in their careers because I think they have realised the same as me you know, like wow, we wasted our time…We have all had to put pressure on ourselves and work out what is needed. Like we didn’t have what was needed to succeed. I have had the support of my husband…and children…because I have spent a lot of time catching up. They call it training I think. Training in the skills to study. That’s what we had to do. Keep going through the difficult times. Getting to find out what you haven’t got.*

This is a good example of the interaction between informal learning, such as reflection, networking and seeking small groups, and motivation. Students consistently commented about how they gradually had to put the pieces together and work out what skills they needed to develop and practice in order to succeed.

One response from a participant when asked about coping with the institutional environment, displays a growing awareness of how they were changing as people and, in this case, how they were communicating with other people:

*I’ve had to learn to be more forward. I flew in from Queensland to do the course and found out that things was different to what I had been told on the phone. I had not really understood what they meant when they called it ‘workshops’. No-one explained what that was all about. But that’s OK. I stuck it out. I just had to learn to think about the questions I had to ask. They didn’t know what was happening in my head, did they?* (Queensland-based student, mother of three, in first year of a degree)
Such significant informal learning through reflection shows a growing awareness of the needs of the Western institutional processes and mores. However, as mentioned earlier, this can be a cause for angst on behalf of the student, since improving in knowledge and understanding can potentially change their worldview. This will be the focus of the next section of this chapter.

6.5.1 Identity transformation

Significant learning about the tertiary study system occurs in students through ongoing interactions with those around them. This interaction is a result of their knowing experience of a new study culture. This knowing is learning (Wenger, 1998) and is an ongoing experience in their daily lives. Participants often indicated in this study that they had a need to feel independent from the institutional support as a means of feeling that they had achieved it themselves. Yet many of them were using available institutional support at the time but did not really want to acknowledge it:

*I try and do as much as I can on my own...this leads to the point where I need assistance...but well down the track.*

Another student, a male student in his early 40’s, who is studying at Higher Education level for the first time after many years of TAFE (his words) studies, stated:

*I was feeling really out of it. I couldn’t work out how to put my ideas on the computer. I’d sit in the support room but nothing would happen. I mucked around a bit, checked my emails, wrote to my friends...and then things got bad. I was getting really behind in getting assignments done and then one of my lecturers had a talk with me at morning tea one day. She asked me how I was going. She said that she’d seen me working in the computer room and wanted to know what I thought of her course she was teaching. I said that I didn’t really know coz I hadn’t yet started any of the work. We talked a bit and she said would I come to her office after class and we could talk about getting me a tutor to help sort out what I had to do and when it was all due. I knew that I could get help from a tutor but it didn’t really mean anything to me until that teacher told me what a difference it would mean to me and how it would just get me started. I didn’t really see myself as in need of a tutor until I got one! It wasn’t really a shame-job after all.*

One other student, a male, 31, on his third attempt to complete the course, had to get help to get the right balance:

*My personal style of studying makes things difficult for me...I take a long time to get through my studies. I don’t want to just produce things...I want to make sense of it all. This time I got help right from the start. I had to get help from a tutor for me to learn that I had to meet the deadlines and just put it in then.*
This growing self-awareness associated with the more formal academic management of learning in tertiary institutions will be referred to later. However, it indicates that a major learning experience occurs at the point where the Indigenous worldview and the institutional worldview meet. The student has to confront how they personally work, how they organise themselves and how this blends with the institutional expectations, if at all. It results in the student having to address his/her way of doing things and work out how to match this with the institutional academic protocols and practices.

Another student identified that he was not able to feel a part of the institution and hence not able to relate to the whole process of study. He felt alien to the experience because his own personal, social life was so rich and fulfilling with his family and friends that he was disappointed with the study experience. It was a very dull experience for him. He was perhaps touching on the notion of having two identities (Allard & Johnson, 2002) or social literacies as they are constructed through social discourses. His disappointment and anxiety about the initial few months of his course can be heard in his words:

   You feel keen, happy, you talk with your family about how great it is that you’re studying, but deep down in your heart, in your very spirit, you feel dead coz it’s not a happy experience. It’s an anxious time really, a scary time, when you’re expecting to find out something bad all the time – like you’ve missed a deadline or an assignment – you can’t understand what is wanted… I did miss a practical too and didn’t know what to do and if I would get a reaction… It’s all so worrying!

Another Voice also indicated that the reality of institutional study was a very different place compared to what she was used to. One female participant, aged in her mid-40’s, well respected in the Indigenous community for her ability to juggle a number of paid and unpaid positions as well as a family, commented that her mother’s country made her feel at peace. When she got too involved with trying to juggle both worlds, and worldviews, she took time out and went there and sat alone and grounded herself in her family and those who went before. She then could face the study again, face the daily task of bridging both worlds:

34 Originally, the term ‘social literacies’ was used to suggest the skills, knowledge and processes for addressing multicultural teaching and learning (Kalantzis and Cope, 1988). The meaning of the phrase has since evolved to encompass widely different concepts, including for example, social ‘competencies’, and/or citizenship education (e.g. Arthur & Davison, 2000). Clearly the discourse around ‘social literacies’ is shifting in response to changing educational policies, both nationally and internationally (Allard & Johnson, 2002)
After some time away, after I have sat with my mothers and talked about old times and what has gone before, I feel I can cope...I can see it from the outside again. When you feel good and whole, then you can study more.

This stress of engaging across two seemingly separate communities of learning and interaction is experienced, and commented on, by many participants in this study. The interesting point is that there seems no one model of engagement with the institution. The participants all felt that they did it their way. The question arises as to how they did it. How did they succeed in getting past the initial, difficult arrival stage when they were experiencing and interacting with two disparate worldviews and travelling along a learning continuum or journey?

Participants frequently referred to their cultural responsibilities as having both a positive and a negative influence on their study journey. The cultural role an Indigenous person plays in their community cannot be underestimated. Whilst tertiary studies place immense demands on the student’s time, from both a personal and academic perspective, their community role, the position they hold within the family group, can have an equally demanding expectation on their time. As mentioned earlier, some view it as being hard to balance. And students are not the only players who are trying to come to grips with the different worldviews in this journey. Institutions are grappling with the challenge of establishing culturally inclusive managerial, administrative and teaching structures and practices that are responsive to the changing demographics (Balatti et al, 2004, p.22) of their students. This will be the focus of a later chapter concerned with implications of this study for institutions.

6.6 Conclusion

I would like to conclude using the voice of one student, a young male student from a regional centre of the Northern Territory:

Being Indigenous and studying at university is somewhat a dead end for many people. The two concepts are wide apart and unlikely to be easily bridged. Many of us fail to get there.

This chapter demonstrates that, as they settle into this surviving stage of their journey, the participants in the study are inundated with administrative, academic and personal issues that
have the potential to overwhelm them with a sense of frustration and helplessness. As research has demonstrated, students:

...unfamiliar with the behaviours and conventions that underpin Western systems ...often find the whole experience disconcerting. (Schwab, 1996, p.13)

But this study shows that students do find a way to cope in the new mono-culture. With a strong resolve to succeed, study participants fall back on informal learning strategies such as interacting with ‘critical’ others and networking as a way to manage the incidents as they arise. Whilst their engagement with both the administrative and academic aspects of tertiary study still produce issues of concern, the growing anxiety at this stage of the journey appears to be related to the fear that, as there is a growing awareness of Western systems and their cultural mores, there is a perceived change in the student’s personal perspective. The more the participant experiences new and different dimensions of human diversity, the more they learn about themselves (Adler, 1975; Zhang, 2005). This growing awareness of potential change in the way they are viewing the world will form the focus of the next chapter. This new learning about themselves and their changing worldview provides a platform for commencement of Chapter Seven, the sustaining stage.
Chapter Seven

Hanging in there

It’s a very powerful experience...to study...it makes you think through your very inner self...it makes you look at yourself and work out what is important...you can’t just drift in your mind any more...you have to decide how you are going to spend your time...who with and why.

(Male student, mid-30s, regionally-based)

7.1 Introduction

When one of the Indigenous students was being interviewed for this study, she committed the time to give a full history of her life to that point. Educationally-speaking it was a patchwork of highs and lows. When asked what had kept her going she answered that when she graduates she vows to make a difference to Indigenous students and commit to a vision that she has for herself. This summarises the case for many of the participants in this study with their underlying sense of commitment and sustainability reflected in many of their answers.

Chapters Five and Six have explored the students’ initial motivating influences as they commenced their learning journey and their first reactions to the institutional environment. Using the voices of the participants in the study, the transitional issues and incidents faced in those early months following enrolment have been highlighted.

Students cope in their new learning situation in various ways. Chapter Six explored their behavioural adjustment that indicated new learning and personal growth as they adapted to the environment. Using their Indigenous cultural networks, they combined informal learning strategies with those support strategies available within the institutional framework. The students have described how the support of this cultural social capital helped them overcome their natural inclination to leave because of the complex institutional worldview that dominates their study environment. Nicholson (1990, p.89) supports this when suggesting that the stress of the early experience can lead to defensive hostility and withdrawn behaviours and acknowledges that leaving altogether may be a perfectly rational response.
Chapters Five and Six complete the description of the *arriving* and *surviving* stages and the participants describe, through examples, the actual experiences and learning that takes place. The description so far portrayed in the previous chapters suggests that what happens during the critical incidents, during the period of contestation when the institutional and the personal world views clash, becomes the foundation for answering the research questions associated with this study. The Voices of the participants describe how the students experience a myriad of incidents predominantly related to miscommunication between institutional staff and themselves around administrative, academic and also personal culturally-connected issues.

The first stage of *arrival* saw the participants experience a period of culture shock amid an escalating number of critical incidents. However, the underlying reasons for wishing to complete a qualification in the first place equips the participant with a strong underlying and intrinsic motivational influence when faced with the myriad of unexpected situations during the next stage of their learning journey, the *surviving* stage.

As a result of coping with these incidents and relying on a series of cultural connections, Chapter Six shows that the students gradually adapt to the expectations of their new learning environment. Through a process of experiencing, reflecting, developing and using social capital both within and without the institution, students gradually grow in confidence, confirming their ability to use their inner strength to overcome the potentially debilitating aspects of early institutional experiences.

In summing up the story depicted by the Voices so far, the participants arrive at the institution at the commencement of their learning journey already members of several communities of practice, the main one being their Indigenous cultural community. Others would include their specifically named community, for instance the Walungurru community, and their family tribe, but for the purpose of this discussion the major influence on the participant is their membership of the Indigenous cultural community of practice. During their interaction with the institution and its staff members, firstly during the *arriving* stage and then later during the *surviving* stage, a response or activity is needed when many of the so-called issues of significance escalate into a critical incident that has the potential to be detrimental to the success of the student’s learning
journey. So the participant seeks support from a member of the community of practice most familiar to them: their Indigenous cultural community of practice.

As shown in Chapter Six, advice is initially sought from their most trusted relationships: Indigenous family and friends. These members of the Indigenous community of practice have the relevant social capital, that is knowledge or experience, which can be imparted to the participant through rational discourse (Mezirow, 1991). The participant now has this knowledge or experience available to them. They put it into practice through a response to the critical incident thus reacting not resisting (Philpot, 1990) and so increase their personal level of social capital. They then have at their disposal an increased awareness of what is going on around them in the institution and are better prepared for the next wave of issues and incidents as they arise.

The journey continues. The critical incidents, or periods of contestation, continue to occur in a seemingly ad hoc arrangement but cover the breadth of tertiary experience from administrative to academic to personal issues. With the networking and interaction on a daily basis with staff members and other students, the participants gradually learn more about the institutional world view or community of practice. In the study, difficulties in inter-cultural communication were directly related to participant belief that there was a general lack of understanding of intercultural knowledge perspectives on the part of the academics within the tertiary education system. Feelings of cultural alienation, whilst voiced as an ongoing concern, was actually alleviated when other Indigenous students were present or within communication contact. Using the strategy of networking, in particular involving contacting Indigenous students or community representatives early in the course of their study program, was of inestimable assistance to the students in coping with the alienating university environments. They increasingly began to trust other students and staff members. In doing so, they are entering the sustaining stage of their journey when they can begin to find their place, or hybrid space between two cultures. As mentioned in Chapter Six, the participant has to address their ways of doing and work out where they fit within the institutional protocols and practices. It takes time, though, and during this time much self-reflection has to occur, the focus of this chapter.
This chapter will further explore the participants’ experience of learning during the sustaining stage of the journey. It will focus on the impact of context on learning and demonstrate that self-reflection on identity and finding one’s ‘place’ is essential for sustainability in a tertiary institutional environment.

7.2 Interaction and Adaptation
If educational institutions do not provide a culturally safe and caring environment, small problems can be seen as insurmountable (Smith, 2002, p. 7):

*Family demands and responsibilities are greater for Indigenous Australians. If students attend… where such strong family values are not respected, the result is high absenteeism, which affects learning…*

In many instances the identified solution to the problem seems to increase the complexity of the problem and the student finds themselves in a ‘place’ where their solution does not fit the institution. One participant in this study, a 30 year old female from northern Western Australia, intent on *building a better lifestyle for my kids*, enrolled in the Indigenous-focused institution as she believed that *being an Indigenous Institute they’re very culturally sensitive*. She relates how she found that this concept was not interpreted universally the same. When she found out that her brother had died (she knew he was sick), she took off with the children and returned home for several weeks to be with family and support them through the funeral process. And when she returned to the institution to resume her studies, she received a big shock:

*I just took off you know. I didn’t think about my study. My family needed me. This was a big thing for me. To come away from home and study but then my life turned upside down when my brother died… it meant I wasn’t in the right place for him when he passed away. I had to sort that out… with my family. I had to tackle it my way. After a few weeks, pretty long time, I went back to Darwin to keep on my study. And I got a real shock, like. I had a lot of humbug for my going away. I got real angry at this and couldn’t understand how it was going. I didn’t have family at that place… so didn’t tell anyone what was happening. It was a different thinking I can see that now. They thought that maybe I wasn’t going to study anymore. But I was. I just had family business first. I had things to sort out…*

This student experienced a jolt, an incident that meant she had to try and view how things appeared from another perspective. That is, she used the informal learning process of reflection to find a solution by looking at the problem from another perspective. What she found out from thinking about it was:
There’s two ways of learning you know. Like with Health-work. There’s the cultural side and the medicine side. Two ways to learn and practice. I didn’t know about the two ways of learning how to learn until I went away. When I came back...and had to sort it all out...I see that... people see things in a different way.

As can be seen from her recollection of the details of the event, she quickly learnt through experience and reflection that there were expectations associated with studying that were independent of family and cultural obligations.

It is noted that at this stage of the learning journey that the participant is at the cross-roads in decision-making: approach or avoid; learn or leave. The issues of significance have produced a series of critical incidents across three areas of their learning journey: the administrative, the academic and the personal. Underlying all of these areas is the cultural perspective, a deeply personal and committed aspect of the learner (Makes you very strong being an Indigenous person here...). There is just so much to juggle: one’s personal motivating vision (I developed that inner thing), family expectations (Family demands and responsibilities are greater for Indigenous Australians), cultural commitments (I wasn’t in the right place for him when he passed away), and academic deadlines (It’s so hard and so stressful). The solution is to utilise a wide-ranging selection of informal learning strategies.

Human interest generates knowledge in three broad areas: the technical, the practical and the emancipatory (Mezirow (1991, p.72). This study encourages reflection on the link between the students applying strategies (I feel really good when I can share the burden of study) to overcome a critical incident and the resultant emancipatory generation of new knowledge in the dynamics of learning to understand others. Habermas (1971) calls this communicative learning. Its purpose is communication: learning to understand what others mean and to make ourselves understood. Most significant learning in adulthood falls into this category because it involves understanding, describing and explaining: intentions; values; ideals; moral issues; social, political, philosophical, psychological or educational concepts; feelings; and reasons. All of these things are shaped decisively by cultural and linguistic codes and social norms and expectations (Mezirow, p.75).
According to Habermas (1971, p.92) the validity of social norms is grounded only in the intersubjectivity of the mutual understanding of intentions and secured by the general recognition of obligations. As the participants in this study learned, when confronted with a situation that had not previously been within the communication mores associated with their specific cultural worldview, as Habermas noted, validity cannot be determined through the empirical-analytic kind of enquiry used in instrument learning. Rather, validity testing takes the form of consensus reached through rational discourse (Mezirow, 1991, p.76).

In other words, their learning is a process of confronting the unknown context, having to think about what they already know, engaging in critical reflection, often with a significant ‘other’ in order to make sense of the experience and then responding in a way that indicates understanding and, as a result, new learning. Participation in rational discourse will help adults become critically reflective of the meaning perspectives and arrive at a more advanced meaning perspective (p.78). This period of validity testing links well with what is happening during the previously mentioned period of contestation, or critical incident, when the Indigenous student is trying to make sense from their cultural perspective of the incidents that occur on a regular basis during their study journey. The participants’ personal growth is clearly illustrated in the current study and reflected in their growing understanding of the institutional worldview as well as in their increased awareness of themselves as cultural beings.

As mentioned above, how the participants actually get to this point of understanding lies in how they respond to the critical incidents. Rational discourse, or focused discussion with another person, or considered concentration of one’s self on the issue, is the first step. There is plenty of evidence that the participants engaged in making use of their ties with family and friends, commonly termed networking. As alluded to in Chapter Six, this is a normal process in adult education and learning. However, for the Indigenous student their cultural commitment and trust in its members led them to look to their Indigenous family and friends (Really my most support comes from my family) for their networking support irrespective of what support was available at the institution.
This is supported in the exploration by Georgina Whap (2001), a Torres Strait Islander from Mabuiag Island in the Torres Strait, of the meaning of Indigenous knowledge and how it is transmitted. Indigenous knowledge is viewed as a living, breathing concept which reflects the oral tradition that allows ‘life’ to flow through the expression of everyday activities involving the interaction of people (p.23). Sharing in the political, spiritual, secular and communal daily lives of other Indigenous people is essential for the oral tradition to continue, that is the ‘learning’ experience involved in sharing understanding of the world. To do this, a culture of communication, sharing, communities of practice and the ‘passing on’ of knowledge is essential. It is to this group that the Indigenous students initially turn when they experience an issue of significance or critical incident within the confines of their tertiary institution. They seek comfort, ideas and support from their own cultural base and from there they have the courage to move through the crisis and be transformed as a learner.

Such learning requires a growing awareness of cultural difference between the two worldviews. In other words, what has taken place is meaningful learning, the focus of the next section.

**7.2.1 Meaningful learning**
A significant impact of the incidents and social and cultural contexts in which the participants interact is meaningful learning, both culturally and academically. Students continue to experience issues that are new to them, administrative systems that are inflexible and skills and procedures of which they are unfamiliar. By the sustaining stage of the journey, most of the students in the study feel that they are beginning to adjust to their new life, but many had not reached the point of achieving a consonant relationship between self and environment (Nicholson 1990, p.88).

Evidence suggests that by the time the students are at the sustaining stage they use a variety of coping strategies to succeed. That is, they are aware of the need to personally take responsibility for finding a solution to the issue. One of these is networking, as mentioned in depth in Chapter Six, and they actively seek support from other Indigenous students and their own family members. For example:

*My friends, you know, my black friends, have helped me to maintain my identity. They have helped me in my course. It is very good mixing with other Indigenous students...I get help sorting out problems.*
But, at this stage of the learning journey, sometimes assistance cannot be wholly found from within the Indigenous network. Certainly support is still there and this remains strong throughout the journey but there comes a time when the student realises that they need to take responsibility for learning and understanding the Western institutional worldview and see how they can best fit. One female student, a young mother, initially sought family assistance but in the end had to seek support from an institutional staff member. Here she reflects on her developing skills in finding solutions to issues:

_I had got on the wrong side of my lecturer. I’m to blame for this...I was just too shy to say anything and didn’t talk back properly. I had a report to do. I didn’t even know how to use the computers in the library. I was just too frightened to speak with anyone about it at the library. So I rang my sister. She had been in study before me. She’s learning to be a teacher you know. I told her that I need to be able to talk to someone here - someone who could be a help in my report writing. She said to me, “You’re setting yourself up for failure, you know”. She talked to me about how to get a tutor, a mentor... You know what I found out about in my studies is that what you need is space, a place, not just throw your hands up in horror and withdraw or don’t put in an assignment. It’s OK to say OK I’m in a crisis...then they suggest things like well email the lecturer...just little things but until you find that place where you feel OK then you can’t do those things...you know that place is sometimes in your head, it’s a place where you can feel that it’s going to be OK, that you have support and reassurance like you would do._

This concept of needing a ‘space’, or ‘place’ as it was referred to in Chapter Six, will be examined in the next section but it does demonstrate that with time available and reflective practice, students can move forward in their understanding of the Western institutionalised environment.

As mentioned previously, all participants maintained and, in fact, extended their cultural connections while establishing new networks of support during their study journey. Whilst initially utilising Indigenous family connections and community, the networks expanded as their confidence grew or the issue became too difficult to solve within their local cultural connections. The networks now include institutional staff, with Indigenous staff preferred but not essential, as well as Indigenous students not previously known. This need is supported by Falk’s (2003) statement that _without opportunities for people to interact...social capital simply cannot develop or be used_. This vein of thought was mentioned by one participant in this study, a mature-aged Indigenous male student, already a veteran of academic achievements but who has returned to study to gain a health-related qualification so he can:
Bring about the needed community, family and individual changes.

He clearly felt personal change was happening in his life as he spent more time in a study environment. He felt that *something cultural is going on* and viewed the change as the result of involvement:

*Involvement leads to commitment and...acts as a catalyst for change.*

This self-reflection, or personal view of themselves, and how their study journey experiences are changing their perception of themselves, will be examined in the next section. Participants appear to be adapting to, or being acculturated into, the institutionalised environment by personal reflection and challenging themselves by finding ways to view other cultures.

In summary then, the cumulative effect of seeking support, or rational discourse, with trusted members of a closely-aligned community of practice, in order to be able to quell the discord associated with numerous critical incidents, results in meaningful reflection and reconstruction of one’s identity or ‘place’ within the learning environment. Wenger (1998) uses the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* to characterise this form of learning (p.11), proposing that participation in a community of practice results in an identity transformation. The resultant identity, the focus of the next section, then occupies this *half way* place or hybrid space between two cultures.

### 7.3 Self-reflection and Re-construction of identity

As mentioned earlier, critical incidents form a major part of the learning journey. The effect that a series of critical incidents has on a student is not to be underestimated. Participants engage on a daily basis with the institution and where cultural issues underlie, or impact on, the communication, miscuing or miscommunication between the two parties can be the result, as discussed in the previous two chapters.

The subsequent transitional issue, or potentially critical incident, highlights the inadequacy of response from one or both parties to the communication. On the one hand there is the unique institutional worldview, seen as a *two knowledge system* (Weir, 2001) intellectual framework, whilst on the other is an Indigenous student with their own Indigenous frame of reference or *ways of doing*, referred to in Chapter Six as worldview. These are two identities or social
literacies (Allard & Johnson, 2002) constructed through social discourses. They come together in a social or academic incident that has the potential to send the student away. It has the potential to overpower the initiating motivational influence, identified in Chapter Five, and cause the student’s anger and frustration to increase and result in a shameful outcome to the journey.

Instead, new knowledge can be the result. At the point where the Indigenous worldview and the institutional worldview meet, that is at the critical incident, a major learning experience is possible. Within this area of contestation, anxiety and discord are evident. The Indigenous student is forced to reflect on their own ways of doing and compare this to the expectations, protocols and practices of the institution and respond to this discord. Chapter Six mentions a growing awareness in the participants of the ‘system’ and its associated hidden agendas. As mentioned in Chapter Six, this critical incident forces the student to reflect, to become ‘grounded’ within their family or cultural community, with those who went before, and learn different ways of looking at the world. Informal learning, or meaningful learning, is triggered by a jolt.

Within this area of contestation, as mentioned, participants either devise adaptive actions for success or they opt to leave the learning journey altogether. Whilst the former results in additional workloads and mental and emotional stress, success is assured as students and institution vie for common understanding. These adaptive actions, as previously mentioned, include networking, turning to family members and engaging with the Indigenous community of practice in order to reflect on possible action or response. The student is trying to bridge both worlds through an informal learning context. Adler (1975) refers to this as experiencing new and different dimensions of human diversity resulting in the participant learning more about themselves. They are changing in their behaviour and response. They are building up their social capital.

In the process of new learning and gaining in their understanding about themselves, participants acknowledged that they felt that they were changing. It is observed from the Voices that when they begin to settle into institutional life and establish their new social networks then they gradually adapt to the new culture. They admit to noticing changes in their reactions to things that happen:
When I fronted up to the desk I didn’t panic…I thought, “Here’s someone who can help me” instead of panic, panic at having to talk to a perfect stranger.

They also notice changes in themselves and how they think about issues that arise:

I just felt a weight off my shoulders, I really enjoyed my time with a tutor, it was just right for me at that time.

For some this still causes angst:

What I would say to you is the most important thing about these bad times when I feel lost...when I’m not going to make it... is that they are not so bad now...I know what to do lots of times and I worry a lot less.

As identified in earlier chapters, prior to embarking on their journey, many of the students had been employed as Health Workers and so leaving that culturally safe environment and entering one where the protocols and social mores were mostly unknown meant that they needed, at least partially, immerse themselves in the institutional environment, both socially and academically, in order to survive. They are unsure of the results. They know they have to adapt to survive but adapt to what and to what degree? That is the intimidating part for the participants in this study. Some do it relatively easily. Others worry a lot. The latter students have to come back again and again in order to get the balance right for them. Weir (2001, p.354) refers to this as participants devising adaptive actions that result in additional workloads and mental and emotional stress. One single female student from a regional area expressed her feelings this way:

I just keep it all at the basic level...I look at each thing that happens and don’t try and get too involved...emotions like...I know I am learning as the time goes along... I find myself spending a lot of time with my class friends...they’re helpful in getting me to find that way of being happy and secure, comfortable in myself

By the sustaining stage of their learning journey, some participants are gradually turning to other people or groups as their support. Participants are increasingly using critical reflection to learn about different perspectives and becoming more socially assertive within the institutional environment. Whilst this is behaviour that could be viewed as a normal outcome of everyday living, it is important to note that initially the Indigenous community had provided the much-needed support during the stressful times, but as the learning journey progresses, the participant seeks out a wider circle of friends and staff members. By this time they have gained awareness of the Indigenous student support that is available in the institution and have made friends outside the people they mixed with on arrival. What changes occur to them and their personal image and how this comes about will be the focus of the next section. The participants’ voices will self-
reflect on the gradual awareness of the learning that is occurring and the changes that are noted in their personal development.

7.3.1 Becoming more confident
As mentioned above, by the sustaining stage, the participants are working out how to devise adaptive actions for success when dealing with all the incidents that occur, both minor and major, on an almost daily basis. Due to the fact that many of the participants are from regional or remote areas of the Northern Territory and Queensland, they are used to mixing with people with whom they have a lifetime of experiences and to whom they are often related rather than the tertiary environment. Their regular circle of friends and family back home are mostly Indigenous and they therefore share a wealth of cultural nuances and stories that cement their relationship.

However this is generally not the situation during the learning journey although there is some indication that the environment is more familiar, or culturally appropriate, for some students at the Indigenous-focused institution. As a consequence of having to deal with the issues of significance as they arise and so becoming more competent in cross-cultural contexts, some participants indicate that they are becoming less shy (We Indigenous peoples are in many cases lacking confidence) and more able to make their own decisions and choices in their lives (I’ve got an inner determination to get there). They no longer wait around for a consensus on an issue or wait for someone else to make the decision. As one male student remembers:

I learnt how to deal with situations.

As the participants learn how to manage daily situations, by coping with the critical incidents, then their awareness of the institutional system or worldview increases and they better understand how it works. It was noted in Chapter Six that one of the urban-based, female mature-aged students, a mother of four and well advanced into her degree, commented during an interview that hidden agendas and hidden systems are not there if people understand them. When asked what she meant by that comment, her reply was:

Just about having to prepare for assignments or exams and things that people have to actually train themselves for and if you don’t have that in your home or you don’t have it in your friends then you don’t have it and you don’t know what you haven’t got.

She was then asked when she came to this realisation about the value of education and also that academic skill requires training and putting pressure on oneself to learn the skills. As examined
in Chapter Six, this student commented that *she had to put the pressure on... and work out what is needed.* Students consistently commented about how they gradually had to put the pieces together and work out what skills they needed to develop and practice in order to succeed. They have to reflect on themselves as learners and weigh up what has to be done to achieve their ambition.

To survive in their course the participants are constantly making adjustments to how they respond to situations and other people. This also indicated an increasing level of personal decisiveness. Adapting to a new culture means accepting the cultural expectations and trying to respond in such a way that your behaviour is understood and, hopefully, acceptable. To do this the participants needed to learn that within the complex environment of a tertiary institution, there were many viewpoints and behaviours and not all of them are compatible with the Indigenous perspective. In some cases the students coped and in other instances they created their own solutions. In some instances it meant that there was a protracted relationship with the institution as other cultural commitments took them away from their study. The learning is still identifiable though. Being able to move comfortably between the two cultures and see the perspectives of both is a major achievement but it can be very frustrating and time-consuming for the student. As the quote opening Chapter Six states:

*Too many community commitments. It’s hard to balance!*

This means that the students have not only become more confident but they are now able to critically reflect on their situation, take responsibility for prioritising and, in the process, become more aware of the viewpoints of others, the focus of the next section.

**7.3.2 Becoming more aware of the viewpoint of others**

As a spin-off from their experiences, students become more aware of others. One example of this is mentioned in Chapter Seven when a young male Torres Strait Islander student recalls how he felt when he was trying to adapt to the expectations of the institutional environment. During the time he has been on his learning journey he has observed others, an informal learning strategy, and after reflecting on what he has observed, another informal learning strategy, he responds to a situation with:
I put everything aside and think about what a ‘student’ will do here. Not me, but a ‘student’. It’s strange really but you have to climb into another person’s head and try and be what is expected.

That is, he finds a ‘place’ from where he can resolve the problem with which he is faced.

Through the arriving and surviving stages of the journey most of the participants continue to experience the acculturating process of being mid-way between two cultures and the respective expectations of them as learners. During this time they spend learning to adapt, they internalise behaviours and protocols or those non-Indigenous traditions they perceived useful (Weir, 2001) and adapt them to suit their purposes. The actual practicalities of adapting could be viewed as organising your mind (Weir, 2001, p.329) as this female student from interstate is doing:

It’s just so hard to understand where everyone is coming from that you have to put aside what you think and try and work out where everyone is coming from. I have to really get into the culture of the place and work out where they are all coming from.

Where they are all coming from is an interesting statement to make. It immediately shows that the participant is still trying to find their place in this environment. It is still a them and us situation at this stage. The student is not at that ‘place’ where she can feel that she is coping with the demands of the institution yet confident that her Indigenous identity has not been compromised. She is still wary and still looking into the situation.

Likewise another student, realised after quite a traumatic critical incident, as portrayed in Chapter Seven, that the learning she had gained from the incident meant that she:

Didn’t know about the two ways of learning how to learn until I went away. People see things in a different way.

In learning how to deal with situations, the participant has been able to view the incident from another perspective. But one gets the feeling from the Voices that there is a yearning to connect with both points of view and see things from both perspectives.

7.3.3 Development without compromise

As mentioned earlier, adapting to a new culture means understanding the host cultural expectations and trying to respond in such a way that your behaviour is understood and, hopefully, acceptable. But the participants are justifiably unwilling to let go, or compromise,
their culture. Although this has to be considered in terms of the level of consciousness. At the conscious level the participant may well be willing to let go of a few of their previous practices when in a conflict situation. They may need to unlearn some personal practices that have prevented them from improving in their academic achievements. However it would seem that at the sub-conscious level, the strong perception of what the participants stood for culturally was not to be compromised.

Researchers have found that student departure is influenced by their perception of how well their cultural attributes are valued and accommodated and how differences between their cultures of origin and immersion are bridged (Cabrera et al; 1999; Walker, 2000; Thomas, 2002). They want to connect with both. This attitude has been noted by McInnis and his co-authors who found major changes in the student cohort over several years (1995, 2000a, 2000b). Students now expect institutions to fit their lives rather than vice versa (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p.52). This study found that students can become unhappy about the degree to which their lives are changing with their experiences in the institutional environment. As described at the commencement of Chapter Six:

*I find that the best thing I can do is go and sit with my Indigenous family and friends, sit out there under a tree and talk about what’s important in life, where I should be going with my life. (Female Indigenous student, aged 34 years, mother of three, working and studying)*

This student has to take herself back to her family and her Indigenous contacts so that she can see it all from the Indigenous perspective again. She feels that she is becoming so caught up in the institutional environment that it is detrimental to whom she is. She needs to find a balance in her approach to her experiences and then she can keep going.

Several participants kept having breaks from their course because they felt they weren’t happy with the effect institutional life was having on them culturally. One such student, on returning again to complete her studies asks:

*How much of an Indigenous person’s identity is bound up in their position or considered position in Indigenous society? How much can be allowed to be ‘taken over’ by the other world of western education? I change every time I come back here to study. And I don’t know if the change is one for the good.*
It seems that this process of acculturation is an elongated one. When the participants reflect on what is happening in their lives it seems the change has to receive their approval, or perhaps their family’s approval, at intervals along the way. This has been referred to earlier using the words of an Indigenous researcher, who is also a student, as something cultural is going on. When interviewed he commented that he felt that the change was the result of involvement. He accepted the change in himself because he had a culturally-based goal that he considered more important than not accepting acculturation into institutional life and leaving the course.

As the previous chapter has illustrated, with the combination of paid work and study, most students indicated that they had less time now to spend with their friends and family with whom they shared their Indigenous heritage and with whom they had previously socialised almost all the time. As can be seen from the above example, the participants commented that this had changed them as a person and caused them to wonder where they fitted in. It also resulted in reactions from their family and friends with questions and accusatory statements mentioned at family occasions. One female student, already successfully through her first year of study, remembers that:

*On arrival at uni I had to get used to the uni lifestyle.*

This student found that the only way she can continue to stay engaged is to stay focused on her original motivating goals and work out the institutional way to succeed as she adapts to the new culture.

However, students can continue to experience being mid-way between two cultures and their respective expectations, not always a harmonious situation. Sometimes they are confronted with situations where they have to learn to trust someone new and they find their views changing with experience. One young man from a regional centre explains:

... *I was struggling with my course materials...I couldn’t seem to understand what came first and what I had to do...it was all a bit of a sorry time for me...but then they told me I could have a tutor, you know, someone to help me. I tried my family and asked them about what I should do. They said, decide yourself. So I waited for a bit...it got worse...so I did. I got a tutor and you know it’s not so bad really, I can organise myself now and I’m happy about that.*
What should to be noted is the increasing control that the students take over their actions in learning to respond to the context or incident in which they find themselves. Learning to trust the institution and finding the space where they feel comfortable means they can reach out beyond their current circle of friends and support structures. They find institutional support for their journey and do not feel that they had compromised themselves by doing so, as they feared earlier in the journey when they were establishing themselves in their institution. In other words, their view of themselves has changed. Rendon et al (2000, p.137) supports this premise, claiming that students can be simultaneously socialised in two different cultures and that dual socialisation is possible when the overlap between two cultures is fostered.

The participants have gained a personal view that is different to the one with which they began the journey. Their perception of themselves and their view of others has changed. This is the institution’s ultimate responsibility – to support students to transit between two cultures (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p.54).

### 7.4 Conclusion
This chapter has generalised what happens during the learning journey of the participants in the study at the sustaining stage. The response to critical incidents, the critical reflection and the resultant change in perception of who they are and where they fit into the tertiary study environment is shown clearly in the Voices of the participants.

Changing perceptions and coping strategies appear to go hand in hand for the students in this study. In the previous chapter, it was suggested that the study participants underwent a major learning experience in the contested space (Nakata, 2007) where the Indigenous worldview and the institutional worldview meet. Evidence would suggest that it was at this point that the dilemma associated with the incident or crisis was at its maximum strength and the student has to make a choice as to their action. It would appear that if a student utilises informal learning strategies in attempting to resolve the issues then they are attempting to bridge the gulf or divide between the two worldviews. They reach out, take a personal interest in what assistance is being offered and attempt to achieve success with support from both their cultural and institutional support strategies. This invariably occurs at the sustaining stage when the student has enough
personal self confidence and trust in the institution that they can interact with the institutions and utilise the strategies available.

The stress associated with engaging across two seemingly separate communities of learning and interaction is commented on by many participants in the study. It would appear that they view their actions as very personal. There is not one model of engagement with the institution. Most participants probably feel that they have done it their way and talk about what solutions worked for them. As mentioned also in the previous chapter, participants often indicated their need to feel independent from the institutional support as a means of taking pride that they had achieved it themselves. Even though they may have utilised some of the supporting strategies available during the surviving stage of their journey, they avoided acknowledging it. However, by the sustaining stage of their study journey, the students had all found a ‘place’ for themselves, critical for their success, which accommodated their Indigenous perspective and they no longer felt like they were compromising themselves as they felt earlier in the journey when they were establishing themselves in their institution. In other words, their view of themselves had changed. They had gained a personal view that was different to the one with which they began the journey. Their identity of self had changed.

This chapter demonstrates personal growth as a result of a major outcome of the study journey. Interaction with institutional staff, usually initiated through a need on the part of the student, has the potential to deteriorate into a critical incident. It is through interaction with those around them, and the development of coping strategies, that the participants gain a better understanding of themselves as Indigenous learners. It is also through interaction with people around them, and the development of strategies such as networking, that they learn different ways of looking at the world and gain a better understanding of themselves. In the words of a female student not long after she received a successfully written assignment back:

*I just knew I could do it. Wow, this makes me feel good… Who am I? I am an Indigenous person who is making good!*

It is through the experiences of this learning journey that the students gain a better understanding of a very different worldview to the one that they have known all their life.
While interacting with others, self reflection played a significant role in enhancing learning. By reflecting on new experiences, learning is made more meaningful and effective. By dealing with difficult and trying incidents, study participants build personal resilience and improve their capacity to cope with the next situation. As one student, a mother of three from a regional area commented:

There’s nothing to compare to the thrill of success in your study. It’s been a long time since I have felt like this. A real achievement. I know what I am on about now.

Listening to the Voices in Chapters Five, Six and Seven describe the learning journey shows the development of personal strength to cope with unexpected incidents and personal growth in identity as the students successfully coalesce the two worldviews – the Indigenous worldview and the institutional mores. They developed and trialled various coping strategies, such as networking and personal reflection, in order to manage new contexts, both administrative and academic. Additionally, they learned relevant personal organisational skills such as juggling work and study with cultural commitments. This culminates in their sustaining stage of learning when their self-reflection identifies that they have changed as people and as learners within both societies.
Chapter Eight

Outcomes of the Study

*I learnt to stick it out...I can think now what other students do and try it myself...it’s strange really but you have to climb into another person’s head and try and be what is expected ... I have changed ... I’m cool with that as long as I can be in both worlds.*

(male student, Torres Strait)

8.1 Introduction

The three previous chapters, Chapters Five to Seven, describe in detail the perceptions of the Indigenous study participants from the commencement of their learning experience, when they first engage with members of the institution, to the point during the journey when they reach a level of sustainability. This sustaining stage appears to be based on resilience borne out of strong motivation and critical self-reflection. These three descriptive chapters were, somewhat simplistically, constructed to tell the story of the students’ initial motivation, arriving and interacting, learning different ways of looking at the world and, in the process, gaining a better understanding of themselves as learners. It is also a story of a test of character as participants confront the circumstances of living and studying in two worlds. Their journey, for those who go the distance, is much about reflecting on what is happening to them and the informal learning that such a situation evokes. Although participants are engaged in differing study paths, and commenced studying at various points in time over the past few years, commonalities were experienced in their learning conditions and learning progress and these will form the basis of this chapter.

This chapter begins with a re-statement of the research task followed closely by a brief overview of the learning journey, depicted in Chapters Five to Seven, emerging from the participants’ voices in these chapters. By way of furthering the analysis, this chapter will continue to review the circumstances of the participants in terms of their learning. In particular, this chapter will provide new knowledge related to this study’s research questions by examining the importance of the participant’s development of informal learning strategies when responding to new challenges and contexts. A number of interesting issues are raised when this development is
contextualised within the Indigenous knowledge system. Finally, a summary of the study’s findings will conclude the chapter, connecting the generation of new knowledge with the development of a learning space based on culture. It is expected that this new knowledge will inform the next chapter which will, in part, summarise the results from Research Question 1. That is, results concerning how institutions provide support for their Indigenous students. In addition to this, the next chapter will also provide an overview of the implications of this study for management policies in Australian tertiary institutions.

8.2 Re-Statement of Research Task

Conceptualising the situational context of any educational journey entails the provision of a descriptive account of the totality of the learning phenomena and learning conditions that apply. The purpose of the research is to investigate the critical factors essential for success relevant to the learning environment of a group of Indigenous students enrolled in tertiary institutions across three geographically-diverse case study sites in the Northern Territory. In particular, the research sought to understand the way in which Indigenous students studying in the tertiary sector are able to manage their participation in different or multiple worlds (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The conceptualisation provides a theoretically sound basis from which value judgments can be made about the nature and quality of tertiary-level Indigenous educational experiences.

In summary, the study addressed the following research questions:

(1) What are the general institutional support structures in place for Indigenous students at tertiary institutions in Australia?

(2) Using Indigenous students’ perceptions, what are the factors that influence their reaction to the range of critical incidents and issues that arise during their learning journey, that have the potential to affect their progress?

(3) With the benefit of the findings, derived from achieving those objectives, what are the elements of the institutional learning environment critical to the Indigenous student’s successful completion of, or ongoing progress in, their course?

As a result of the research questions, there are two dominant foci in this study:

(1) to investigate adult learning processes within a cross-cultural environment, particularly focusing on the Indigenous student’s experience and world-view; and
(2) to review the issues related to Indigenous students making sense of, interpreting, and succeeding in Western-focused institutional learning environments. The culturally-appropriate (Mooney, 2006, p. 6) visual imagery associated with a learning journey will be used throughout this chapter when referring to the experiences of the Indigenous students as they undertake their study program.

To provide an answer to Research Question 1, the historical context to the study is summarised in Chapter Two with part of the chapter being devoted to describing some of the institutional measures implemented to increase access and participation for Indigenous students (see 2.3). This topic will be further discussed in Chapter Nine when considering the implications of the results of this study for tertiary institutions.

Research Question 2 forms the basis for what happens during the entire learning journey as described by student voices in the previous three chapters, Chapters Five, Six and Seven. With the commencement of the learning journey, it is apparent that significant learning occurred through interactions with those around them which indicates that learning is, ‘in essence, a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing’ (Wenger, 1998, p.3). It is important to bear in mind that the issues raised and the situations described are culturally and personally extremely complex, so that in order to achieve understanding, it has been necessary to weave a path through this complexity by simplifying and generalising when describing what has occurred. In many ways, whilst a summary is presented below as a coherent and systematic linear description, it describes what is, for the most part, a non-linear and situation-specific learning journey in which incidents and learning happen somewhat chaotically and often concurrently.

The major part of this chapter, Chapter Eight, responds to the Research Question 3. Following a brief summary of the previous three chapters, this chapter will, in the main, provide a conceptual analysis of the learning journey and the new knowledge resulting from the study. As previously mentioned in the Introduction, the next section of this chapter will provide a brief overview of the learning journey, depicted in Chapters Five to Seven, emerging from the participants' voices in the study.
8.3 Brief Summary of Previous Chapters
The participants in the study elucidated their learning journey through a series of conversations with the aim of exploring factors that were critical to the success of their journey. This section will summarise the learning that occurred from the participants’ perspective. These critical factors will assist in the following discussion which focuses on implications for the way in which tertiary institutions support Indigenous students.

8.3.1 Arriving
The learning journey commenced for each participant when they interacted with members of the institution. Sometimes this was at enrolment while for others it was when they first arrived on campus. Evidence suggests that, in the main, these experiences left the student confused and anxious and wondering if they had made a mistake in coming. The unfamiliar, Western institutional system combined with personal anxieties associated with leaving their community, their family, and in some instances their community role as Health Workers, meant that in many cases the students were in a highly anxious state, easily upset or disappointed by the seemingly insensitive atmosphere surrounding their first few days on campus. Their experiences, viewed holistically, ebbed and flowed between personal angst and the joys of at last being in a position where they were working towards achieving the aspirations that motivated them in the first place. Incidents came and went and were managed as best they could but when it was most difficult, it was their original reason for coming that kept the students motivated. This motivating influence, underpinning the reactions of the participating Indigenous students to situations arising during the first few weeks of their study journey, has been detailed previously in Chapter Five.

With the arriving phase of the journey being so fraught with anxiety and stress, the next section will look at the ways in which the study participants develop strategies to manage the various incidents as they arise. This becomes a learning journey in itself.

8.3.2 Surviving
Following a period of time varying from a few weeks to several months after commencement in their course of study, the participants move into the survival mode in their journey. That is, during the interactions that occur between the institutions and themselves, they learn to understand, manage and personally grow in resilience. This is despite each incident or event
having the potential to destabilise their journey and affect the outcome. Chapter Six describes the moments in time during the learning journey when the participant and the institution come together, often over a substantial length of time. Whilst it can be viewed as an open space, open to substantial learning opportunities, it also has the potential to be a contested space. As such, it continues to be a highly stressful and anxious experience as the student battles to understand the situation and then manage this space, and feel comfortable with the solution. As mentioned earlier, the student’s strong motivation to succeed, a result of a diverse range of factors including community support, provides the stimulus for learning and energises the participant to seek ways of resolving unfamiliar situations.

As a result of the interaction, incident or event, action has to occur. It cannot be ignored. Basically the participant has two choices open to them: they can either remove themselves from the contested space and, as a result, leave their study journey altogether or at least for a time; or they can respond by seeking a solution that they believe will be more comfortable or manageable for them and ultimately one that they hope will keep their cultural identity intact.

This leads to discussion of the sustaining stage during which the participants begin to feel more confident.

### 8.3.3 Sustaining

As the participants move through their journey they enter what I have termed the *sustaining* stage. The incidents and challenges are more comfortably managed as the participants become practised at critically reflecting on the issue and seeking to apply previously learnt knowledge gained from similar situations. The participants gain confidence and knowledge in managing incidents as they arise, with each incident becoming an additional opportunity for learning.

It is apparent from the study that when students take action on their knowledge, it is generally in the form of small-scale trialling of a strategy or response to a critical incident. What this means is that the students start to analyse their preferred way of learning; they identify difference and the need for this; they identify the presence of an institutional world view in comparison to an Indigenous world view. They note how they have to adapt or coalesce their *‘ways of doing’* with the institutional *‘ways of doing’*. Within the area of contestation between the student’s world view and the institutional practices and expectations, aptly described by one student as *a strange*
participants either devise ‘adaptive actions’ for success or they opt to leave the learning journey altogether. Whilst the former results in additional workloads and mental and emotional stress, success is achievable if the participants can find a ‘place’ within the tertiary environment in which they are moving towards an understanding of how the other system works.

Whilst this is happening, however, their personal fear of undergoing a change in identity as a result of their adaptation is never far from their minds. What they realise is that, at times, they must challenge their own cultural assumptions. This growing awareness that their experiences to date do not provide the answers results in a level of critical reflection not familiar to them. Instead of relying on their Indigenous networks, they are challenged to expand their strategies for coping and embrace new understanding. This can potentially put them at odds with their own culture as they may be changed by learning to ‘see’ other world views and ‘ways of doing’.

How the participants respond to this dilemma, and find a space from which to view the world, is the critical factor in their survival in the journey and the focus of the next section of this chapter.

8.4 Conceptual analysis of the Learning Journey

What becomes apparent from the study is the participants’ initial belief that their Indigenous ways of doing, their strong motivation and family support was all that was needed to succeed. They commenced their journey very positive that the experience would be an enjoyable, manageable one. What they did not expect was that the situation or context would be so different from what they had previously experienced, or that these previous experiences would prove inadequate for managing the situations which arose. An even greater surprise, however, was the growing awareness, and subsequent fear, that the learning necessary for them to be able to manage the situations, and make their journey sustainable, could lead to a change in their personal cultural identity. Nor could they anticipate the extent of this change and its potential to alienate them from their current perceived position within their cultural society. This is supported by Marsick & Watkins (2001, p.25) when they conclude that informal and incidental learning is at the heart of adult education because of its learner-centred focus and that lessons are learned from life experience.
As the literature states (see, for example, Chapter 3), learning is a process of human adaptation to the social and cultural environment (Zhang, 2005). It is to a large degree made up of processes that encompass information gathering, testing of ideas, gaining support and knowledge development (Jarvis, 1995; Marsick & Watson, 1990). Daily encounters and experiences produce opportunities to learn and can provide a stimulus that goads the human being into action. This stimulus can be an event, or perhaps a series of events, resulting from an interaction within the learning context. Whatever the event or events are, they provide the stimulus required for action, and hence informal learning, to occur. Informal learning is still a major learning pathway (Stockley, 2007, p. 1). Estimates vary, but about eighty percent of learning is thought to be informal (Carnevale and Goldstein, 1983; Zemke, 1985). Informal learning is ad hoc; it occurs because a personal or professional need has to be met immediately. The unique outcome of informal learning is that it has an immediate effect on performance (Stockley, 2007) because it is feedback directly related to the immediate task to hand. It often complements formal learning, as in the situational environment of this study.

One of the reasons that informal learning represents about eighty percent of all learning activity is that learning needs can often arise quickly and unexpectedly. As in the learning journey for the study participants, the fast pace of what happens during interaction between individuals means that often a quick and effective response is required. Such learning opportunities provide a variety of ways in which an individual can develop the skills of response in order to cope with the situation in which they find themselves (see Chapter Three). These learning opportunities can include such practices as (Zhang, 2005, p. 208):

- Gaining knowledge and understanding through networking; that is ‘it is often collaborative/collegial;
- Using trial and error approach to manage cultural differences between interacting adults; that is massaging the ‘ecology’ of the setting until a level of understanding is reached;
- Observing and interacting in the lived world; that is, it is contextual; and
- Engaging critical reflectivity as a key mechanism in learning from experience; this practice is supported by the proponents of the humanistic adult education theory, who argue that experiential learning theory does not presuppose too much about individual agency, reflection is the bridge between experience and learning.
Indeed, as the study reveals, different circumstances required different responses, and each incident provided an activity and experience-based environment for learning to take place.

In this study the context in which learning takes place is integral to the way in which situations are interpreted or responded to (Howard, 2002; Cseh, 1998). It is clear that the student’s ability to reach a sustainable level of managing the incidents as they arose, potentially has a direct effect both on their cultural identity and their academic success. This is due to the fact that the context for learning, that contested space between individual culture and institutional expectations, is continually changing as the student adapts until eventually they get better at operating in the context and can sustainably manage incidents. This adaptation to context subsequently changes the student’s cultural identity.

In the following section, this new context in which the participants find themselves, and the resultant new knowledge that this study has found, will be considered using a hypothetical scenario.

8.4.1 Brief Review of the Learning and Cultural Contexts
As mentioned in Chapter Six, the world of academia lends itself to a myriad of stressful experiences for the neophyte student viewing the institutional processes and procedures from another world view. What actually happens to the individual student?

Let us consider a hypothetical composite picture of a student (derived from the participants in this study). He/she arrives at university full of confidence and certainty that they have made the right decision. They are motivated by strong family and community support. That doesn’t mean that there isn’t a great deal of stress but it is mingled with excitement. But, unexpectedly for them, on arrival, they can’t see too many other Indigenous students. That is not too big an issue because they are sure that they will be able to find a family member who works in one of the offices and she’ll help them find their way.

Their learning journey can best be described using Diagram 1. For the participant in this study, the journey involves interactions and experiences within an environment consisting of members
of two distinct world views or contexts, the Western institutional view and the Indigenous world view. This journey is, somewhat simplistically, depicted in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: The Learning Journey
Evidence from this study suggests that the Indigenous student commences their course of study, designated the *arriving* stage, strongly motivated to succeed. This helps throughout the journey as they are immediately immersed in a different world from that which is familiar to them and face a range of new challenges. Issues or challenges that arise as the participants navigate their way through the learning journey I have termed ‘incidents’, sometimes *critical* incidents, as these stepping stones in the journey have the power to undermine the determination of the student to succeed. These incidents or challenges are depicted in Diagram 1 as a sine curve, the amplitude of the waves representing the level of challenge and personal anxiety caused by these interactions, the basis of which will be considered more fully later in the chapter. As explained in a previous chapter, the amplitudes of the waves remain high for the first two stages of the journey as the student is being buffeted by the ongoing incidents and challenges whilst at the same time, adjusting their responses so they develop their own strategies to manage the different situations as they arise. As can be seen from Diagram 1, only when the student reaches the stage (*surviving*) in the journey when they begin to feel more in control of their learning, does the effect of an incident on them personally, and hence the sine wave amplitude, begin to reduce. It is at this point in the journey that the student can conceive that sustainability, or successful continuation in the journey, is a distinct possibility for them.
However, this sustaining stage of the journey becomes, personally for the student, the most critical part of the journey.

Whilst their identity at the commencement of the journey was generally culturally-based, and they identified as being an Indigenous person, this general perception changes over time as they broaden their relationships and develop adapting strategies to cope with incidents (further explained below).

Fast forward a few weeks into the hypothetical scenario and there are so many things for the student to do and try to understand that it is becoming overwhelming. A gradual feeling of helplessness has replaced confidence. Both the formal and informal expectations of tertiary study become evident early in the semester. The formal processes of enrolment, timetabling, academic writing and research, whilst difficult enough to manage as a neophyte student, quickly get subsumed by the anxiety associated with the more informal learning aspects of the commencement of study. Learning how to be assertive on an individual basis; learning how to communicate in a way that is recognised by the institution and your peers; learning about social communication with people one has not known all their lives; managing personal finances and juggling time and priorities; all these informal learning skills are required for successful continuation in their course of study.

The institutional influence during the learning journey is represented in Diagram 2 below by the term Institutional world view. It is understood from the advertising and websites of the respective tertiary institutions that they begin the relationship with the student from the first point of contact with a commitment to quality and to supporting students to gain a qualification within a safe and successful environment. The other influence on the Indigenous student, during the learning journey, is of course their cultural identity. This cultural perspective is represented in Diagram 2 by the term Indigenous world view. Their identity, incorporating the individual’s relationship with others and hence their perception of themselves, changes with their engagement in informal learning processes, such as critical reflection, and the acknowledgement that their previous experiences have not provided them with the necessary tools to manage these new situations.
This personal position of the individual, that is the depiction of the student moving through their learning journey, is represented in Diagram 2 as the *Individual Perception of Position*.

**Diagram 2: Change in Identity**

It is indeed an emotionally charged space. There is a lot at stake here and some of the situations do not have cultural measures of commonality about them. The Indigenous student is anxious that he/she will get into a situation where they lack awareness or knowledge of what is expected, and the university is mindful that their reputation is at stake in terms of how they manage Indigenous students and their well-being. Similarly, there is a fear of failure on the part of the student and a fear of not managing the situation well on the part of the university. So when they come together, or interact, as outlined in Chapters Five and Six, from the initial meeting at enrolment to attendance in class, the environment is laden with potential difficulties involving communication and interpretation of the context. Cultural differences can be highlighted and result in mis-communication or a confrontational situation. In other words, a contested space. Differences between cultures … influence people to describe the world in different ways (Zhang, 2005, p.200). With their own *way of doing*, numerous examples in Chapters Five through to
Seven show where participants have interpreted a situation very differently to the person from the institution, whether it be an administrative or academic staff member.

As can be seen from that illustrated example, students are placed in a situation whereby they need to learn to manage, or adapt to, the situation. As a result, this contested space impacts directly, through the informal learning process, on the Individual Perception of Position. That is, as Diagram 2 indicates, the student’s perception of themselves, their identity or understanding of the space they inhabit in the universe, changes over the time of the study journey largely due to the informal learning that occurs.

In terms of the informal learning process, how do they ‘cope’? Initially, they do this by falling back on using known experiences and seek the knowledge and support of familiar networks. However these processes may fail, that is their networks may not have the knowledge or the understanding of the different institutional cultural settings, which adds to the student’s stress and frustration. The students in this study adapted by finding other means to explain and manage such situations, which resulted in an intensive development of appropriate skills. For example, in addition to using their observation and information gathering skills they also use other informal learning strategies such as trial and error. Based on the information they have gathered they form a ‘best guess’ strategy. Some work, some do not, forcing the student to reflect deeply on their situation. In this questioning process they often develop a more critically reflective position. As noted in Chapter Seven, the process of critical reflection within informal learning processes requires a person to challenge some of the assumptions on which they were basing previous decisions to action. In general it can be argued that initially Indigenous students will be basing their decisions on assumptions situated within their own cultural domain. However, as more incidents are faced or managed, their skills at challenging such cultural assumptions leads them to gather other cultural information outside of their own cultural domain. By challenging their own assumptions and seeking to understand more broadly the situation in which they find themselves, they increase their understanding of the Western cultural institutional milieu. This approach to understanding and managing their circumstances increases both their knowledge and their confidence in handling what were previously unknown and frustrating situations. It also alters their cultural understanding of others and this may impact on their identity.
Trying to satisfy both worlds in which they are participating weighs heavily on the majority of Indigenous students in the study. As Chapter Seven reveals in one student’s voice:

*There’s two ways of learning you know... Two ways to learn and practice. I didn’t know about the two ways of learning how to learn until I went away. When I came back... and had to sort it all out... I see that... people see things in a different way”.*

This immersion in a tertiary education system has infinite possibilities for the student to have both positive and negative experiences, particularly with respect to cultural understanding between parties and personal cultural retention. These issues associated with acculturation within another culture, will be further discussed below.

In the next section I will explain how the informal learning process results in the student moving along the Individual Perception of Position (IPP) continuum inhabiting a space where cultural differences generated by the interaction of differing worldviews are kept to a minimum. That is, the IPP within an incident or interaction changes over time through the use of analysis and critical self-reflection. In the next section, I will examine this development with referral to the positive and negative aspects of this change and the hybrid space that emerges from the journey.

### 8.4.2 Identity issues emerging from Informal Learning

The informal learning that takes place within the context of a learning journey involves a process of adaptation to the Western institutional environment. As previously mentioned, this process occurs *in situ*, triggered by challenges and incidents that occur within the student’s interactional space.

Chapter Five has indicated that the result of these challenges is the acknowledgement by the student that their Indigenous perspective or ‘way of doing’, appears to be inadequate for dealing with the issues to hand. That is, they are ‘*running out of knowledge*” (Zhang, 2005). The incidents result in the student appreciating that there is much that they do not know. The other result is the realisation that, like Ford (2005), the “*system is destroying our own Tyikim knowledge base*”. This can be explained in terms of the adaptation, or acculturation process having the potential to change the individual from a cultural perspective. What happens is the
student experiences a change in their cultural identity, or *way of doing*, because the situation in which they find themselves results in them challenging assumptions concerning their own cultural perspective. And by challenging these assumptions, the Indigenous student will, in the process, come to manage the underlying assumptions and practices of the Western institutional culture. Only then, when they can appreciate the other perspective and respond to institutionally based situations, will they resolve the issue surrounding the incident, metaphorically turn the corner of the incident’s sine wave (see Diagram 1) and continue on the journey. They then enter a hybrid-space, a self-positioning space where their behaviour indicates a level of understanding about the institutional system, and the Western cultural mores underpinning it, and yet hopefully they are still able to demonstrate their cultural preferences or ‘ways of doing’. On entering this space, the individual remains an Indigenous cultural person but they can now sustainably manage working in a Western institutionalised environment. The positive aspect of the IPP changing is that the student gains in confidence as they manage the institutional cultural elements associated with incidents. The major potential negative aspect of this change is the concern, as mentioned in previous chapters, of the experience changing them too much and impacting on their own cultural position or identity. But new knowledge is gained as a result of this encounter. The students pick up the tertiary cultural mores but from within a hybrid space. That is, they develop their own persona or ‘way of doing’. In essence, their view of themselves has changed. They have gained a personal view that was different to the one with which they began the journey. Their identity has changed.

In the concluding part of this chapter a summary of the findings of this study will be discussed with the view to making connections with how institutions may adapt their practices to better meet the needs of their Indigenous students, the topic of the next chapter.

**8.4.3 Summary of findings**

In this study, the students gradually developed their own strategies to cope with the different incidents as they arose. Barer-Stein (1987) suggests that at its simplest, learning is the recognition of difference. But for the students in the study it proved more than this. In summary, while participants initially regarded tertiary education as empowering self-development both for themselves and their community, their ongoing personal commitment to
improving the state of Indigenous health was considered a personal priority towards community wholeness and wellbeing, or *maintenance of cultural integrity* (Weir, 2000). Given that fulfilling obligations is a fundamental cultural tenet for Indigenous persons, this commitment to community wellbeing continued to motivate and provide the foundation for the *sustaining* period of the learning journey. By the *sustaining* stage the students had all found a form of institutional support for their journey and did not in any way feel that they had compromised themselves by doing so, as they did feel earlier in the *surviving* stage of the journey when they were establishing themselves in their institution. In other words, their view of themselves had changed. They had gained a personal view that was different to the one with which they began the journey. Their knowledge had changed and their understanding of Western knowledge and processes has expanded. In other words, their identity had changed. They had found their place or hybrid space within the circles of self, community and institutional world views. They had adapted to the Western institutional system. With the coalescing of the two worlds within their journey’s environment they could continue the journey with less contestation and anxiety. However, their uncertainty about how much this change would affect their life, particularly their cultural life afterwards, remained a concern to many of them. It could be argued that the process of critiquing and engaging with assumptions of another culture may be in itself acculturating and thus their concerns valid.

### 8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a generalised conceptual account of what happens during the learning journey of the participants in the study. Using concepts drawn from the voices of the participants in Chapters Five through to Seven, the response to critical incidents, the critical self-reflection and the resultant change in perception has been considered. As mentioned earlier, throughout their journey Indigenous students remain in an area of contestation between two cultures (as it is referred to in Chapter Seven), until their Individual Perception of Position changes through critical reflection and metaphorically moves to further encompass Western knowledge. This results in the student becoming better able to manage Western settings but increases concern for its effect on their cultural identity. That is, the impact on their own cultural position. But with confidence comes a degree of understanding that as Indigenous students they are within that
hybrid space where they can remain an Indigenous person with their own cultural connections and practices but that they can now manage working within a Western setting as well.

This chapter has now completed the analysis of the outcomes of the study. Using these outcomes, the next chapter, Chapter Nine, will consider practical ways in which institutions can support and enhance Indigenous student learning.
Chapter Nine

Informing Institutional Practice

The challenge for tertiary...institutions...is to develop courses of study that begin with the knowledge and skills that the students bring with them from their communities, and then develop the students’ study programs through continual reference to their society, their culture and their communities’ needs (Wes Lanhupuy, MLA (1988, p.4) in an address to a graduation ceremony at Batchelor College, Northern Territory.

9.1 Introduction

In recent years, the concept of diversity in tertiary education has been embraced by educators, policy makers and curriculum designers. The results of this has been a broadening of educational delivery, the recognition of different cognitive styles and approaches to learning, and the provision of a diverse range of learning experiences to students (McLoughlin & Gower, 2000). These challenges have led universities to introduce learning and teaching supports to cater for diverse learner needs.

Based on the findings of previous chapters, this chapter will consider practical ways in which institutions can support and enhance Indigenous student learning. Critical issues identified in previous chapters will be examined and these will serve as signals for suggestions as to where institutions can improve retention with respect to their Indigenous student cohort.

How well institutions have catered in the past for the diverse needs of Indigenous students is outside the scope of this thesis. However, an overview of what is offered across Australia in terms of support is to be found in Chapter Three. It is noted there (3.6) that institutions have two choices: encourage students to abandon their cultural background and adapt to, that is become acculturated into, the institutional ways of doing (Tinto, 1987) or transform the institution to adapt to the needs of the minority student groups (Kuh & Love 2000). This study suggests that the story is not as simple as that. As mentioned in Chapter Three, two alternative perspectives exist concerning what is socially possible for a student from a minority group engaging with the institutional culture (Rendon et al, 2000, cited in Prebble, 2004, p.85). One perspective cites Valentine’s bicultural educational model, which shows that minority students can be
simultaneously socialised in two different cultures whilst the other perspective cites De Anda’s (1984) concept of dual socialisation, possible when an overlap between the two cultures is fostered. As cited in Prebble (2004), Rendon et al (2000, p.137) recommended the coalescing of the two cultures and that individuals not totally separate themselves but instead be supported to transit between two cultures.

Whilst these United States studies have not been duplicated in Australia, it would appear from institutional practice that Australian institutions are adopting that alternate perception, that a coalescing of pathways is a possibility. That is, the acknowledgement that Indigenous culture can be recognised and respected within a Euro-centric institutional culture that is changed very little overall by the presence of this practice. This is evidenced by Indigenous study centre enclaves being set up and given support to exist within an institutional campus. The results of this study would suggest that there is a need at the institutional level for a deeper understanding of, and hence commitment to, the cultural complexities surrounding the informal learning experiences of their Indigenous students.

To arrive at this conclusion, this chapter will initially revisit the learning that occurred during the academic journey. Following this, a number of institutional strategic improvements will be explored that could be adopted to create a learning environment that is commiserate with the academic, administrative and social needs of Indigenous students.

9.2 Challenges facing the student
In previous chapters, Indigenous participants in the study identified a number of issues related to their study environment that they understood had the potential to critically affect the outcome of the journey for them. An in depth description of the complexity of these issues has occurred in previous chapters. This information will form the basis for the discussion in the next section concerning how institutions can provide the much-needed appropriate support for Indigenous students. During the course of the research it was noted that the following factors influenced the progress of the student (Research Question 2):

(1) The learning context across two cultures is very complex (the arriving stage).
(2) Social learning does not happen in a consistent, linear way but seems to occur concurrently and in an ad hoc fashion (the surviving stage).
(3) Life in tertiary study becomes difficult and challenging for Indigenous students from early in the enrolment process (the *surviving* stage).

(4) Action involving choice occurs when the participant has to confront and manage the contested space in which the Indigenous student and the person representing the institutional culture meet (the *surviving* stage).

(5) An imbalance in understanding across the cultural divide triggers a series of significant incidents during their journey, each with varying degrees of impact on the individual and their learning (the *surviving* stage).

(6) Students need to engage both formally and informally with the institution and grow through the informal learning process that adds to the perception they have of themselves as a learner and a human being (the *surviving* stage).

(7) The culturally-based situations that students are dealing with are layered with additional meaning and levels of interpretation (the *sustaining* stage) that need to be managed by the student.

(8) Because of the strong motivational influence to succeed, itself based on cultural undertones, students need to engage in critical reflectivity until they learn to construct their social identity in the new context, whilst attempting to preserve their cultural integrity (the *sustaining* stage).

These issues have been identified by the participants in the study as factors influencing their journey and affecting whether they succeed or not. In summary, the study indicates that the participants’ learning is very complex, involving multi-level understanding of cross-cultural experiences and management of challenging situations. It involves an initial motivation that is culturally-based and appears to result in success when the Indigenous student can find that place, or hybrid space, from where they believe that they are managing the challenging situations that arise but with their cultural identity still identifiable. The study shows that the learning process for an Indigenous student involves them critiquing their own cultural perspective and, at the same time, attempting to understand the cultural assumptions of the Western institutional culture.
The focus now is to examine how tertiary institutions can manage to support this need of Indigenous students such that, at the same time as learning Western responses through an acculturation process, the students can keep themselves culturally safe. But at the same time, engage the institution in a closer understanding of how to make the learning journey for the student a less volatile one and yet be within the financial and administrative realms of possibility for the institution. The next section will consider what is currently happening within tertiary institutions to support the student learning. This will be followed by development of a Model of Support.

9.3 How institutions currently support student learning
As mentioned earlier, the results of this study would suggest that there is a need at the institutional level for a deeper understanding of, and hence commitment to, the cultural complexities surrounding the informal learning experiences of their Indigenous students.

Current researchers in this field are now grappling with the practicalities and mechanics of institutional achievement of cultural safety, to deconstruct what they are responsible for constructing in the first place (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p.28). The word ‘Safety’ in Cultural Safety suggests a standard that must be met or one’s activity is unsafe. However, it is recognised that it is not analogous to other forms of physical safety but is more like an adequate ethical standard (that places the) emphasis on the role and attitude of practitioners in constituting disadvantage, rather than focusing solely on the identity and experience of the client (Hart, Hall & Henwood, 2003, p.486). This involves an institutional recognition that it has a responsibility not to contribute to disadvantage but to consider the impact its policies and procedures have on its students’ well-being. Whilst this is where the philosophy of tertiary institutions currently sits, the experience of the students in this study demonstrates that practical implementation of the philosophy is wanting. In fact the institution has to modify its practices in order to be more commiserate with the cultural environment with which the students identify. This will be discussed later in the section on how the institution can better support the students.

Adapting an institution to one of Cultural Safety, using a whole-of-institution process, currently involves:
• An inclusive Indigenous values base being used for all events within the institution, for example Welcome to Country/festivals/calendars/promotions depicting Indigenous history etc. One operational aspect of vocational training programs is noted by Schwab (2001) who acknowledges that respect is needed by education and training staff for the use of Aboriginal English spoken by many College students (in this case study, Booroongan Djugun College in Mid-North New South Wales) as a functional form of English communication even though the training college emphasised literacy and numeracy skills (p.3);

• Institutional staff being aware of their own attitudes and how they may impact on others; and

• Staff understanding any specific cultural issues being experienced by their students.

If staff are congruent and have established rapport, they are in a position to be culturally appreciative and hence to interact effectively with their students. According to Williams (2004), the development of the above strategies results in Cultural Safety as the outcome using such ongoing practical strategies as Indigenous Support Staff and Indigenous Enclaves/Precincts on campus with an over-riding institutional focus on partnerships and collaboration with the local and national Indigenous communities.

But there is a flaw in the argument: the focus is still not on the institutional practices. The development of this model of Cultural Safety (Williams, 2004) is still dependent on professionals demonstrating a culturally sensitive attitude to disadvantage and, by osmosis, collectively developing a culturally safe environment within the institution. It does not recognise a role for the practitioner to explicitly question the structural systems that perpetuate inequality. In this sense, according to Hart et al (2003), the models to date (Williams, 1999, Campinha-Bacote 1999, Bin-Sallik 2003, Williams, 2004) have been anti-discriminatory, rather than anti-oppressive.

In most tertiary institutions, students are treated individually because the institutional environment in general lacks the foundation of spirituality and relationship bonds on which Aboriginal culture is based. Family connections, home environment, religious practices, family or political obligations are generally an unknown factor to the institutional staff and management.
hierarchy with respect to their students. And yet research has shown that supported, successful transitions into tertiary studies that improve student performance, particularly with respect to Indigenous students, include family involvement (Ford, 2006; Slee, 2003). As mentioned earlier, how the participant makes meaning of their new encounters, without feeling that they have compromised their cultural identity, stimulates a major social learning experience. Indigenous students do not want the tertiary learning experience to change them significantly in their identity make-up: they do not want to appear changed in their cultural perspectives because this would lead to a feeling of isolation from family and cultural roots. Furthermore, a perception by family members or their community that the student has undergone an identity change or has repudiated cultural values may cause them to be ostracised. The fear of this happening was evident in conversations with the students.

To produce an all-encompassing culturally safe environment for all students and especially for Indigenous students, the focus recently has been on a three staged process of turning an institution around from just having a check list (Bin Sallik 2003, p.21) or a short-term, cost-effective, quick-fix approach (Williams, 1999, p.2). As Williams (1999) concluded:

We need to move on in order to genuinely address the challenges of cultural safety and service delivery...Programs and practices will continue to perpetuate assimilationist practices if this critical issue is not dealt with upfront...expand the ideas in order to meet structural and systemic challenges (p.2).

Balatti et al (2004) show in their action research project that TAFE institutes predominantly exhibited assimilationist tendencies when confronted with an increasing number of Indigenous students in mainstream programs. However there were a few examples of a second institutional perspective.

The second perspective emerging in the literature (Berger 2001-2, Thomas 2002) goes beyond integration. It includes the institution itself changing or adapting to suit the cultural, social and economic needs of students (Balatti, 2004, p.16). Current institutional thought (politically-correct) is indeed moving towards changing or adapting to suit the cultural, social and economic needs of students, as mentioned above, ensuring that the institution exhibits an over-arching Culturally Safe Environment for the Indigenous (and other) students. Such an environment is:
spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe, for people; where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning together with dignity, and truly listening (Williams, 1999, p.213).

Such an environment pre-supposes that there is a systemic imbalance of power within the institution and that a transfer of this power from the institution to the service recipient is required for a student to feel culturally safe (Williams, 2004). But how can this environment be achieved? Is it the whole answer?

The example of institutional objectives from one university that was referenced in the early part of the chapter included a commitment to provide educational opportunities and to create an educational environment where Indigenous peoples can realistically develop the skills and competencies needed to ensure self-regulation and self-determination within the broader contexts of Australian society. This was to be achieved by:

- Providing learning experiences that create positive student responses and maximise the chances of success;
- Meeting student needs by being flexible in terms of access, courses, modes of delivery, location of teaching and student support;
- Providing genuinely flexible programs which combine personal support with advanced teaching delivery; and
- Strengthening services for students studying off-campus throughout Australia.

Expanded, this would support what Williams (1999) suggested as the minimum or generic requirements for a workplace or institutional set of principles or guidelines for cultural safety:

- Respect for culture, knowledge, experience, obligations;
- No assault on a person’s identity or dignity;
- Clearly defined pathways to empowerment and self-determination;
- Recognition of the right to promote, develop and maintain own institutional structures, distinctive customs, traditions, procedures and practices;
- Recognition of more than one set of principles, one way of doing things;
Commitment to the theory and practice of cultural safety by personnel and trained staff;

Debunking of the myth that all Indigenous people are the same;

Working with where people are at and not where you want them to be;

‘Right to make own mistakes’, people doing it by themselves, being active and not passive;

Careful negotiation of power “outside” professional skills and knowledge which may be used to enhance decision-making;

Make the time required for skills and context to develop a certain level of understanding, otherwise the knowledge and skills of outsiders can dominate organisational directions;

Needs to be consistent ongoing broad approaches (not one cause, one solution);

Communicate co-operatively;

Clarification of the place and role of non-Indigenous staff; and

Emphasis on community control or ownership which does not abdicate professional from the responsibilities of their job and other obligations.

However, this list of institutional management operatives was still being considered from the institutional perspective. This study shows that the significant personal learning that occurred during the journey was centred more on the perspective of the informal learning experiences of the participants, such as making meaning of incidents and how to manage them, and less on what the institution had to offer in the way of support. In the next section consideration will be given to what the institutions can do from the perspective of supporting the learning that does occur and how this can be developed into a Model of Support to inform institutions concerning appropriate practices for ensuring success within their Indigenous student cohort.

9.4 Model of Support for institutional practice

In Chapter Eight the results of the study indicate that by the surviving stage the students begin to analyse their preferred way of learning; they identify difference and the need for this; they identify the presence of an institutional world view in comparison to an Indigenous world view; and they note how they have to adapt or coalesce their ways of doing with the institutional ways of doing. It is arguable that the process of critiquing other cultural assumptions has the potential to be acculturating.
In a section of this chapter (9.2) it has also been noted that the participants’ learning is very complex, involving multi-level understanding of cross-cultural experiences and management of challenging situations. In summary their learning involves the following:

1. Students becoming aware of the benefit to them of utilising informal learning strategies to manage the incidents they encounter. For example, using the strategy of social networking by seeking support from other people, initially from the Indigenous community but also talking through issues with other community members and institutional staff either within or external to the institution.

2. Students becoming aware that they needed to understand and appreciate that within such a complex environment as a tertiary institution there are many viewpoints and behaviours and not all of them compatible with the Indigenous perspective.

3. Students appreciating that later in the journey they need to utilise another form of informal learning using a process of reflecting on both their own culture and the institutional cultural practices: developing and trying out a range of culturally appropriate coping strategies both within and without the institution to manage the issues that arise, the result being that they grow in confidence and find their place within the institution, not where they can best ‘fit’ but where they feel nurtured and respected.

4. Students appreciating that a successful outcome is assured when students and the institution negotiates a common understanding: students arrive at a hybrid space within the tertiary institutional environment where they could feel able to manage the challenges and still maintain their Indigenous cultural perspective or identity.

From this list an overview of the elements of the institutional learning environment critical for success can be generated (Research Question 3), the topic of this chapter.

1. Motivation connected with family or community

Indigenous culture is based on family and community connections. From the early part of the journey when the student, in the main, is motivated and supported by the community, when this trust and belief in them acts as a massive motivational influence, the student is self-motivated and keen to achieve. Unbroken, regular family and Indigenous community connections make the difference. In this study, students who persist with their studies hold strong personal goals
connected with family and community needs. Success in their study is linked with their ability to manage the challenges with, in the main, support from family or community through social networking. This study shows that critical reflection requires often stressful critical incidents while retaining the motivation to succeed. This concept of a strong motivational influence, based on family connections and support, is supported in numerous studies (Walker, 2000; Abbott-Chapman & Edwards, 1998).

2. Understanding of the process of change through which the students are travelling

For Indigenous students to experience less stress and challenge during the journey it is necessary for institutional staff to understand the process of cultural change, potentially a change in identity whilst maintaining strong cultural roots, that is part of the student’s learning journey. Life in tertiary study is difficult and challenging for the Indigenous students from early in the enrolment process and this continues until well into the surviving stage. For Indigenous students to feel comfortable with the institutional environment more quickly, institutional staff need to be made aware of, or become familiar with, the stages through which the students pass before they feel able to manage both worlds in which they have been immersed. They have to confront and manage the contested space in which they find themselves when they cross paths with the institutional representatives for a particular reason. An imbalance in understanding during these negotiations will trigger a series of significant incidents during their journey, each with varying degrees of impact on the individual and their learning. It would be preferable if institutional staff were aware of these potential crises and work through ways in which they can lessen the impact their policies and procedures may have on the student.

3. Understanding the importance of informal learning practices

Institutional practices would appear to be more user-friendly and flexible if, for instance, institutional staff were more aware of, and responded to, the informal learning needs of their students who arrive at the commencement of their journey. In some instances these students arrive with little appreciation of the substantial differences in cultural practices between themselves and the institution and the depth of reflection that managing this difference will involve them personally. It is not enough to consider only the formal learning aspect of tertiary-
level institutional life. Time needs to be available to focus on the informal aspects of campus life and support the significant informal learning curve that faces the Indigenous student. With the knowledge that these three elements within the institutional learning environment are critical for success for an Indigenous student, the next section will use these results of the study to develop a Model of Support. This Model is based on the premise that Cultural Safety is not enough. Cultural Sensitivity, utilising a combination of the two concepts of Cultural Nurturing and Cultural Connections, is required if an Indigenous student is to be fully supported on the journey and arrive in the previously mentioned hybrid space where they can feel confident that they are managing the coalescing of institutional and Indigenous perspectives. Technically this may mean that they have been acculturated into the Western cultural assumptions and mores, yet still able to keep themselves culturally ‘safe’. In the next section I will explain this model and indicate the challenges associated with each part of the model.

9.4.1 Cultural Sensitivity
As mentioned above, the next section will explain the Model of Support that this research has produced. First of all the components of the model, Cultural Nurturing and Cultural Connections, need to be reviewed. This section will consider each component individually and then bring them together to explain the model.

9.4.1.1 Cultural Nurturing
Nurturing is about collectively practicing cultural safety at the institutional level. By definition, nurturing has its foundations in our natural sensitivity to another person’s perception of the world. This is expressed collectively when society empathises with cultures different to our own. This allows us to teach more effectively, to communicate in ways that deepen our relationships with each other and to ensure that the person stays (culturally) safe within society, in particular within educational institutions.

For institutional nurturing to become a reality, institutional staff need to consider the Indigenous student as a holistic individual and, as such, nurture and support that which is important to their success. From this study what has proved important is the development, and use of, informal learning strategies such that the student eventually reaches their specific hybrid space, mentioned above. In other words, it is essential that institutional staff appreciate the student’s
commencement-level concerns and needs and work co-operatively with both the student and their family towards increasing the student’s awareness of the processes and informal learning skills necessary for the successful attainment of their formal education. For example, institutional practices could encourage the observance or awareness of the Indigenous students’ informal learning needs in terms of a realistic understanding of the institutional processes and protocols.

An example of this could be how assessments are managed. As the results of the study show, early in the learning journey a student may not have the organisational skills or the communication skills to manage everything that is happening. It may be that their informal learning strategies are not yet finely tuned. With respect to one of the formal institutional processes, completing assessments, the student may have low English-writing literacy or they may be too shy or not used to public speaking in large-group lectures or tutorials. The student may also never have experienced exam conditions for an assessment. The ability to manage these life skills depends on educational background and experiences to date. A student who is inexperienced in a Western education system needs time to gather the experiences and develop the informal learning strategies required to manage the situations they encounter. Therefore, if the institution promotes and encourages Cultural Nurturing then, for instance with respect to assessment completion, a lecturer could utilise assessment flexibility. Firstly they would need to holistically assess the situation and note certain educational limitations in particular students. Those students could then be offered a variety of ways in which formal learning is assessed. For instance, instead of a written essay, the lecturer could introduce a topic in small groups and listen and assess each student as they verbally contribute their knowledge and understanding. Such flexibility could be encouraged until such time as the student has gained the necessary skills to undertake a more formalised assessment. Through this period of support the institutional staff would be clearly defining, in conjunction with the student and their family, the skills required to advance in the course and assisting the student to attain these.

In an institution where Cultural Nurturing is promoted and encouraged, there could be a lessening of demand on students to have an understanding of Western approaches. Staff could show greater understanding and support concerning matters such as the student’s appreciation of timeframes and what assessment deadlines actually mean in reality in terms of their personal
organisation skills. This would pave the way for less misunderstanding and difference between cultural practices and hence less confrontation. This is in contrast to the current practice of institutional support focusing on the more formal learning needs of the student, such as curriculum content and provision of a computer laboratory or specific support enclave.

9.4.1.2 Cultural Connections
Considerable research has shown a strong cultural continuity among urban Indigenous people (Forrest, 1998; Malcolm, 1998; Malin, 1989; Toussaint, 1987). This has been verified in this study and is the basis, or foundation, for the model of strategic support developed here. Through their portrayal of the day to day lives of their people, Indigenous writers such as Archie Weller (1986) confirm the validity of cultural continuity (Partington et al, 1999).

This chapter earlier referenced the necessity of students to have a clearly defined motivational influence, strongly connected with their family or community, for success to be assured. In the main this study found that, during the initial few weeks the Indigenous students’ informal networking was mostly connecting with Indigenous family or community members. However, as their needs changed it became apparent to them that these connections were running out of knowledge and could not provide the support that was needed. It was later in the surviving and sustaining stages that the need became apparent for seeking further afield in terms of networking. The confidence of the students grew and they networked with other peers or institutional staff. However, family and community connections remained strong, providing support for the student in the form of cultural balance and cultural integrity whilst they are being acculturated into the Western institutional mores through informal learning processes.

Informal networking provides the support and advice that the students need for their effective management of incidents and issues as they arise. It allows them the freedom to access information and tap into the experiences of their networks, use trial and error, brainstorm options and seek reassurance within a culture familiar to them. With support from family and community members during the transition to their own culturally safe space, students can be nurtured through their concerns and fears with the potential that the impact of institutional acculturation on their cultural identity is reduced. An institutional nurturing of these networks in a culturally safe environment can inform the prescription for a sustainable culturally-sensitive tertiary
environment containing those elements considered by Indigenous students to be critical for course progression or completion.

Unfortunately, tertiary institutions do not use this powerful tool. In most instances, academic and administrative staff function independently of the family connections of the student. This study has shown the importance of family connections for successful outcomes with wave pattern critical incidents and the analogy of a journey in the learning experience. The nurturing that is required for success begins with the family and the Indigenous community. If there was a closer relationship between the institution and the student’s family then the student’s anxieties and challenges would be shared by, or at least known to, both the staff and the family. In this way, the amplitude of the sine wave may not metaphorically reach the heights that it does when the student is trying to sort out the issues themselves.

In summary, in an institution where Cultural Connections is promoted and encouraged, as one institution in the study attempts to do, there could be strong management support for recognising the importance of encouraging Indigenous support systems, such as family involvement, to be an official part of the learning journey.

However, in promoting this philosophical concept of Cultural Connections, with the involvement of both family and institutional staff co-managing the students’ learning journey, an ethical dilemma is introduced. This is because it requires re-consideration of well-established ethical practices regarding privacy and some currently unsupported practices such as inclusion of unenrolled people in the course delivery. For instance, in order for lecturers to build trust the supporting family it may be necessary for the lecturers to discuss the progress of a student with trusted family members. It may be necessary for the institution to invite family members on field trips or to participate in tutorials. If institutions modify their protocols to allow and even encourage such practices it can produce a co-operative arrangement involving both the family or community and the institution to better support the student. This practice of sharing concerns about a student with a third party means that in the long run the potential for conflict in the hybrid space is reduced and the student is more likely to be successful.
The difficulties raised for the institution from a policy point of view is that there are current privacy, legal and insurance issues that potentially limit the scope of these practices. Institutions would have to have the policies, practices and legal underpinnings available for course co-ordinators, lecturers and support staff to have the level of freedom required for them to be able to achieve enough flexibility to meet these cultural outcomes. For example, if an Indigenous student is not turning up to class and yet shows great potential when in class, contact by institutional staff with family can bring immediate results. Asking a family member to attend class with the student and be involved in field trips or tutorials can encourage the student to see how valued their presence is. It can also bridge the divide between home and family such that discussions can occur at home concerning topics under discussion in class. This link also produces another level of personal accountability into the learning journey, assisting the student to reflect on their progress.

Despite these many benefits, such institutional practices would require a modification of their current protocols but the results of this study suggest that this is a necessary step forward if Indigenous students are to succeed in greater numbers than they currently do.

9.4.1.3 The Model of Support
In summary, tertiary institutions need to make the necessary protocol changes to be able to deal with the fact that Indigenous students have to learn Western cultural assumptions and mores, often through volatile and chaotic circumstances during which they may leave and which, it could be argued, leads to acculturation. However, at the same time as this is happening the Indigenous students are trying to keep themselves culturally ‘safe’, so institutions need to assist this two-pronged process to occur with as little disruption as is administratively and academically possible.

One way, as mentioned above, is to lessen the demand on students to understand Western approaches in such detail but at the same time support greater use of Indigenous family connections. Institutions need to foster relationships with the family and community connections of the students. This study shows that more institutional Cultural Sensitivity involving the simultaneous development of Cultural Nurturing and Cultural Connections is required. The focus needs to be on assisting the student to arrive at their individual hybrid cultural space within
which each student can feel empowered to make decisions and control their learning journey from their individual Indigenous perspective. Institutions need to respond more deeply than the current cursory treatment of institution-invoked safety. Whilst recognising that the cultural connections are explicit and essential, as one participant in the study explained

*My friends, you know, my black friends, have helped me to maintain my identity. They have helped me in my course. It is very good mixing with other Indigenous students...I get help sorting out problems.*

identities are always fragmented and intersect in a constantly changing, sometime conflicting array (Weaver, 2001, p. 240). As one participant explains, on returning again to complete her studies asks:

*How much of an Indigenous person’s identity is bound up in their position or considered position in Indigenous society? How much can be allowed to be ‘taken over’ by the other world of western education? I change every time I come back here to study. And I don’t know if the change is one for the good.*

The effect of such an assimilating experience on cultural identity is the focus for another study but consideration that this has been raised by the participant means putting a high priority on considering the process for growing social capital by researching opportunities for trust and cooperation. Only then will Indigenous students feel that they have found the space from which to exist in both worlds – the institutional worldview and the Indigenous cultural perspective. They will have found the essential criterion for success.

### 9.5 Conclusion

Based on the issues of significance as identified by the students, this chapter has given practical consideration to the strategic institutional improvements that could be adopted to create a learning environment that is commensurate with the administrative, academic and social needs of Indigenous students. These strategies involve tertiary institutions making the necessary protocol changes to enable Indigenous students to more easily manage and understand Western cultural assumptions and mores within the tertiary environment. This includes considering the overall demands on Indigenous students who are new to study at this level. In addition to this, incorporating strategies such as making greater use of Indigenous family and community relationships in the support of their students could pave the way for a smoother journey. Whilst institutions need to proactively foster relationships with the family and community connections
of the students, this study also shows that more institutional Cultural Sensitivity involving the simultaneous development of Cultural Nurturing and Cultural Connections is required. The focus needs to be on assisting the student to arrive at their individual hybrid cultural space, within which each student can feel empowered to make decisions and control their learning journey from their individual Indigenous perspective essentially without loss of cultural identity.

This chapter and the previous chapter have now finished the analysis of the implications of the study for both Indigenous tertiary students in a cross-cultural context and the tertiary institutional environments themselves. The next chapter, as a final chapter, will review the study and make suggestions for further research.
Chapter Ten

Conclusion

*A researcher is not looking for the answer, but for the source of more questions.*

(Sue Bowler, Newscientist, 27th September, 1997, p. 42)

10.1 Introduction

Practical consideration of institutional strategic improvements that could be adopted to create a learning environment that is commiserate with the administrative, academic and social needs of Indigenous students has been addressed in the previous chapter. This chapter will review the study, reconnecting the outcomes to the initial research propositions, consider the limitations of the study in light of the results and make suggestions for further research.

10.2 Connecting Outcomes to Research Questions

This thesis started by stating that it is widely acknowledged that Indigenous people in Australia endured many generations of discriminatory, segregated, inferior and ‘culturally-adapted’ education until well after World War II (Lane, 1998). This meant that Indigenous students were at a distinct disadvantage in being able to participate on an equal footing with other Australians in society in general, and in the field of education in particular. For decades, discussions about the importance of equality of access to educational services, equitable educational participation and appropriate strategies and approaches to Indigenous education have fuelled debate from community and government organisations and the public in general (EL-Ayoubi, 2004).

The current practices of educational institutions in their designing of courses, their facilitating and supporting of student learning and their assessment of student efforts are seen to have a direct impact on Indigenous students’ successful participation. Education has been flagged by the Federal Government as one of the key factors in the Australian reconciliation process (Social Justice Report, 2007). The incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning into tertiary institutional constructs and practices is paramount in establishing a study environment
where the inter-cultural learning journey is mutually inclusive (Dodson, 1994). But the question arises: what is the culturally appropriate way of doing this?

Each player in the Indigenous tertiary learning journey brings with them their own cultural safety discourse and this needs to be explored and shared as the journey continues. Noel Pearson confirmed this recently when he expressed the need for Indigenous people to be placed in a position where they are able to choose lives that they have reason to value – necessitating strong social and cultural norms to be instilled in the young people during their formative years so they will develop to their utmost potential (AICD, 2008). This raises questions about how young Indigenous adults can reach their utmost potential in the current post-compulsory educational environment. Such considerations lie at the heart of the research focus in this study.

The study was considered within the parameters of a learning journey. Results have shown that during the course of the journey students experience a myriad of challenges and critical incidents that they must respond to and resolve if they are to continue in the journey. Using a variety of informal learning processes, such as networking, trial and error and reflection, students find a culturally-based personal space where they can challenge and reflect and determine a new framework of reference for themselves as an individual Indigenous person. This research perspective took into consideration both the challenges faced by the student within a Western institutional environment and the culturally-based personal identity crises they experienced when two world views meet.

This outcome was the result of research investigating the critical factors essential for success relevant to the learning environment of a group of Indigenous students enrolled in tertiary institutions across three geographically-diverse Case Study sites in the Northern Territory. In particular, the research sought to understand in what way Indigenous students studying in the tertiary sector are able to manage their participation in different world views, or multiple worlds (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The conceptualisation was expected to provide a theoretically sound basis from which value judgements can be made about the nature and quality of tertiary-level Indigenous educational experiences.
In summary, the study addressed the following research questions:

(1) What are the general institutional support structures in place for Indigenous students at tertiary institutions in Australia?

(2) Using Indigenous students’ perceptions, what are the factors that influence their reaction to the range of critical incidents and issues that arise during their learning journey, that have the potential to affect their progress?

(3) With the benefit of the findings, derived from achieving those objectives, what are the elements of the institutional learning environment critical to the Indigenous student’s successful completion of or ongoing progress in their course?

As a result of the research questions, two dominant foci emerged in this study:

(1) The need to investigate adult learning processes within a cross-cultural environment, particularly focusing on the Indigenous student’s experience and world view, and

(2) The necessity to review the issues related to Indigenous students making sense of, interpreting, and making progress in Western-focused institutional learning environments. The culturally-appropriate visual imagery associated with a journey was used throughout this thesis when referring to the experiences of the Indigenous students as they undertook their study program.

As explained in Chapter Nine, during the course of the research the study identified the following outcomes:

(1) The learning context across two cultures is very complex (the arriving stage).

(2) Social learning does not happen in a consistent, linear way but seems to occur concurrently and in an ad hoc fashion (the surviving stage).

(3) Life in tertiary study becomes difficult and challenging for Indigenous students from early in the enrolment process (the surviving stage).

(4) Action involving choice occurs when the participant has to confront and manage the contested space in which the Indigenous student and the person representing the institutional culture meet (the surviving stage).
An imbalance in understanding across the cultural divide will trigger a series of significant incidents during their journey, each with varying degrees of impact on the individual and their learning (the surviving stage).

Students engage with the institution and grow through the informal learning process which adds to the perception they have of themselves as a learner and a human being (the surviving stage).

The culturally-based situations that students are dealing with are layered with additional meaning and levels of interpretation (the sustaining stage).

Because of the strong motivational influence to succeed, itself based on cultural undertones, students engage in critical reflectivity until they learn to construct their social identity in the new context, whilst attempting to preserve their cultural integrity (the sustaining stage).

These issues have been identified by the participants in the study as factors influencing their journey.

In summary, the study indicates that the participants’ learning is very complex, involving multi-level understanding of cross-cultural experiences and management of challenging situations. It is supported by an initial motivation that is culturally-based and appears to result in success when the Indigenous student can find that place, or hybrid space, from which they believe they are managing the challenging situations that arise but while attempting to keep their cultural identity intact. The study shows that the learning process for an Indigenous student involves them critiquing their own cultural perspective and, at the same time, attempting to understand the cultural assumptions of the Western institutional culture.

These provide numerous opportunities for further research but prior to expanding on this, the limitations of this study will be presented.

10.3 Limitations

As with all research the findings need to be interpreted with regard to the limitations. To reiterate the major limitations noted previously in Chapter One:
Firstly, the specific area of study that was selected (Health Science) may have limited the general applicability of the findings. This limit was unavoidable given time constraints and the geographically dispersed location of the participating tertiary institutions. An area of HE and/or VET had to be selected which was likely to contain an adequate number of Indigenous enrolments. The Health Science area of study was selected as there were adequate Indigenous students enrolled in this area of study across the three case study sites.

Secondly, and most importantly, as with any study of this nature, to be conducted by a non-Indigenous researcher, a number of operational, political and moral concerns were identified. Whilst I had spent nearly two decades in the Northern Territory working in the field of adult education on Indigenous communities, appropriate protocols and procedures had to be followed. Assistance was sought from the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (AIATSIS, 2000). To that end, the processes and parameters continued to evolve as the study progressed.

It is acknowledged that analysing current and historical data as well as interpreting and categorising open-ended and closed questions by me alone meant that my world view and biases could give the results a particular perspective. Two practices were implemented to combat this: firstly, an Indigenous Reference Group was set up to advise and support the study, and secondly, it was important to include in the research design the perceptions of the Indigenous students as ‘voices’, forming the basis of the thesis methodology.

However, these limitations do not detract from the validity or the more general applicability of the findings. This is because the informal learning process evident in the subjects’ responses, and underpinning my analysis, is a human response to a wide range of situations across academic disciplines. It might therefore be concluded that these findings, whilst being specific to the three case study sites, also shed light on what happens to Indigenous students (and possibly students from other cultural groups) in other academic fields and tertiary institutions.

**10.4 Further Research**

The first research opportunity stems directly from the above limitations:
1. This interpretive study suggests that experience of study at tertiary level for Indigenous students who are mainly from remote areas in the Northern Territory is fraught with frustrations and challenges and that success is highly dependent on a strong culturally-based motivational influence being present from the commencement of the journey. Whether these findings are genuinely widely applicable (as suggested in 10.3 above) could be a concern. To address this, future research could test this potential limitation by extending the participant group beyond the Northern Territory and inviting participants studying a variety of areas of study from campuses across all states and territories of Australia. This addresses the potential concern that the findings in this study could be due to some peculiar aspect of the Northern Territory tertiary education sector or limited to rural and remote Indigenous students.

Of course, in increasing the sample size and examining a broader range of areas of study and tertiary institutions, care should be taken to consider the varying background conditions from which these parties come.

2. This thesis also claimed that challenging situations arose during the surviving stage when the participant has to confront and manage the contested space in which the Indigenous student and the person representing the institutional culture meet. It has also been referred to in Chapter Nine as an imbalance in understanding across the cultural divide. However, the comments about this could lack balance because this study involves interviewing only the Indigenous students for their view on details concerning interactions between the students and the institutional representatives. Expanding the research to include both sides of the communication scenario, such as interviewing representatives of the tertiary institutions involved, would deepen our understanding of what happens within the contested space. It would be interesting to be able to define the extent of the tertiary representatives’ level of Indigenous cultural awareness, and how this informs their practises, and whether this was at the level expected of staff in the institution’s policies and protocols. It would also be interesting to be able to define the extent of the Indigenous students’ awareness levels of Western institutional processes and protocols and to what degree this was a contributing factor in making situations challenging. By closely examining the actual communication that occurs within each incident, the researcher may be able to define actual moments during the confrontation where the ‘difficulties’ in the conversations relate to the turning points in the sine wave hypothesis put forward in this thesis. The potential is
to investigate when lack of cultural knowledge, on either sides of the conversation, elevates the situation from an enquiry into a confrontational one.

3. With respect to informal learning, the students gradually developed their own strategies to cope with the different incidents as they arose. In summary, while participants initially regarded tertiary education as empowering self-development both for themselves and their community, their ongoing personal commitment to community wellbeing continued to motivate and provide the foundation for the sustaining period of the learning journey. By the sustaining stage the students had all found a form of institutional support for their journey and did not in any way feel that they had compromised themselves by doing so, as they did feel earlier in the surviving stage of the journey when they were establishing themselves in their institution. In other words, their view of themselves had changed. They had gained a personal view that was different to the one with which they began the journey. Their knowledge had changed and their understanding of Western knowledge and processes has expanded. In other words, their identity had changed. They had found their place or hybrid space within the circles of self, community and institutional world views. They had adapted to the Western institutional system. With the coalescing of the two worlds within their journey’s environment they could continue the journey with less contestation and anxiety. However, their uncertainty about how much this change would affect their life, particularly their cultural life afterwards, remained a concern to many of them. It could be argued that the process of critiquing and engaging with assumptions of another culture may be in itself acculturating and thus renders their concerns valid.

Within this hybrid space the participant can identify as both a tertiary student and an Indigenous individual, armed with strategies to manage situations that may arise. A concept that could be explored in further research is the actual defining of this hybrid space. What are its characteristics and when does the Indigenous student become aware that they have reached this point in their journey? Further, this study could be expanded to examine how this personal attainment equips the student with the management of incidents that are external to tertiary institutions. Can we extrapolate that students who are comfortable with their identity in a tertiary study situation are also able to manage issues in other dimensions of their lives in a more balanced way?
10.5 Conclusion

In summary, this thesis has generalised about what happens during the learning journey of tertiary Indigenous students. It has been found in this research that they begin highly motivated, strongly aiming towards a course that will train them for improving the health and well-being of their community. The aim of the study was to both document the current tertiary institutional support structures available and record the perceptions of a sample of Indigenous students concerning their tertiary study journey and the issues of significance that arose as they undertook that journey. It was expected that the students would identify the critical elements of the study journey and these would be documented with the anticipated result that institutions may improve or review their support practices based on the perceptions of the students.

The research identified that the students all experienced intense frustration and disappointment with the many challenges faced during the journey but that they eventually found that space in the Western tertiary environment where they could be an individual without loss of cultural identity and yet able to manage challenging situations as they arose. The trigger for this personal and cultural growth was the informal learning generated by their unique experiences. Practical ways in which institutions can support and enhance Indigenous student learning from the perspective of the student and not just the institution have been detailed in Chapter Nine. The present chapter has concentrated on identifying the limitations of the study and recommending further research.

As mentioned in Chapter One, this thesis makes an important contribution to the current research on Indigenous student support in cross-cultural institutional contexts. By reporting the personal experiences of a considerable sample of Indigenous tertiary students through their learning journey, it addresses a significant gap in the literature of the learning experiences of Indigenous adult learners in tertiary institutional contexts.
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