FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' APPROACHES TO LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITY

By

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Abstract

Research on students' approaches to learning in higher education has consistently demonstrated a range of factors influencing students' approaches to learning. The vast majority of these studies have been carried out with British and Australian undergraduate students, primarily first year students. These studies focused on specific factors using models of inventories or questionnaires.

As a postgraduate student, my interest in tertiary education and my working background as a staff member in a Chinese university has led me to the present research. From my point of view, knowledge is constructed rather than transmitted. Students have their own characteristics in the process of constructing their own knowledge due to their diverse educational and life experiences. Thus, it is not appropriate to categorise them in certain fixed stereotypes. For understanding their learning experiences and exploring the factors which influence their approaches to learning, it is necessary to have interactions with them in order to gain in-depth insights.

This researcher used interviews on the basis of an investigation of the factors influencing learning from a sample of postgraduate students in a New Zealand university. The interview data was discussed with participants, other postgraduate students as well as some lecturers within the school. Common themes across participants were identified. In addition, the factors within each participant's interviews were presented to show the unique characteristics of the individual postgraduate students.

The findings from this study showed that the influence of students' prior knowledge and learning orientations was important and this supports the literature in this field. The contextual factors which include lecturers, choice and integration of courses, and assessments were found to affect students' approaches to learning and responsible for the variability of learning orientations. Consistent with other studies, work responsibilities, financial problems and family commitments were found to have an impact on approaches. Lecturers' preferred teaching and research styles and students' expectations of lecturers' support were found to be significant factors with regard to students' approaches to learning.

This study explored the factors that influence postgraduate students' approaches to learning, especially at the individual level. The findings have significance for understanding students' learning and improving the quality of learning. Lecturers might be aware of the diversity of students' characteristics and adopt appropriate teaching strategies for enhancing students learning. The school administrators and programme leaders might want to create a more positive environment for lecturers' better teaching practices. Postgraduate students in the similar situations may confirm the factors that influence their learning approaches and assume higher personal academic responsibilities for their learning.

In my future study, the lecturers teaching conceptions and factors that influence their teaching approaches will be investigated for mutual understanding between lecturers and students. Alternatively, further study might replicate the present research with a sample of postgraduate student in my home country (China) to identify the similarities and differences.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Xiaomin Jiao: _____

Date: _____

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expressed below. Any inappropriate expressions and errors existing are, no doubt, my own.

Chapter I: Introduction

My research journey

The thesis presented here is an extension of my interest in teaching and learning within the context of adult and tertiary education. The thesis also represents a significant and challenging personal journey causing reflection on my past tertiary experiences as a staff member in a Chinese university, and as a postgraduate student in a different context. The journeying towards change impacted my research methodology; from an approach which captured data using techniques which had participants remaining anonymous and distant from the researcher, to the selection of techniques that led to face-to-face and oral interviews with participants from other cultures. At issue here is my growing confidence in being able to sensitively interact with participants in my additional language, English. While this thesis gives an account of the actual research process, the unwritten story is the journal of these changes and their significance, personally and professionally. The following paragraphs seek to outline the important decisions made in shaping this research project.

Initially, my research proposal was constituted as an assignment within my course-work. This proposal focused on the experience of postgraduate students in New Zealand, their learning perceptions, approaches and outcomes. A diary approach and questionnaire were proposed to be used for collecting data on study time and workload. The revised two-factor Study Process Questionnaire (R-SPQ-2F) (Biggs, Kember & Leung, 2001) was intended to be used for gathering data on how students approach their study. This proposal was constructed near the end of the first year of academic study within my postgraduate programme. It was this proposal which led me to focus the research topic of my thesis on postgraduate students' learning approaches.

The present research reflects my interest in teaching and learning within adult and tertiary context as well as my working background. I had been working in a university in my home country (China) for more than fifteen years however, I wished to gain more information about the educational system within New Zealand. In addition, my interest in the research topic comes from my personal experiences of postgraduate learning. My postgraduate study started two weeks after my first arrival in New Zealand in 2003. I was returning to postgraduate study as an adult learner in a completely new educational system and social environment with English as an additional language, and as a

consequence, I experienced a great number of difficulties in my initial postgraduate course-work. I was keen to know if other postgraduate students' learning experiences were similar. Could this be different for other international students or domestic students?

The proposal for this completed research aimed at exploring 'environmental factors' which influenced postgraduate student's learning. My interest was in exploring the breadth of factors that impact student's learning. The techniques I initially identified and stated in the Participant Information Sheet included the use of a diary, a questionnaire and an interview. As stated in my research proposal:

> If you agree to take part you will be asked to complete a Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ, Biggs, 2001) before that semester starts. You will then be asked to keep an hourly study diary for a period of 1 complete week in the course of the semester for collecting data on study time and workload. A second questionnaire will be given at the end of the semester. Finally some students will be invited to have follow-up interview with the focus being on the study experience.

The feedback I received on my proposal indicated that "the postgraduate committee suggests deleting 'environmental' from the title". This would mean that a broader range of factors could be explored in the research and might also lead to a reconsideration of the methodologies.

This reconsideration of methodologies caused dramatic changes to the process of doing my thesis, and by extension, to my understanding of the characteristics of postgraduate student learning. I had initially assumed that students could be categorised within certain stereotypes subsequent as a consequence of data collected by questionnaires. However, constructionism views that all knowledge is 'contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). This suggested to me that an exploration of the influences on postgraduate student's learning might be conducted on the basis of their perceptions as captured in a questionnaire, or alternatively, the complexities of the lived experiences of my participants might be more appropriately captured through the use of a case study methodology. My growing awareness of this difference initiated a prolonged dialogue over the methodology and techniques selected to address my research question. As the researcher, I found myself balancing quantitative possibilities against a deeper understanding of the broad range of factors which influence these very unique

participants. Ironically, I advocated for deeper approaches to learning, something I also needed to apply in this thesis.

The original ethics application referred to the completion of a Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ). Upon further analysis and discussion with my supervisors, it was suggested that this particular instrument was too narrow in its purpose, focusing specially and solely on course design as this impacts the learning approaches, to the exclusion of other contextual factors. The breadth of the research question and the growing awareness of the complexity and intricacy of the influential factors, therefore, would not be fully served by this technique. It was argued that semi-structured face-to-face interview constructed to explore the range and impact of the factors influencing student's learning approaches, was more suitable to the research question. A pilot interview was conducted to appraise the suitability of proposed interview questions. As a consequence of the pilot study, the interview questions were slightly revised and the semi-structured face-to-face interview of participants was endorsed. The shift to a qualitative research project was now complete.

The transition described above remains a matter for my ongoing reflection as this relates to my own awareness and confidence in working with less manageable and structured research data obtained through interviews (this is sometimes called 'messy' data). Written communications and face-to-face interactions with participants increasingly built up my communication skills. My commitment to the research and my enjoyment of using the data collection techniques, and the whole research procession brought about a better understanding of the research topic itself as well as a deeper insight into the participants' uniqueness and complexities. An unexpected benefit of the research project was to hear some participants report that the process had provided them with a chance to reflect on their learning experiences and to voice their concerns to lecturers and administrators.

While the story of my personal journey will continue well beyond this study, this thesis has highlighted the influences on postgraduate students learning are indeed idiosyncratic and contextually-bound.

Chapter overviews

This thesis is broken into several sections. Following the first chapter which reviewed my research journey of shaping the present study, in the second chapter, I start with a review of the recent research literature pertaining to the basic concepts underpinning my study: study approaches, orientations and self-regulations in content to previous studies on influential factors focusing on undergraduate students' learning experiences. Then I outline the characteristics of postgraduate students and literature in this area, especially those that have been done within New Zealand. Finally, the rationale of the present study and the research question are presented.

In the third chapter, the methodology is presented. Here I explain my theoretical position of the knowledge construction and views of students' uniqueness. The research context of the present study and participants are then introduced. A pilot interview, data collection, ethical considerations and how the data is analysed are also presented in this chapter.

The findings are presented in the fourth chapter, which overviews the students' backgrounds. Then, the common themes across participants emerged from the data are outlined with support of substantial extracts from interview transcripts. After that, the influences of factors on each participant are summarised in the last part of the chapter.

Whilst the fourth chapter outlined the findings, these are discussed more fully in the fifth chapter. The discussion covers factors that influence the participants' study in this research, such as the students' prior knowledge; their orientations to learning; assessments and workload; their adjustment to the postgraduate learning environment; and their expectations of lecturers' support.

Based upon on these findings, the conclusion is the sixth chapter. In this chapter, I first summarise the findings of the present study. The strengths and limitations of this research are then discussed. Implications for enhancing students' learning and recommendations to school administrators, programme leaders, and students are provided. The directions of future research are presented in the final section of the thesis.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This review starts with the conventional conceptualisations of learning approaches and the expansion of the meaning of learning approaches. Then I look at the factors that influence student's learning approaches. After that, the research of postgraduate student learning approaches is reviewed and the rationale of the present study is presented.

Approaches to learning

Deep / surface and achieving approaches

Approaches to learning or learning approaches refer to the ways in which students go about their academic tasks, thereby affecting the nature of the learning outcome (Biggs, 1987). Students' approaches to learning (SAL) research originated in Sweden, with Marton and Saljo's (1976) study of surface and deep approaches to learning. The authors studied students' learning from the perspective of the learner, and came up with the idea of an 'approach to learning' (Biggs, 2001). Basing on qualitative analysis of interview data and descriptive analyses of differences between the learning behaviours of small numbers of students, these authors distinguished between deep and surface approaches to learning. The distinction between these two approaches gave rise to the deep-surface dichotomy in approaches to learning, which has become an emerging research area since then (Zeegers, 2002).

Biggs (1978, 1987) has expanded the notions of deep and surface approaches to learning. In Biggs's conceptualisation, students using the deep approach are intrinsically motivated to learn. They choose strategies aimed at maximising understanding by focusing on the meaning of the learning material, such as reading widely and integrating new learning with previous relevant knowledge. The deep approach is associated with an interest in the content of the task, a focus on understanding the meaning of the learning material, an attempt to relate parts to each other, new ideas to previous knowledge, and concepts to everyday experiences (Biggs, 1993). There is an internal emphasis where the learner personalizes the task, making it meaningful to his or her own experience and to the real world.

Students using the surface approach are motivated by factors that are external to the learning task, e.g. the desire to obtain a qualification and the fear of failure. Strategies involve satisfying, or investing the minimum amount of time and energy necessary to

meet requirements (Biggs, 1993). The learner who uses a surface approach perceives the task as a demand to be met, tends to memorise discrete facts, reproduces terms and procedures through rote learning, and views a particular task in isolation from other tasks and from real life as a whole.

Entwistle (1984; 1997) and Biggs (1978) identified a third approach 'strategic' or 'achieving, but it seems on the whole to be seen as the ability to switch between deep/surface approaches, rather than as a distinct approach (Volet & Chalmers, 1992; Haggis, 2003).

Students using the achieving approach are motivated to study regardless of interest, by the results from visible success and in particular high grades (Biggs, 1993). Strategies involve organising time and workspace, seeking cues from teachers as to what is expected, planning ahead, and prioritising.

Kember (2000) suggests that approaches to learning might be better characterised as a continuum rather than dichotomous deep and surface approaches. The positions upon the continuum are characterised by the intention and the strategy employed. The memorising without understanding intention and rote-learning strategy are on one end, while the intention of understanding and the strategy of seeking comprehension are on the other end of the spectrum. Kember (2000) describes the intermediate position in the following way.

> The intermediate position closer to the deep end of the spectrum arises from students who have a preference for seeking understanding, but recognise that their examinations normally require them to reproduce material. They, therefore, try to understand the concepts and then make sure the material is learnt so that they can get a good grade in the examination. The intermediate position towards the surface end of the spectrum arose because students, who initially intend to memorise, found the memory load became such that some selection became necessary as they progressed through the school (p.105).

Learning orientations

Gibbs, Morgan and Taylor (1984) had extended the notion of motivation and used the term "educational orientations" to refer to "the whole domain of higher education students' personal goals, intentions, motives, expectations, attitudes, worries and doubts in doing course or studies" (Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004, p. 360). Similarly, Beaty, Gibbs and Morgan (1997) define the learning orientations as "all those attitudes and

aims which express the student's individual relationship with the course of study" (p. 16). The orientation are the set of purposes which develops when an individual interacts with a given higher education context at a particular time in the student's life (Webber, 2004).

Study orientations can be seen as a hierarchical system (Honkimaki, Tynjala & Valkonen, 2004). In this system, the term 'general study orientations' refers to students' attitudes towards their education at a general level. These orientations are relatively consistent and have been divided into vocational, academic, personal and social orientations (Gibbs et al., 1984). The second level consists of domain-specific study orientations, which are more differentiated than the former. These orientations include meaning orientation, achievement orientation and reproductive orientation (Entwistle, 1988). The third level of orientations encompasses situational study orientations, which are the most inconsistent and concern an orientation to the performance of concrete tasks in studying situations.

Vermunt (1998) incorporated five learning orientations to explore students' aims and goals in relation to higher education. The "certificate directed" orientation describes a focus on passing examinations or earning credits, whereas the "vocational orientation" involves a focus on the professional application of the content studied. The "personally interested orientation" is similar to scales describing interest or intrinsic orientations in other inventories. The "self-test directed orientation" describes students' testing or proving their capabilities, while the "ambivalent orientation" indicates students' doubts about both the value of their courses and their ability to cope with the work.

Studies suggest that the concept of orientations to learning has validity across different types of student cohort. For example, Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs (1981) reported three orientations among UK Open University students, vocational, academic and personal. The Aboriginal students in the research of Digregori, Rarrington and Page (2000) were more likely to be orientated by the need of their communities. Previous research on North American adult students' orientations to enrol in university study has identified a variety of individual motivators such as desire for career change, intellectual curiosity and satisfaction in having a degree (Richardson, 1994). The orientations to learning found in these studies were thus determined to a significant extent by student characteristics and circumstances.

Learning approaches, metacognition and self-regulation

The various conceptualisations of student approaches to learning had been focussed on students' intentions: what students learn is influenced by what they intend to learn. This seems particularly true of the deep approach. Students using the deep approach pursue meaning and integration of knowledge. The strategies associated with the deep approach such as reading widely, thinking about what one has learned, and making connections with prior knowledge and present situation require time and mental effort (Evans, Kirby & Fabrigar, 2003). If students using this approach are going to be successful, by implication they require the ability to monitor their own learning progress and allocate mental resources (Biggs, 1985). This leads to the topics of metacognition and self-regulation.

Metacognition refers to the knowledge, awareness and control of one's own learning, one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them. Given that Biggs (1986) has also suggested the approaches to learning be considered as 'congruent motive-strategy packages', in that they comprise both an intention and a related strategy (p. 133), it is clear that the constructs of metacognition and approach to learning are strongly related. Indeed, Biggs and Moore (1993) consider them as one and the same thing.

Other researchers who have drawn links between approaches to learning and metacognition include Vermunt (1996) and Chin and Brown (2000). Vermunt (1996) identified four 'learning styles' which bear a strong resemblance to Entwistle and Ramsden's (1983) four 'study orientations'. For each learning style Vermunt (1996) identified a related mental model of learning and the regulatory strategies used. In the latter aspect Vermunt (1996) identified a development from external to internal regulation. Chin and Brown (2000) also found a notable relationship between students' approaches to learning and metacognitive activity. Aspects of metacognitive activity that were more prevalent amongst students using a deep approach included the following: self-evaluating their ideas, self-questioning when they encountered blocks, detecting the errors, considering a range of possible alternatives, and considering limitations in their ideas (Case & Gunstone, 2002).

Four learning styles were distinguished and described briefly with respect to just the learning strategies domain (Vermunt, 1998). The meaning-directed learning style encompassed self-regulation, relating and structuring, critical processing and

concretising strategies. The reproduction-directed learning style consisted of external regulation, memorising and analysing. The undirected learning style included only lack of regulation, within the learning strategies domain. The application-directed learning style mainly consisted of a learning orientation and a mental model of learning without high leadings on strategies.

Self-regulation in learning is most often related to the deep approach, whereas external regulation is more likely to be associated with surface approach. Other combinations, especially self-regulation with the surface approach, may result in poor learning outcomes (Vermunt, 2005).

Learning approaches and epistemology

Recent research in science education has shown the relationship between students' epistemologies and their approaches to learning science which, in turn, influence their choice of learning strategies and whether they integrate what they learn. For example, Tsai (1998) found that students having constructivist epistemological beliefs engaged in more active learning as well as used more meaningful strategies, whereas students having epistemological beliefs more aligned with empiricism tended to use more rote like strategies because they believed learning was like a collection of correct facts. Thus student' epistemological beliefs seem to shape their metalearning assumptions and influence their learning orientations. The adoption of a constructivist epistemology is related to more meaningful learning. When students engage in meaningful learning, they are purposeful and constantly monitor and reflect on the process of learning and evaluate the results of their own learning effort (Chin & Brown, 2000).

A student learning approach may be regarded as a typical coherent combination of several components: views about learning, regulation activities and processing activities (Wierstra, Kanselaar, Linden, Lodewijks & Vermunt, 2003). Most learning approach researchers assume both a certain stability and variability of learning approaches. It is assumed that a student's learning orientation is responsible for the relative stability of learning approaches, while the learning environment is responsible for the variability of learning approaches (Meyer & Muller, 1990).

Learning approaches in context

Key researchers in this area attempt to make it clear that the 'approaches to learning' framework is 'holistic' and 'relational' (Ramsden, 1987) and that it accommodates a multiplicity of elements that can only be understood within a context. Prosser and Trigwell (1999a) suggest that perceptions, approaches and outcomes are seen as separate entities for the purposes of analysis but that 'they should be considered to be simultaneously present in the student's awareness', rather than 'independently constituted' (p. 13). So student's interpretation of his/her situation in the context is considered to be vital of the determination of approaches to learning (Haggis, 2003).

Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) were the first to empirically establish a relationship between approaches to learning and perceived characteristics of the academic environment. They stressed the importance of the particular context in determining whether a deep or surface approach to learning is used, and emphasized that the approach to learning should not be seen as a style-like, stable trait of the student, but as a response to a situation.

Research efforts addressing the impact of students' perceptions can be readily framed within Biggs's (1989) 3P model, which conceptualises the learning process and an interacting system of three sets of variables: the learning environment and student characteristics (presage), students' approach to learning (process) and learning outcomes (product).

Presage factors tend to be those which exist prior to learning and include both personal and situational factors. Personal factors include student characteristics such as prior knowledge, IQ, home background, values, personality, and in the case of English as a Second Language and cross-cross-cultural students, language proficiency in the local medium of instruction. Situation factors include course structure, curriculum content, methods of teaching and assessment, and rules and regulations pertaining to institutional and classroom situations. These factors not only provide a 'climate' for learning, but also have motivational consequences, and are 'modifiable' (Biggs 1990, p. 6), indicating their potential for influencing a student's approaches to their learning. An approach to learning, therefore, is not simply a stable trait that a student possesses, but an interaction of both personal characteristics and the teaching and learning context (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001).

Process factors describe how students approach their learning. While there is some diversity in the terms used, there is a fair degree of empirical evidence that students adopt two basic orientations or approaches. A 'deep' approach to learning is described as striving for improved understanding by applying and comparing ideas. Conversely, 'surface' learning involves reproductive strategies with little attempt to integrate information (Marton & Saljo, 1976).

Product factors describe the learning outcomes (cognitive, affective or behavioural) which students derive from the learning process. Traditionally, depth, or accuracy of learning, has been summarily described through assessment scores. Recently, student's evaluations of education have become increasing discussed. These are generally of two types – global evaluations of accomplishment, or expressed satisfaction with a course, and specific perception of particular skill development (Lizzio, Wilson & Simon, 2002).

Learning outcomes are determined by a wide range of complex factors, such as fixed student-related factors such as ability; teaching-related factors such as curriculum, and methods of teaching and assessing; and the approaches to learning that students use while engaging in any particular task to achieve an outcome (Biggs, 1993). All these factors affect each other, forming an interactive and complex system.

In basic terms, the model proposes that, firstly, personal and situational factors influence a student to adopt a particular approach to learning which, in turn, medicates or influences the types of outcomes achieved; and secondly, that presage factors (e.g. perceptions of the learning environment) can also influence learning outcomes.

A student's approach to learning is not a stable trait of the individual, but rather the student uses an approach best suited to the learning situation and the learning context. An approach describes "the nature of the relationship between the student, context and task" (Biggs, Kember & Leung, 2001, p. 137).

As stated above, the way students learn is the result of the interaction between the person and his or her environment. Personal influences cause consistency in the way students learn, environmental, or contextual influences are responsible for variability (Vermunt, 2005).

Age may be an influencing variable. It is assumed that there are big differences between younger and older people in their learning. These differences pertain to someone's

position in society, the larger amount of life experience that adults bring with them to a learning situation, learning motivation and learning ability (Vermunt, 2005). Mature students are more likely than younger students to adopt deep approach or a meaning orientation towards their academic studies and, conversely, that they are less likely than younger students to adopt a surface approach or a reproducing orientation (Richardson, 1994). Three different reasons are motivational factors, the impact of secondary education, and the role of life experiences.

It is possible that gender differences influence the way in which men and women are inclined to learn (Richardson, 1994, 1995). Severiens and Ten Dam (1997) study the relation between learning styles and gender. They found that men, on average, scored higher than women on undirected learning, while women scored higher than men on reproduction-directed learning. Zeegers (2002), however, found no differences between male and female students in their approaches to learning.

Findings from the study of Zhang (2000) indicated that although parent education levels did not make a difference in learning approaches among Hong Kong and mainland Chinese students, higher parent education levels were associated with the use of deep learning strategy among the U.S. students. However, with no exception and for all three groups, travel and work experiences were significantly and positively associated with deep and achieving approaches.

Psychological health variables have gained a limited amount of attention in the academic performance literature. Lecompte, Kaufman, Rousseeuw and Tassin (1983) found that student's reporting high anxiety at the start of the academic year had significantly poorer grades at the end of the academic year than their less anxious peers.

Research has also shown that financial situation, social support and work responsibilities affect academic performance. Lecompte, Kaufman, and Rousseeuw (1983) found financial difficulties were a common reason for leaving university. Social support has also been found to influence academic performance. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found that the presence of a person who provides strong support and support from family or spouse are important predictors of student retention and academic success. Employment responsibilities have been found to influence student retention. Pantages and Creedon (1975, as cited in McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001)

found full-time students who worked more than 15 hours per week were more likely to withdraw than full-time students who worked less than 15 hours per week.

Besides personal influences there are also some contextual factors related to the learning activities that students employ. The most important and direct one is the way in which instruction and teaching are conducted (Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999). Research on more general contextual factors has focused on, for example, differences in educational experience (Marton & Saljo, 1997) and disciplinary differences (VanderStoep, Pintrich & Fegerlin, 1996).

Ramsden (1991) noted that students' perceptions of curriculum, instruction and assessment are key determinants of their approaches to learning and the quality of their learning outcomes. The study of Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse (1999) was the first study of its type to investigate the teachers' reports of their approach to teaching rather than the students' perceptions of their teachers' teaching, and to show relations between teacher's approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning. It appears that there is a relation between approach to teaching and the quality of student learning outcomes. Student-focused conceptual change approaches to teaching are associated with deep approaches to learning, and teacher-focused information transfer approaches to teaching are associated with surface approaches to learning.

According to Marton and Saljo (1997) people's learning conceptions originate in their experiences with learning and participating in education and training. In their study mainly students with little educational experience, irrespective of age, showed reproductive views on learning. They suggested that increasing experience in formal education goes together with a development in conceptions and views people have about learning.

The nature of the academic discipline is supposed to influence the kind of thinking strategies students use to learn. Different disciplines would pose different demands on the way subject matter can best be studied. Ramsden (1988) theorised that deep and surface approaches would have very different manifestations in different academic specialisations, in agreement with the context-dependent nature of approaches as originally formulated by Marton and Saljo (1976). Ramsden (1988) suggested that in science contexts, a deep approach to task might initially demand a narrow focus on details which, on its own, could appear to be a surface approach. In the humanities, he

argued that a deep approach would usually involve establishing personal meaning right from the beginning of a task. Entwistle (1997) also argues that researchers need to reformulate approaches to learning within different disciplinary contexts:

> The defining features [of deep and surface approaches] also fail to do justice to differences between disciplines. The specific processes involved in seeking deep understanding, as well as the balance between, must vary across subject areas. Ideally, the idea of a deep approach needs to be reformulated to show how it emerges in a particular course of study, while students need to be shown how they can apply different learning processes (including memorization) appropriately in seeking conceptual understanding. This is an area of research which is, so far, undeveloped, and needs attention (Entwistle, 1997, p. 216).

In summary, students approaches to learning seems to be determined by a whole complex of factors: students' learning orientations, student-related factors such as age, gender, prior experience, work responsibilities, personal commitment, psychological health; learning contextual factors such as curriculum, and methods of teaching and assessing; and engagement in any particular task to achieve an outcome. All these factors affect each other, forming a complex interactive system.

Research on postgraduate student learning approaches

The overlap in the study of student learning conceptualisations is considerable, however, the majority of studies relate to full-time undergraduates. As reviewed previously, students' cohorts, their prior knowledge and orientation to study influenced their approaches to learning. As the present study is focussed on what influences postgraduate students' learning approaches, it is necessary to investigate their characteristics.

There is a substantial increase in the student population in the postgraduate education programmes in tertiary education in New Zealand. Accompanying this growth in higher education is an increasing diversity amongst the student population. Students from different social and cultural backgrounds, with different experiences and varying levels of education bring with them different needs and academic potential (Strauss, Walton & Madsen, 2003).

Social and technological change is compelling many professionals to update and upgrade their knowledge base. A higher degree (particularly, postgraduate qualifications) has become an important qualification with which to advance career prospects in competitive labour markets. This university and many others in Aotearoa /

New Zealand are rapidly increasing postgraduate taught, or course-work masters theses to attract both mid-career professionals and international students who are, it would seem, preferring these types of programmes rather than the traditional research-lead thesis counterparts (Smith, 2005). The increasing dominance of the course-work masters programmes is a clear sign that these students are more concerned with exploring contemporary theoretical perspectives in a professional or vocational context than with carrying out the original research required by a thesis-based degree (Strauss, Walton & Madsen, 2003). Many graduates see postgraduate education as a pathway to better employment prospects. Course-work postgraduate students are often in full-time employment in demanding professional positions.

Postgraduate students already had experience of studying at university. Due to age and experiences, they are also likely to have had greater knowledge of the cultural, social and political life in which they have been working, studying and living. They are crucial to the continuity of the university system, and they are also an articulate and critical group that is likely to have given consideration to relevant issue (Lindsay, Breen & Jenkins, 2002). Postgraduates, particularly older students have very high levels of motivation. The work of Richardson (1994; 1995; 1998) indicates that older students are more likely than younger ones to adopt a deep approach to their learning, particularly as a result of their previous learning experiences. In other words, the expectations of postgraduate students are likely to be qualitatively different from those of undergraduate students. These differences are in addition to a range of cultural, social and political experiences for international students (Kiley, 2003).

While the visibility of postgraduate students within university communities has grown considerably in recent years, there has not always been adequate acknowledgement or exploration of ways of adapting to the needs of a more diverse student population. There is, however, only a small body of literature developing within the area of postgraduate student learning. The focus of most research into postgraduate education has been on issues associated with the supervision of research (Zuber-Skerritt & Ryan 1994); the experience of postgraduate research (Cryer, 1998); opportunities for promoting lifelong learning with postgraduate professionals (Edward, 2000); the experiences of international postgraduate students (Kiley, 2003; Meyer & Kiley, 1998; Cadman, 2000); collecting and responding to postgraduate student feedback (Pearn, 2004); students' experience of postgraduate supervision (Sayed, Kruss & Badat, 1998);

students in postgraduate medical education (Smits, Verbeek, Nauta, Cate, Metz & Dijk, 2004); views of postgraduate students on academic research and teaching quality (Lindsay, Breen & Jenkins, 2002).

Like other literature in the study of student approaches to learning, these studies are mainly conducted in European, North American countries, and Australia. Instruments for studies were developed, tested, and applied in these countries. Little research has been completed within the New Zealand tertiary educational context. To the best of my present knowledge, some examples (not limit to these) are described below.

Webb (1997) from Otago University critically evaluated the influence of phenomenography and the deep/surface metaphors on staff development. He examined the teaching methods of academic staff and students' learning activities. The focus was on the staff development in Australia and Britain.

The case study reported by Houston and Rees (1999) from Massey University provided a student based action research project into quality management within a postgraduate education programme. Based on research conducted at Massey University, and an extensive literature review, Scheyvens, Wild and Overton (2003) argued that academic success is strongly related to the personal well-being of international students. Particular pressures were faced by students during the first few months as they adapted to a new cultural, linguistic and learning environment. Female students and those with families faced additional, continuing pressure.

Strauss, Walton and Madsen (2003) and Strauss and Walton (2005) explored the experiences and expectations of EAL (English as additional language) postgraduate students at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), both international and domestic students, and their supervisors in relation to thesis writing, revealed some of the dilemmas faced by both parties in the research and supervision project.

Rationale of the present study

Although some studies have provided information about postgraduate student learning, few studies have had a sufficiently descriptive approach about individual differences in learning to offer teachers alternatives to help improve students' learning. What remains scarce in the literature is the research on postgraduate students with a focus on the course study experience of the postgraduate students.

Moreover, many of the studies reviewed above studied the influence of personal and contextual factors on students' ways of learning in isolation from other factors. Each study separately captured relevant relationships between different factors and students learning approaches in a restricted scope. The majority of studies tend to focus on the relationship between academic performance and one of the broad areas of personalogical factors, psychosocial factors, or contextual factors. There has been little published research of either academic or non-academic factors, let alone an integration of these factors performed within a New Zealand tertiary context.

Typically, the majority of studies have employed a cross-sectional or retrospective methodology. A variety of self-reported questionnaires and inventories have been designed to assess how students learn and study. Among the most frequently used and best-documented instruments were the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Biggs, 1987), Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (Ramsden, 1991), Approaches to Study Inventory (ASI) (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983), Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS) (Vermunt, 1998). These instruments were 'developed for different purposes, derived from contrasting theoretical perspectives, and labelled in different ways' (Entwistle & McCune, 2004). As a result, other researchers may found it difficult in selecting the one best suitable for their purposes. Further more, due to the unique characteristics of context; some well-tested questionnaires do not surely fit the research (Wierstra, Kanselaar, Linden, Lodewijks & Vermunt, 2003). For example, for measuring the learning environment impact on learning approaches of students in Dutch from other European countries, Wierstra et al. (2003) had to construct a new instrument because "no existing learning environment questionnaire fully satisfies this match of learning environment and learning approach characteristics"(p. 511).

The present study intends to investigate factors that influence students' learning within a postgraduate context in New Zealand, with a focus on their taught course study experience at one university in New Zealand. More specifically, the research question is, *What are the factors that influence postgraduate students approaches to learning within the School of Education*? The interview technique will be employed in this case study to gain a more complete picture of participants in this study. This study seeks to add to the few studies which have focused on the student experience and which have emphasised the diversity of the postgraduate characteristics.

Summary

The major factors outlined in this literature review in relation to the present study include the range of influences that impinge upon a student's approach to learning, the significance of the contextual factors within this, and finally the dearth of literature that considers factors influencing student's approach to learning at a postgraduate level.

In the next chapter, the theoretical research position of the present study, how the data is collected and analysed are explained.

Chapter III: Methodology

In this chapter, I firstly explain my views of the construction of knowledge and the uniqueness of students' characteristics. Then the context of the present study and participants are introduced. A pilot interview and the process of data collection are reported, followed by the ethical considerations and how the data is analysed.

Theoretical position

This study employed the methodological assumptions and practices of constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to capture the multiple and socially constructed realities of case participants. Such constructions are "devised by individuals as they attempt to make their experiences, which, it should be recalled, are always interactive in nature" (p. 86).

Epistemologically, the perspective taken in this research sees every 'person who learns' as uniquely situated within a matrix of intersecting factors and dimensions of the learning experience. These intersecting dimensions are neither solely internal nor solely external. Learning is thus a way of interacting with the world (Crotty, 1998). As learners learn, their conceptions of phenomena change, and they see the world differently. The acquisition of information in itself does not bring about such a change, but the way the learners structure that information and how they construct the meaning.

Blais (1988) explains that constructivism is a philosophical position where knowledge is viewed as something that each learner must construct. Within this view of learning, each individual accepts responsibility for their learning and creates his/her own unique schema of the world. Learners are viewed as active participants in the learning process. Learners are assumed to construct their own meanings, goals, and strategies from the information available in the "external" environment as well as information in their own minds (the "internal" environment). This view is in contrast to the more "traditional" view of learning as the transmission, from teacher to students, of a discrete body of information or knowledge. From this traditional view, the student is dependent, a "listener-follower" and there is less reason for the student to think for him or herself. Clarke (1998) concludes that student perceptions that the responsibility for their learning lies with their teachers "tend to be consistent with the transmission model" (p. 114).

According to constructionism, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43). In terms of student learning, meaning is not imposed or transmitted by direct instruction, but is created by the student's learning activities. However, only through dialogue can the researcher become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings (Manen, 2001). Thus, the case study approach and the interview technique were used in this research for data collection and analysis.

Case study

According to Yin (1989, p. 82), case studies allow a research to 'reveal the multiplicity of factors (which) have interacted to produce the unique character of the entity that is the subject to study'.

A case study design was employed to gain insight into the postgraduate learning approaches and meaning for those involved. In order to examine the particular and the unique of postgraduate students, I selected seven cases in the present study with intention of developing a rich descriptive picture of each participant, their learning experiences and the factors that influence them which seemed pertinent.

Additionally, qualitative research is seen by many researchers as the preferable way to obtain in-depth knowledge and insight regarding human experience (Amenkhienan & Kogan, 2004). As suggested by Richardson (1994) studying how the life experiences of mature students might determine their approaches to studying in higher education could not be carried out by means of bare quantitative procedures such as check-lists, inventories or questionnaires. This would demand the use of individually conducted, semi-structured interviews. For example, by interviewing a limited number of students, Kember (2004) provided an in-depth picture of aspects of the student experience in his study of interpreting student workload.

The study aims to explore individual differences about learning in higher education. The desire is to gain knowledge about the learning approaches of postgraduate students in this study.

The research context

The importance of context should be emphasised for understanding students' learning. The meaning of learning and strategies adopted, in an important way, are determined by

the context in which learning happens. As discussed in the previous part, students' learning approaches varied at course level, departmental level, as well as at geographical level. Thus, it is necessary to have a look at the context this research is situated.

The Master of Education (MEd) aims to encourage students to develop advanced knowledge and critical analysis skills in the educational arena. While students can specialise in a specific sub-field of education, they are required to develop their research capabilities in a more general way. Students are encouraged to develop a cross-disciplinary approach to their studies while developing and applying theoretical and grounded perspectives for a wide range of issues and contexts in education.

Graduates from this programme will have developed a broad range of research and applied skills together with sound analytical and critical thinking skills. They will be capable of demonstrating high levels of professionalism, independence and leadership in their chosen field. In addition to academic and professional competences, graduates will also have further developed their personal capabilities. (School of Education, AUT, Postgraduate Handbook, 2004)

The MEd programme contents covered policies, theories and practices in adult education; early years' education; issues in education; examining professional practice; educational leadership; diversity and difference in education; Montessori education; Pasifika education; and research methods.

The papers were taught through lectures in small classes. Each class has about five to ten students. Class sessions are normally in the afternoons on weekdays, with consideration of part-time students' working situation.

Most of the students are professionals in educational settings and international students. Ages typically ranged from 20s to early 60s. Students are female dominated. Most of them are part-time and domestic students (as can be seen in the table below for details).

Table 1: Postgraduate students in School of Education in 2005

Gender		Study Method		Age Ranges		Residency Status	
Female	Male	Full-	Part-time	20-29	30 +	Domestic	International
23	4	5	22	4	23	24	3
Ethnicity							
Asian	European		Maori	Non Declared		Other	Pasifika
5	12		3	1		2	4

The students were assessed by means of a written academic assignment. Oral presentation is taken as one part rated aspect of the whole assessment in some papers of the study.

The Master of Education (MEd) was offered as a full-time two-year, or part-time five-year programme comprising 120 credits of eight papers and another 120 credits of thesis. Two compulsory papers introduced students to the research methods and techniques. For full-time and part-time students, papers and thesis were expected to be completed within five years.

The participants

The postgraduate students participating in the study are part-time and full-time students who are studying for Master of Education. They are presently either working on their thesis after the completion of their course-work, or completing their course-work.

To begin the research, with the approval of the programme leader, I sent an email to all the postgraduate students at the School of Education (AUT) with a view to introducing the research and inviting their participation (see Appendix A). One of the respondents was identified to do pilot interview. Then I used snowball sampling technique to find the other participants (Neuman, 2000). As a result, seven students participated in this study. The seven cases were chosen to be manageable in terms of understanding each case in-depth.

Pilot Interview

A list of interview questions was developed for gathering data of student learning experiences and factors that influence their study. In order to test and check the appropriateness of the interview questions and collect practical experience, a pilot interview was conducted.

The pilot interview was conducted with one participant, who was told in advance that it was a pilot interview and that comments or discussion about the interview questions were welcome during the process of interview.

Before the interview started, I introduced the research topic, but tried to minimise the words in avoidance with the influence on the width of participant's interest. With the consent of the participant and his/her signature on the Consent Form (see Appendix B), the pilot interview started. From the review of pilot interview, several problems occurred during the process, are outlined as follows:

(a) The recorder was stopped twice during the interview. The interviewee in the pilot interview knew the supervisor quite well. She stopped the tape recorder and asked if my supervisors would listen to the tape and read the transcriptions. The second time happened when she was asked to talk about her lecturers. She gave me a sign to stop the recorder. Then we started to discuss the question. She showed her hesitation to express her comments as in usual discussions.

(b) Some interview questions were not appropriate and needed to be revised.

(c) The tape recorder needed to be of better quality, and interview site needs to be quiet without disturbance.

Discussion with the supervisors successfully solved the first problem. Due to the specific characteristics of the participant-supervisor relationship, the supervisors would not listen to the tapes, and not have access to the raw data (original transcripts). The interviews would be tape-recorded, pseudonyms would be used, and other personal characteristics such as gender, age, nationality would be replaced with alternative ones, with the consideration of keeping the participant safe, and anonymity and confidentiality preserved. I kept a note of these changes for the data analysis. When the transcripts and changes were finished, the copy would be sent to the participant to check for accuracy. With the consent of participants, the data would be used for analysis, and sent to supervisors for assessing the quality of data. It was critical for me to explain how the data would be dealt with before the interview started.

Questions were modified to best suit the research purpose. The supervisors negotiated with the school to receive a better tape recorder and the access to a quiet room for conducting interview when it was needed.

Data collection

The interviewing technique taken was consistent with earlier investigations into student learning (Ramsden, 1992; Webber, 2004), which advocate "fairly open interviews with students discussing their experiences of learning" (Entwistle, 1997, p. 16) so as to allow the interviewee to influence the direction of the interview and provide rich descriptions.

The interviews were conducted after the semester break to avoid times of greater academic stress. Interview times were made to the convenience of the participants.

The interviews usually took place either on the university premises or at the home of the student. The interview places within the university included: the postgraduate study room after working/studying hours, a meeting room within the School of Education, student's apartment, interviewee's offices.

The interview questions were aimed to explore the various contexts surrounding the participants' decision to enter university, and focused on questions around topics such as educational experiences, qualifications and employment history. It was followed by a second one, which was open-ended "*What most influences your ways of going about studying during your course-work study*". This question gave the interviewee 'an opportunity to express himself [*sic*] about matters of central significance to him, rather than those presumed to be important by the interviewer' (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956, p. 13, as cited in Webber, 2004). With regards to the research topic, after this question is answered, I prompted with regard to 'learning', 'student', 'teacher' and 'assignment' if these were not mentioned by the interviewee. All the topic areas were covered in each interview, but the order and direction of the questions was determined by the responses of each individual.

The interviews, which lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, were tape-recorded. After the recording was stopped, an interactive conversation continued around the topic of research and learning issues. Notes were also taken for possible use in the research with the approval of the interviewee.

A koha was given to each participant at the end of interview in appreciation of their time and support and not as an inducement to participate in the research.

Transcripts

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed within one week after the interviews were conducted. I personally transcribed all of them. The original version of the transcript was offered back to participants for checking, and to verify that they were willing to allow the information in the transcript to be used in the research. Any particularly sensitive data which might risk revealing the identity of the participant was highlighted and was replaced with pseudonym. The participants were also informed that they could edit, add to, or delete from the material in the transcript.

Six transcripts were checked via email. The participants made corrections to the transcripts. I revisited one participant for clarity of unclear and ambiguous words in the tape. The transcript was checked while the interviewee listened to the tape. According to the feedback of participants, the transcripts were edited to include pseudonyms.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was gained by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC). It was agreed that all participants in the present research would be referred with pseudonyms. Sensitive data which might put them at risk would be removed or modified with the agreement of the participants.

The Information Sheet (Appendix A) of the present research was given beforehand to every potential participant for their understanding of present research. Their participation was voluntary. If they decided to take part, they would be invited to have an interview of around 30 minutes with the focus being on their postgraduate study experience. Before the data from interview was processed they would have an opportunity to check the accuracy of the transcript. Confidentiality was assured.

Participants could withdraw from the research project at any time without reason and withdraw information they have provided before the information has been analysed.

The Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) was signed at the start of the interview. Again before each interview, individuals were reminded that confidentiality was assured

and their identities would be kept secret, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data analysis

Taking one interview transcript as an example, I analysed the data with the guidance of two supervisors. They first worked independently to identify themes in the interview data. Then I met my supervisors to discuss the themes. This process maximised investigator triangulation (Digregorio, Farrington & Page, 2000), as the analysis of the data was thoroughly discussed with one sample interview transcript.

Other measures were also taken to ensure the trustworthiness, or soundness, of the study. For example, I discussed the findings with participants, other postgraduate students, as well as some lecturers in the school, to confirm and correct emerging themes.

Being a postgraduate student studying at the School of Education, I had experienced the course-work. Common understandings existing between myself and the participants made the site access and rapport building easier than as an external or 'outsider' researcher. In terms of methodology there was no pretence at 'objectivity' in the research. My subjective positioning within the study led to data analysis and discussion solely based upon the data collected (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000). The insider knowledge and experience provided an advantage of thorough and in-depth understanding of the complexity of the students' learning experiences.

It is acknowledged that, from the participants' point of view, perspectives might be withheld due to an unwillingness of exposure; students might think that some thoughts are better not said in public, and that this is potentially the case in any research dependent on reported perspectives.

Examples in the interviews were:

Example I.

>Interviewer: So how do you think about the lecturer's help?
>
>Interviewee: Er, how will I think they helped? (Yes) I think they did what they had to.

Example II.

Interviewer: During your course study, what mostly influence your ways of studying?

Interviewee: Positively or negatively?

Interviewer: Both, all of them.

Interviewee: … positively would be individual lecturers, and areas of interest … Negatively, again, some of lecturers, I found [pause] er [pause]. Another negative influence is not having much choice…

Audio-tape recordings of interviews were transcribed by myself and checked for accuracy by each participant respectively. Participants were supportive when there was a need for clarification of material in the transcript. As suggested by Cresswell (1998) the transcripts of interviews were then read several times to gain a general overview of the data. During the first reading, notes were made in the margins of each transcript. The second reading was conducted while listening to the tape recordings with special attention paid to the emerging themes, participants' perceptions, and the meanings assigned by participants to specific words.

Summary

The major factors outlined in this chapter in relation to the present study include the theoretical position underpinning the case study methodology and the significant decisions made in the process of completing the research.

The analysis of the findings is presented and discussed in full in the following chapter.

Chapter IV: Findings

Drawing from the interview data, in this chapter, I first introduce the background of each participant. Then the common themes across participants generated from the interview are listed. Extracts from the interview transcripts are presented to support these themes. Finally the environmental influences on each participant are summarised.

Participants' backgrounds

Participant A: Tracey

Tracey has completed all taught papers and is working on her thesis. She pursued her study in middle age, did her undergraduate study full time, and worked full time as school teacher. She went straight to postgraduate study from undergraduate study. At the time of the interview, Tracey is a full-time lecturer in a university at Auckland as well as a part-time postgraduate student at the School of Education. She is interested in education, but does not want to be limited to just teaching. A masters degree is expected to bring her opportunities of promotion in her job.

Participant B: Lucy

Lucy is a part-time student with no work responsibilities. She is living with her daughter. Lucy received her diploma five years ago. She had worked for six months after her graduation with Bachelor of Education. After that she was enrolled in the MEd programme. She has completed two papers and this is the second semester for her study. Lucy wants to know more about education and believes that the qualification of MEd will broaden the job prospects and expand the scope of her future job choices. She was restricted to teaching in a specific area with her Bachelor's degree.

Participant C: Cindy

Cindy is teaching at a university in Auckland. She got her diploma in 2001 and then completed her Bachelor's degree. The major of her degree is other than education. She is present in her third semester with two papers of the MEd study. She has completed four papers in the previous year. As a teacher, Cindy wants to learn more about education. The employer pays for her tuition fees. She thought it was a great opportunity while she is working full-time to do a part-time postgraduate study. Social activities are important in Cindy's life.

Participant D: Tina

Tina is an international student. She has completed all the papers, and now in the stage of thesis writing. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in 2000. The major of her undergraduate study is English. Tina was a university teacher in her home country before she came to New Zealand. She is expected to improve her teaching practice through her further study. Tina studied in an institute in Auckland for a short period before she was enrolled in the MEd programme. Her parents provided financial support for her study.

Participant E: Jenny

Jenny came to the MEd programme as an international student soon after her graduation with a bachelor's degree in her home country. Her parents wanted her to get a masters degree, but it was her personal motivation to choose the master in education. She likes this field though her undergraduate study had no relation with education. Jenny used to do part-time tutorial job during her undergraduate study. As for her future, she wants to be a teacher or a researcher in the educational setting. Her parents supported her study financially.

Participant F: Susan

Susan is working full-time in a university as a practitioner as well as a lecturer. She obtained her diploma in 1992 and converted it to a bachelor's degree in 1997. She wanted to start focusing her career as a lecturer, so she chose the MEd programme. She thought she needs some sort of knowledge or skill in that branch of her career. Susan studied part-time and gained 120 credits in the past four years. She is supposed to submit her thesis in the fifth year. Susan has two preschool children. Her employer provides financial support for her study.

Participant G: Salena

Salena had her masters degree, Bachelor of Education and a postgraduate certificate before she came to New Zealand. She has got ten years' teaching experience in the secondary grade in her home country. She wanted to gain an international exposure in the field of education, and had some ideas in doing research in particular field which she would like to use back home. Salena studied full-time. She is working on four papers this semester and is supposed to start her research after the completion of theses papers. Salena received student loan from her government for her study here.

Emerging themes

In exploring factors that influence students' learning approaches; a large part involved the study of students' thinking, behaviour, and their internal states (Chin & Brown, 2000). Since the analysis is based on the data from relatively short interviews, it is not possible to gain full and direct access to the mind or internal state of the learner. In order to fully utilise the data, I presented as many relevant details as possible from the interview, and simply let the accounts 'speak for themselves', permitting the reader to construct their own understandings and meanings (Waller, 2005). The purpose was to show the influences on the students' learning approaches.

Prior experiences

All participants acknowledged the differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study. Their previous learning styles have different impacts on their postgraduate learning.

Cindy is struggling to change her learning pattern:

> The way I studied at undergraduate school, I still have the same kind of patterns when I study.... my past experiences are still influential, I mean I am much better, but I still work like that. …. I don't think it is the best way to do it, but I can't change…. it's hard to change…. So it's partly because of my style, and partly because I don't know enough to be able to sit and write the essay (Cindy).

Students provided their understandings of the differences, for example:

> The undergraduate study that I did, everything you needed is given in handouts, and lecturer notes. That was almost like spoon-feed information. Postgraduate level, you have been asked to contribute to the development of the knowledge that taken place in the classroom, that did not happen to me at undergraduate level. At undergraduate level, it is very much, the lecturer had the knowledge, you absorb the knowledge, and you use that knowledge, to produce an assignment, to pass the paper. At postgraduate level, it's more about, the lecturer has the knowledge, but I recognised that I have knowledge, and together, we put them together with other people in the past, and develop knowledge in the papers, we go like that. It's very very different (Tracey).

> My personal learning style at undergraduate level, yes, (does it still work now?) mostly not, because of the setting, and the assessment, and they are very different, so yeah, here I had to learn how to learn, for this particular study, yeah (Jenny).

> At the bachelor level, it was more of theory, like we have to learn and read on this time, and reproduce it in the exams either as application or comprehension questions. So that was the only difference I found here, the style of teaching, for example, is quite different. They are more informal, like group discussions, and it's quite different from formal teaching which I used to back home (Salena).

Tracey had an advantage because of her educational practice.

> Yes, it was very clear to me. Maybe it is different to me for being a lecturer as well because, we talking the same language, and we do module booklets, that I write module booklets, so I quite understand what is expected, I think that's an advantage to me (Tracey).

Motivations to enrol in the MEd

For the seven participants in the present study, the main motivations for their enrolment in the Master of Education programme included improvement of teaching practice, career advancement, preparation for future development, self enjoyment, personal interest, and responding to parental expectations.

The reasons that participants choose to enrol related to their professional practices.

> I want to learn more about education… I could teach in a positive way. My personal beliefs and values influence the way I study. I think you should make most of opportunities to learn, so that's my personal ethics and beliefs (Cindy).

> I ask myself that question 'why am I doing this?' I was going to stop at the degree. Then I wanted to do masters and after I complete that, I want to do doctorate study, because I am interested in Education, that's why I chose the Master of Education. And because I work as a teacher… (Tracey).

> Because I want to build my practice and theories for my teaching, when I was in [country name], because I teach undergraduate student, so it's not enough, I want to higher, and more academic study, so that I can teach and finish my work better (Tina).

Susan initially intended to do a masters degree in an area other than education, but:

> I wanted to start focusing on my career as a lecturer, so I choose education instead of [subject] for that reason. I thought that I needed some sort of skills or knowledge in regards to this branch of my career (Susan).

Lucy needs more knowledge for teaching:

> It made me realise that I need more study, it wasn't, the teaching wasn't enough, I found I need more information that's why I enrolled in the masters programme (Lucy).

She then added:

> Well, self-enjoyment, and stimulation, and also understanding….because for me this is self discovery as well as not just developing learning so that I can get a really good job, and finding that I am learning about myself as human, and how I relate to other people, and so I am understanding the concept (Lucy).

Jenny comes with her parents' expectations as well as her own interests, for example:

> This programme, in particular, first of all, the masters degree, because, I think, it's what I am expected to do, it's mostly from the demands of my parents, they want me to get a masters degree. So that's why I am enrolled in masters degree. I'm doing masters degree in education, because I really like this field. It's personal motivation (Jenny).

As an international student, Salena provided her motivation here:

> I want to gain some international exposure, in field of education. I have some ideas in doing research in the particular field of education which I would like to use back home (Salena).

In addition, Lucy expressed another reason for her study. She noted the positive influence that her masters study had on her daughter and recognised that she is an important role model. She was expecting to demonstrate that study is a positive life style choice.

> And because I have a daughter, I have a huge influence in her life, and how she would grow up to be an adult one day as well, so it's more about life… (Lucy).

With regards to future development, the following extracts represented the main trends of answers.

> For my future, it's strange, because I don't know exactly what job I will have, like once I complete this, but I know that the qualification will broaden the job prospects, that I'll be able to intent to.. because currently with my Bachelor of Education, I was restricted to just teaching in early childhood education, once I get my masters, I can teach at some stage in the tertiary sector for example adult education, not just early childhood (Lucy).

> I want to learn more about basically what that was, and to learn more about education I want to have a knowledge in education area, so I could apply for a variety of jobs, not just being a teacher. I could go on like become a researcher, or programme designer, things like that. I wasn't going to be limited just teaching. What I thought in AUT's masters degree I thought gave me a scope to do that… (Tracey).

> It's a kind of blurry, but what I know, what I want is that I want to work in the educational studying, I'm not sure what I will do, in the educational studying, but I will still be in the educational studying, might be as a teacher, as a researcher, that's why I am. So.. (Jenny).

> I would be influencing me a lot the professional level as I said. I want to go in further research. So it would be affecting the style of teaching. And the other aspect of teaching, such as assessment, curriculum set up, etc (Salena).

Lecturers

Lecturers were taken as an important influential factor of students' learning. The diversity of lecturers and their teaching-styles were addressed by the following quotations.

> I think in terms of teaching style, because people here are very people-orientated, and I think they are very good teachers to work with, so I did expect that lecturers, in my first semester to be supportive, I did not experience that. …And every lecturer has a different teaching style anyway …For my experience, I have had six lecturers, six different lecturers in education faculty, they have quite different philosophies and ways to approach them (Cindy).

> Some of them, I found them through course doing papers, a huge variations between lecturers and lecturers' styles, and I guess that comes through individual learning, a sort of situation, when they occurred, some might be more significant than others, and some mightn't. Where there is might be other opposite way to some other students. (Tracey)

> I think, ah mm, the lecturers here … they have their own styles, and sometimes their styles differ greatly to one and another, some actually still have their lecturing style, some did not lecturer at all, just through discussion, but most through their..., actually I would describe them as open, so it is good (Jenny).

> As far as language problem concern, I, no, I don't feel any difficulties, but the way they expect you to express. It is a bit different. I just have to modify my style to suit their requirements. …. Yes, to suite the requirements of the type of questions they set according to each paper (Salena).

Susan found her way to play games with the priorities of the lecturers.

> I think most of time they are pretty good. You have to get into personalities, it's like a personality game you have to play with the lecturer. That was the first lesson I learned when I was doing an academic paper. And I went to a professor in my school, and she pointed out to me, you know, what is [name of the professor]'s learning, what his favourite methodology? You know you should really, when you are working on his paper, choose something he has an interest in, because he is more likely to favour it and not critique it as much. So I played the game, and I got a good grade, even though I don't agree with his favourite methodology (Susan).

Some negative comments could be found in the interview like:

> The lecturers, there are supportive lecturers, and unsupportive lecturers, both ways affect you differently…I had some lecturers who are unclear of their expectations, they say they want something, when you give them work, they don't like what you've done. Their teaching-styles and their method of assessment is not very clear. Or… (laugh)… clear is probably better. That's really hard, because they say one thing, but mean something quite different. And lecturers who are supportive in that they ask you questions, they give you some time, and give you feedback which is useful. And they have clear feedback (Cindy).

> I, normally at beginning of the paper, I did not know what the paper about, so it was not clear where the paper was going to lead me, but for each assignment, I

think the lecturers are clear what they want. Typically for the assignments, big picture I don't know (Jenny).

While Jenny thought lecturers are clear about what they want, Cindy presents and alternative approach. This could possibly be explained that they were talking about different courses.

> So I notice this year, for the first time, there is a clear marking criteria we are given before the assignment is due. Mostly they don't give you that, so you don't even know what they are looking for, so some papers I did last year we got no clues on what we were going to be marked on… you had to guess from the question in the way they raise the question (Cindy).

Support from lecturers

Without doubt, support from lecturers played an important role in students' learning. Students in the present study had different interpretations of lecturers' availability and use of this kind of support.

Jenny did not want to use this support service because she felt uncomfortable doing that, for example:

> I think most of them are open, they always say you can meet me before you submit the assignment. But I have to be honest, I never use that kind of service. (You have confidence?) No, because I'm not used to doing it, because back in my undergraduate studies, I never did that, the lecturer never like you know 'you can give me one week before, I can give you feedback …' that kind of thing, it never happened to me, so it's. it was not comfortable, although it is good, I should use that kind of help, but I did not, because you did not feel comfortable doing that (Jenny).

Lucy was seeking to find more time with lecturers:

> Er, how will I think they helped? …(pause)… I think they did what they had to…. Because we just come in for those two-hour lectures, and we go out again. The only contact, the only interaction we have, I don't think that is enough, to formulate a connection of understanding with your lecturer if you having a difficulty (Lucy).

Tina had experienced both supportive and unsupportive lecturers, she was not sure if she was welcome to see lecturer after class:

> Some teachers they consider me as overseas student, I have problem of language and thinking pattern, and teaching pattern, for example, creative thinking, so they pay attention to these problems and help me about these. But some lecturers they regard me and treat me as New Zealand student, so there is no extra help from them, I feel quite confused, and puzzled, and a little panicked, and nervous … I am not sure… what he/she will think, they did not say you are welcome to see me, I'm not sure they would like to see me after the class, or just in the class (Tina).

Cindy understood lecturers' work and did not want to use their time:

> Personally I don't tend to ask them too many questions because I can find the information myself, because I am an independent kind of person. So I probably don't ask, you know, I send them email if it is a big issue, or there is something I am really struggling with but I won't take their time if I don't have to…. Actually they are quite approachable... Sometimes, emails take a few days to come back to you (Cindy).

Assessment

Assessments appeared to have significant impact on students' learning. All participants had many comments on this topic.

Lucy enrolled in three papers last semester. Only two papers were successfully completed. She explained the reasons like this:

> Because there is so much information that pour down into you like in the semester, there sometimes does not have enough time to understand, or absorb, and reflect how you would feel about it, because there is so much reading and so much information, and if it's new information, you did not have time to, a kind of, settle in your head, understand it, before you can really write down it (Lucy).

Salena did complete all papers enrolled in, but she encountered similar difficulties like Lucy:

> Sometimes it becomes really difficult, and the time constraints are so much that you can't pay much attention to each of them, it's like you are doing them for the sake of doing than more of understanding and application, which requires a lot of time to think about the subject you are trying to write about (Salena).

Although Tracey did not have a problem with academic writing, she realised that there appeared to have a large focus on assessment. She critiqued the normal structure of assessments.

> I think with masters papers I found some of papers were grossly over-assessed, and focus on the assessment is so strong, and you not have enough time to absorb knowledge and develop knowledge you're absorbing, your time focus is making sure you can get these assessments finished. I am sure at masters level, there must be other ways you can be assessed.

> Like they are quite demanding assessments, and so therefore all you are basically doing is you grab your thinking needs from your lecturer in order to pass the assessment. And you are doing a lot of writing, a lot of work, just get pass the assessment, you don't actually have time for critically thinking about what you're leaning, and as a practicing teacher, I don't have time put those things into practice, because I don't get deep understanding of the temporal context that not pertain to the assignment I was working on, and so I think the assignments are overweighted. They are too, you know, a lot of work involved, the assignments in papers, and then the learning taking place is probably detracted from a great deal, because as

for me, as a student, was making sure I meet the deadlines and pass the assignment rather than course content of learning things I should be learning (Tracey).

Like others, Tracey had to change her focus as well as her personal goal in some papers because of the heavy load of assignments. She stated clearly in the interview.

> From my undergraduate, well full-time study , and I had a lot more time, as opposed to postgraduate learning, part-time study, but even part-time, is actually a high workload, working fulltime, I actually had to lower my personal standard. My personal standard is I want A paper, and every paper I want A, no less, and I work extremely hard to try to achieve that. But I found, particularly in second half, of the postgraduate programme, that actually wasn't just possible, I did not have the time they need of, put that extra amount of efforts in the assignment to make sure I get an A. So my focus had to go from getting a good grade to making sure I pass (Tracey).

Jenny did not learn from doing the assignment, for example:

> Now after I have finished everything, I would say that I learn mostly not from doing the assignments, but from the reading (Jenny).

Susan is an exception in this study with quite different views upon assignments, for example:

> I think I like the way that a lot of the assessments have focused on research, and putting in a proposal, thinking about method and design, even though the paper itself hasn't been a research paper, a lot of papers have had that focus. That really prepared me for my proposal now, for my thesis, and this is quite an advantage (Susan).

Susan has completed all course-work and started her thesis. Tracey was in the same situation as Susan. However, after studying the course-work Tracey encountered great difficulties when moving into thesis stage.

> It's quite a scary position to get in at the end of your papers, embarking on your thesis, and realise that the paper you've done should be loading your knowledge base to the level with your confidence do your thesis, … it's quite a worry thing, how I am doing, I am not actually confident in doing it…(Tracey).

Susan's first interview with the programme leader might be helpful to understand the reason:

> But, you know, we looked at what was required, what papers were available at that time, then we planned at that stage what order I would do the papers and what papers I will do. And he pointed out to me early on that if I can think about my thesis topic early on, I could start working on that, prior to actually commencing on my thesis. So he was a huge influence of what I have done (Susan).

Feedback

Almost all the participants regarded lecturers' feedback as important influential factor. Student feedback contained expressions like 'hugely important', 'imperative', and 'really important':

> Hugely, hugely important. It's important for lecturers to write notes on the assignments, to give them back to you. Because then there is too much information to remember, if they just verbally tell you. Yeah, feedback is important, so you know, where you can make improvement for the next assignment (Lucy).
>
> Absolutely, imperative… The best lecturer I had, can I name names? One of the best lecturers I had is not here anymore, that particularly lecturer, was every single thing she did, she would like to say it, and you will get feedback, all types, I get feedback everyday other (of) the week. ...and that was really clear, concise feedback that you got, I was orientated what I have learned in that paper much than any other papers. Really important for the learning process for me (Tracey).
>
> And feedback is good. I like the way that they are willing to help you with, at the very initial stage when you prepare for your assignment, and later, till you get your assignment, you have very detail feedback, which give you idea of how good you have improved (Salena).
>
> Particularly in regards to assessments, how you are doing this. Because every lecturer, even when lecturers gives you the same assignment, they will still mark it really differently, because they are looking for different things, because they are diverse people. So feedback on what this lecturer wants is really important before the assignment and after. Because afterward, I just check the assignment and I am looking at what the lecturer said about the way I wrote, about what I had done well, and what I hadn't done well, so I could apply that to the next assessment (Cindy).

However, Jenny was not used to getting feedback before submitting the assignment:

> Although it is good, I should use that kind of help, but I did not, because I did not feel comfortable doing that.

Familiarity with academic writing

Five students experienced difficulties in how to write assignments. The following extracts of interviews represented their problems and issues:

> But my stress comes around assignments, and the pressures of deadlines, being unconfident with the type of assignment, like the first time I did a literature review. Last year was the first time ever in my life I did an annotated bibliography, and I had no idea what that meant, or what it looks like, and the lecturer was not overly helpful to tell you what it looks like, that adds to the stress, because you know nothing about it, you know nothing about this topic, you have to find out all the information, not only about the topic, but about how actually do it, how to format it. So that adds to the stress (Cindy).
>
> Yeah, first of all, the, most assessment styles, academic writing, and I was not, I never did academic writing, so that was my first big difficulty, I don't, I did not know how to write in a professional manner, so, and I learn in a hard way, and get

> very bad mark in the beginning, I have to learn from experience…. I read feedback from lecturers, not many feedbacks, it helps, anyway. I tried, actually, I don't know this is good way of learning, but actually copy writing style from the journal I read, that's the only way I could think of, and so, when reading a journal, it's not only the content that I'm looking at, but also the writing style, I don't know where else to go, really (Jenny).

They want to know how that assignment looks like before they actually start to work on it, for example:

> That hasn't been done yet, you mean? I think exemplars are good, just an example of the work. What a good one looks like (Cindy).

> When we did get the examples, it was really helpful… it's one thing to read the instruction, it's a whole different thing to actually see some real, like examples … If you can have more than one examples would be better, so we know what's good, what's bad, anything (Jenny).

However, how to write in an academic way is not a problem at all to students like Tracey:

> Students like me, is actually a bit of cop-out, anyway. It's an easy way out. I can get a pass in any paper at all, without ever needing to attend the lectures. I understand the course content, the readings out on the course area, by having a couple of conversations with the lecturer, and fully understanding the criteria of the assessment, the assessment is a 2000 word essay, and set out the essay in way I understand it. I have written so many now, I can sit down, and I can write the essay, and I can get a pass mark (Tracey).

Course choice and interest

The availability of courses seems to set limitation of students' choice, for example:

> The options are not that big to choose from, like they are quite minimal, and also one semester something interesting will be offered but in the next semester is not offered, so, yeah, you can't, I think my degree is being formulated on just what have been offered, not necessarily what I would choose (Lucy).

> Another negative influence is not having much choice, the papers, as I got further through, because I am only part time, sometimes a paper that I want to do wasn't available, that's missing. Sometimes I couldn't take the papers I wanted to because I am only part-time, when they were available but I couldn't do them. What I still say not much choice of papers in masters programme. And because my undergraduate background, and my areas of interest is [field of interest] studies, still there is no [field of interest] focus papers in master of education (Tracey).

> The whole course, I am very interested, the papers, I would have to be honest to say there was not many varieties of papers offered, so some of them really was very interested in taking, but some others, I just have to do it, because, that's only available (Jenny).

When asked how they dealt with the courses that they have no interest, they answered:

> I guess I was looking for the connection with my own life, I would look to say where the content relates to myself, changes for [name of geographic area] people, that's a huge influence, or interesting my life here in AUT, where the need being met (Lucy).

> It is little bit like you got a toothache, you have a dentist, you have to go, you got to go to the dentist to get the toothache fixed, but … that is my approach to some of the papers at postgraduate study. I don't particularly want to do them, I don't find them interesting, I do gain a little bit knowledge from them, not in the area I am interested in, or, the particular benefits right now, but I need the certain numbers of credits on papers pass my masters degree, so I don't have a choice, this is the only paper available to me, I have to take it. For me personally, you got to do it, just go and do it (Tracey).

> …Even for the papers I was not really interested in, there are some interesting reading, because I had to do this assignment, yeah, so, yeah, along the assignment there is little interesting … but the whole paper, was not really (Jenny).

Theory and practice

Most participants' backgrounds are within the education sector. It is assumed that they are more easily to relate educational theory in their study with their educational practice. Students responded differently, as the following reveals:

Tracey linked what she was learning to her everyday practice:

> Because I'm working, studying things to do with education, but I am working practically everyday as well. So when things happen in the classroom, for me as a lecturer, I approach the area I study differently, this quite a contributing factor to how I approach that area of study (Tracey).

Cindy had a better understanding of the theories, but she did not actually apply them in her practice:

> Now I understand the theory of my practice, and I do think some ways my practice has improved, but I don't think I teach differently than I used to. But I understand why I do in that way. Because I think, like Parker Palmer said – 'you teach out of who you are', and who I am, because of the education, has not changed a whole lot. But I understand why I do things (Cindy).

Tina is expecting to learn something new, but she doubts how it could be used in her practical life:

> The reason is that I want to learn an experience, different ways of thinking and expressing ideas, than what I am used to, and that way is quite helpful, it taught me to think differently, and expect different things, but to what extent can it be used in my practical life, at the moment is a big question mark (Salena).

Susan identified a gap between theory and practice.

> To some degree, unfortunately, there is a huge gap between theory and practice. So we can learn one thing, but the reality is that I believe somewhat in postmodernism, that all students are individuals, and you can't fit them all in the same box, or cubical, that's probably why I don't like the five-year, you know, the limit you have to finish your study either, but I think it helps me understand where people are coming from, developing understanding of students' diversity, and the fact student's life now, is not the life that I had ten years ago when I did my study, develop appreciation for that I guess (Susan).

Acknowledging the gap, Susan still learned from lecturer's combination of theory and practice:

> …. It's been helpful seeing other lecturers' work, so when I observe my lecturer's working, I can see what I like about the style, of teaching, I can adopt something, and there are things I don't like, I don't adopt them (Susan).

As a full time student, Tina also gained knowledge from lecturer's teaching practice for her future professional improvement:

> From lecturers here, lecturers, they are more patient in, how to say, patient and know how to lead students to thinking, I think this is useful for me in my future practice (Tina).

> It's quite a scary position to get in at the end of your papers, embarking on your thesis, and realise that the paper you've done should be loading your knowledge-base to the level with your confidence do your thesis, … it's quite a worry thing, how I am doing, I am not actually confident in doing it….(Tracey).

Adjustments

Adjusting to a new environment of postgraduate study was not unproblematic for some students, which included adjustment to the learning tasks, teaching patterns, learning styles, as well as social settings in terms of international students. Comments such as the following were not unusual:

> I did not adjust to the workload which is quite different from the degree, and also I did not manage my time effectively, and also I did not ask for help a lot sooner, I became, when there was a difficulty, I just shut down, really. I found that adjusting to small class …and also because it is quite self-directed, you are not in collaboration as much as you are with your colleagues in the degree, you are quite isolated, so therefore I was feeling quite inadequate, yeah (Lucy).

> The most influence for me is teaching pattern, because it is very, I mean teaching strategies, teachers' teaching is very different with [name of the country], here students need more independent study, … more creative thinking …. so I have to spend more time to get used to the new method of teaching (Tina).

> I did not know what western countries teaching patterns were like, I don't know something about it, so I come here, and begin the course directly, so certainly everything is new for me. Everything is new for me, so, yeah, is very difficult (Tina).

And lecturers, they, most of them are not actually lecturing; it's more of discussion, more discussion setting, so I think that influences me a lot…. I was new to this kind of class, so first of all, I really did not know what to do in the class (Jenny).

Well, actually, yeah, the beginning is really difficult. I told you that my first assignment I got, I barely passed, so it was very discouraging, because it made me feel bad, there was no way that I could finish the study. 'how could I finish…' so yeah, the stress at the beginning was really high, and yeah …. I felt really lost when I started, especially. It was not really bad to do my second semester, because I know what I could be expected. Doing my first semester is, is shock. (culture shock) yes (Jenny).

Being here, the first thing I learned was how important the skim read for the main point I am not used to doing this back home. Because we are taught to read something for total comprehension. Initially I found it is difficult to go through the readings (Salena).

The style of assessment, the expectations of readings was also one of the reasons putting a lot of pressure on me. I have my own personal commitments, like how do I support myself in this country, which I had thought it would be easy by getting a job, which did not materialise, so it was too much for me in the first semester to take both, getting used to the new ways of learning, trying to settle down by getting a job. So that had a lot of impact on the way I prepare for my assignments and my health do (Salena).

Transition as I said it was definitely a different social set up I coming into. The first time I have to greet my professors, that was, it here something different for me, because here it's very informal where as, that was not the right way greeting people back home. This was the little thing I had to know when I just came in here, and to feel comfortable the way you are expected to be in the classroom which again is not the right form of talking or being seated, which would not be the appropriate way back home, so these were the little things initially I had problem with, but then I take it my strite. I know it is what; it is quite normal the way is out here (Salena).

Lucy provided her suggestions for new students:

The suggestions would be, for first, in first semester for postgraduate students, that unless you organise your family life, your commitment, and your personal life, and organize in such a way that allow time for study, then the study would be hugely difficult, because you are not making that adjustment (Lucy).

Student – student relationships

All participants acknowledged the positive influence of classmates. However, the extent of support is limited because of interaction time.

In general, Cindy appreciates all happening in the classroom:

Classmates definitely influence in this area. Some people who annoy you, they talk too much, and I probably annoy somebody else. Everything in the classroom is an environmental influence, it is what you like (Cindy).

Tracey understands that 'the paper will be much easier' with support from classmates:

> Unfortunately for me, I found, postgraduate study is quite isolated. In certain papers, there is a type of family group, sort of the feeling we exchange the ideas, but not on the majority of papers. The majority of papers we will have to work on own. I don't know whether that is to do with the dynamics of the class, or the content of the course, or personalities of students, I don't know. But I do think that in few classes that we have, we work together, we support each other, then that paper will be much easier. It definitely helps (Tracey).

Salena and Tina received the benefit of support from their classmates. It is interesting to note that this support came, not from the domestic students, but rather from other international students:

> They are very helpful, and I don't get interact much with them, because most of them are working, so when we finish class, we all part immediately. But I had one student, also one international student, we have gone through this experience, because she was a semester ahead of me. And she was a great support to me in the way preparing the assignment and getting used to what was expected here. If not for her, that would be even more difficult for me (Salena).

> With classmates, I think classmates relationship is good, but not, not close. But if they (lecturers) don't help, I would not ask them, I ask my classmates (Tina).

> If I don't understand something, the peer, group work in the classes, if our relationship is good, I can develop myself into the group work, and the discussion, but if we are cold to each other, I can't discuss.

Despite collaboration during class time, Lucy also expected to have more interaction with classmate after class hours. She emphasises this in the following quotes.

> During class time, there was good collaboration between my classmates and ... yeah, that was all fine, everything there was fine, but after class .. once [the] lecture of course is over, you go to your house, and you do your study, and they go to their house, there is not really a chance to ask questions, to talk, unless you make arrangements to see each other, and that doesn't happen (Lucy).

> I guess, because, the whole culture of the masters programme you come in for two hours and you go again, and there isn't interaction like in the postgraduate, when sharing experiences, you can learn from someone else…. And also what helps me to realise that is talking with other students, about their experiences, to help me realise that there is not just me that's the problem, that's is shared difficulty, that does get better ... because there isn't that so much, it is quite isolated then so you just go away thinking I have so much to do ... you're thinking how could I manage this (Lucy).

Employment responsibilities

Employment had an impact on the study of Cindy, Susan, Tracey who are working full-time.

Employment is a big thing, it's about fitting in with my job, that's why I do a part-time (Cindy).

Sometimes, it depends on what's going on at work. If I… if it is heavy, very dependant on the timetable, and or clinical, heavy clinical events, the assessment time is really hard to fit in study as well, you know, with family, etc, etc. but if I, like at the moment, we are doing a lot of planning, my timetable I got stick to, the meetings I got to attend, but I can still fit study around these. … You know, may be my self-efficacy will be higher if I had more time and more energy to put in (Susan).

Because I'm working, studying things to do with education, but I am working practically everyday as well. So when things happen in the classroom, for me is a lecturer, I approach the area I study differently, this quite a contributing factor to how I approach that area of study (Tracey)

Family commitments

Family commitments affected Lucy and Susan, all other students were not influenced by this factor.

Mostly care for my daughter. You mean my private life? … sure, mostly looking after my daughter, and so, you know, caring for her, and then, manage the household, exercising, meeting friends, if there is time, yeah, my spiritual life (Lucy).

It is a different life style from when I did my bachelor's degree, we studied but we also had fun. But we were young and did not have other commitments such as family or work (Susan).

Financial problems

Compared to other students, Tina and Salena appeared to be more financially stretched. All of the others worked either full-time or relied on their families.

Tina is supported partly by her parents and her own savings. She has been experiencing the difficulties because of the inflation of New Zealand dollar.

… Years ago, the New Zealand dollar, the currency ratio is not very high, I think the tuition fee for overseas student is too high, so less and less students come to New Zealand to study. I choose this country because I think it's cheaper than other countries, but not, it's very expensive … (Tina).

Salena is also an international student; she took loans in her home country for study in New Zealand, and expected she could be self-supporting by finding a job. Her part-time job not only solved her financial problem, but also relieved her emotional pressure. To some extent, her work made her concentrate on quality learning.

The first semester as I said, I never got, and that was more disturbing and traumatic, and emotionally and physically draining. Then at the second semester, I

got, now I work part-time … All sorts of jobs, it's only physical, but not emotional strain, so it's better to cope than in first semester (Salena).

It has nothing to do with the study I am doing, so it doesn't have a direct influence on my course I am doing, but it helps me to know, in a way, the culture, and attitude of people, ….there is a lot of physical drain to cope with your part-time job and your course, but it is a lot better than waiting for a job and not having a job and still have to do the same amount of work for the course (Salena).

Yes, of course. I have to take a loan, student loan; I thought I could at least support my stay here by taking up a job. And I realized that I could not get one very easily. So that again I might call it a period of adjustment in this country, where you really come to terms with what is possible and what you had expected would be possible (Salena).

Support networks

Despite support from lecturers and classmates, students also obtained support from other sources.

Cindy sought help from colleagues:

I work with people who have done their masters, I go and talk to them, or talk to other people that I know, or students I know from other classes, a lot of different resources not just the lecturer (Cindy).

She might try other source of help, but worried about the results:

As I said earlier, every lecturer likes something different, so I might ask learning support something, and they will tell me one thing, and the lecturer will say 'no, that's wrong'. So I would prefer to go to the lecturer first, if there is something I don't know about because they like things their way. ..The learning support is great, they are in good influence, I use [name of staff in the support centre], and he is great, he emails back my questions. It is not about them, it is about lecturer. It is terrible, but it is true, certain lecturers don't like you, or they don't like your stand on issues, so they grade you as such (Cindy).

Jenny received external help and presented her comments from Learning Support Centre.

When I did get help, I get external help, like from people not within the university, I did two or three assignments, yeah, (ask friends) no, like, I would call these people, they are experts, like university lecturers, but not within this university. (also you go to learning support centre), no, it isn't, it is once, it is once, in my first semester I did. It helped a bit, but it gave me the impression that ….it was not actually designed for postgraduate students. That's the impression I got, I did get some help, but it's … (Jenny).

Lucy mainly sought help from Learning Support Centre:

And then it came to a time when my lecturer said 'we need this work in, and we need it by this date, and then was that I said I'm having some difficulty, I need some help. Then I sought some help from Te Tari Awhina (Lucy).

Tina benefited from her stay with a flatmate who taught in the university.

I was very influenced. I stay with a lady and her daughter, the lady taught in the university, she is very helpful for me in this aspect. I think if I stay at a home that they are, for example, they are shoemaker, maybe is not helpful for me (Tina).

In addition to the above academic support, students like Cindy were encouraged by her friends, while Lucy received support from her mother and sister, and Susan was supported by her father and husband. Jenny and Tina were supported financially by their parents, as the following quotations highlight:

They are great. My flatmate - if I got assignment due, 'keep studying', 'what are you doing'…, as she also studies. My family is great, I talk to my sister, we talk about what I am learning, she is also studying, she also tells me what she is studying. That's good, very important (Cindy).

They are hugely encouraging. Because firstly they look after my daughter when I came here. And without that, if my daughter was not cared for, or if was not happy how she is cared for, I wouldn't study, because, first I can't afford to pay for child care, so therefore, that will create more stress that I would have probably to look for part time work in order to study. So if it wasn't for my family, my life will be a lot harder. And it would affect my study, because then I wouldn't have so much time to study, because I have to work as well (Lucy).

I am really lucky. I have incredible support from my family. My father paid for my first paper... My husband is also very very supportive. He understands what I am doing and why I'm doing it. … When I first got pregnant while doing studies, I thought 'oh gosh, I can't carry on you know, and then "no, no, gosh woman can do any thing", so I carried on. But you know, in the second semester, I had two papers, I had quit my job, and I still had a younger son at home, and I wish I hadn't carried on. I actually wanted to stop at this stage, but it wasn't the study. It was hard work, but you know I was so lucky I got a wealth of support from my parents and from my husband. My two lecturers that I had at that time were also very supportive which I was thankful for (Susan).

Language competence

Language competence was cited as a substantial problem by some of the international students, as exemplified by the excerpts below:

Tina had difficulties in understanding lecturers and expressing her ideas.

And other factors influence my study is … the language, because English is not my native language, so I have to, sometime I can't understand what the teacher said, so language is an important … (Tina).

This is really a big problem, because the language. Although my major is English education, but I found the English I learned in [name of the country] is very

different from it is in New Zealand, so when I write, I thought is right, but New Zealanders can't understand, so technique is a problem, is a big problem. I think my ideas, sometime I have good ideas, but the ideas are always keep behind the expressions. I can't express what I want to really say, so this pulls down my level of academic done (Tina).

Jenny was struggling with Kiwi English, slang and academic terms, for example:

Oh, yeah. Difficulty is definitely. First of all ... my first, inform my difficulty, was the English accent, it just, may be not related to that, but. yeah, I had difficulty adjusting myself with Kiwi English… I did not know the slang. First of all, when I came here, I was really use.., very used to American ENGLISH, and when I got here, first class, first semester, I just got in the class, the lecturer was (name), so that was really tough, that was really tough, because, I did not expect to be that difficulty at first, so I have to really write down every word I don't know, whatever that (Jenny).

She took one of her class experiences as an example:

It was doing a class, the lecturer was lecturing, this particular lecturer, started to explain some, some case, as an international student, it is really difficult, the word was 'Education Review Office', ERO, that is the first time I heard that work, and I did not have a clue about that word, I was that, what. what ? so, yeah, for international student, I did not know the Kiwi context, so when I first heard ERO I would only guess what that was ... that bothers me a lot (what's ERO?), Educational Review Office, it was in one class, I did not know about that, that was my first semester, it was really terrible. Oh, my God, I don't know the theme they are talking about, so yeah, I think it would be great , I don't know actually, give us basic reading, whatever, because otherwise, the other local students know what the lecturer was talking about, but I did not (Jenny).

Balancing study and life

In the interview, students were more likely to cite difficulties in balancing study and social activities/family life – as exemplified by the following quotations.

Lucy did not work, she studied part-time. She was seeking a balance between studying and other areas of life. All were equally important for her.

…I think just balancing everything of my personal life, my study life, and yeah, just finding a balance, and sticking to a schedule, sticking to a routine. I don't think it (stress) comes from one particular area, but when of course, there is more things happening in one area, then that means less time for other things, and that becomes a little bit stressful…. you know, is just like everyday life, not something that study created stress, I think, what you need to do is just be organised…. So that you are not just studying, and having no enjoyment in life, like there need to be a balance (Lucy).

Salena needs to balance her study and financial status:

The only thing I would like to mention is this semester though I work part-time, I feel I have spent more quality time while I prepare for my classes or assessment

than I used to in the first semester, when all my energy is drained looking for a job, so I personally feel that being emotionally and financially secure is very important to be more productive in the course or activity that you are doing (Salena).

Being a social person, Cindy has too many things to do:

Although I am not married, I have friends and I have family, so you have to balance in your social life. I am also involved in church, so that takes some of my time. Then I have to fit all the other things in. So like last year, I had to stop something, I was just too busy. I am still doing too many different things, something has to go, at the moment I am not sure what. You need to organize your life well, which is much easier to do everything (Cindy).

Cindy understands the importance of study, but it is just a part of her life:

I think study is a part of my life, but influences all of my life....as I study, that changes me, the person, every time interact with people, I am different person. Because as I know more, I understand myself more, I understand the world a little bit more, so its affects how I relate in every other area of my life. But study is just a part, because I said about church, you know, when I go to church, I learn things there about my self, and about world, about me, and they influence other sphere of my life. So it's kind of… interrelated (Cindy).

Susan did not like the time-frames of the course, because she had other things to assign her time:

The thing I don't like about the course would be the time-frames. …I think that puts pressure on people. I don't know, I don't like that. It's too rigid, it doesn't allow for people to do other things in their lives as well, because most postgraduate students … would be part-time and would be doing things, yeah, other things as well as studies… So it's about balance, it's about juggling everything at same time almost, you know, like management efficient, a half an hour computer, a cup of coffee with my family, and spend time with the kids, back to the computer, you know, it's about mixing it up (Susan).

Susan described the importance of balancing the quality and quantity she gave to her study:

It's a balancing act, it's a matter of gaining a balance but it's a priority here. I realised that studying doesn't mean sitting at the computer for eight hours in a row, and that it's not actually quality. I used to probably look for the quantity, and thought that there is some sort of correlation between them that the more you studied the better result you got. And now I realise it's the quality what you put in, spend half an hour, to one hour reading something, that's just as good, if not better than forcing yourself to do things you don't like to do (Susan).

Class setting

Class size influenced the students' approaches to their studies. It appeared that small size class is preferred by students, for example:

I think it's class setting, because, because mostly we are, in my opinion, they are mostly small classes, not many people, as when I do my bachelor's degree, you know we have a class of 30 people, 40 people, now it's like ten, six, so the class setting is very influential because .. So it's a different setting, and lecturers, they, most of them are not actually lecturing, it's more of discussion, more discussion setting, so I think that influences me a lot…. I was new to this kind of class, so first of all, I really did not know what to do in the class (Jenny).

The classes were actually very good when I started back 2002, usually four people per class, so it was really nice, and small. …I was put on the spot where I was asked personally, you know, '…how do you think?' It was really quite hard, it was a bit nerve wracking for me, but I appreciated that, … the relationship with my peers in the classroom has actually been beneficial to me. As the class size grew, I shrunk back again. You know, I think must be in 2003, the class size got up to ten or twelve, and, so I sat back again. And did not take that forefront role, that was actually nice, you know… (Susan).

I do actually like the study culture at AUT. I think, I have an opportunity to be part of a masters paper, which has include a large numbers of students in it, and that was, I actually did not like that at all … I think we had about fifteen to twenty and plus, and I am used to classes of four or five. And I actually found it, classes with that number of students, I felt … it detracted my learning (Tracey).

Social activities

During the interviews, frequent reference was made by participants of the balance between study and social life, having limited time to socialise, and to being isolated. Such references are highlighted in quotations below.

Cindy is quite a social person, thus, work, study, and social activities are all important to her.

Not so much about doing the work, but not enough time. Although I am not married, I have friends and I have family, so you have to balance in your social life. I am also involved in church, so that takes some of my time. Then I have to fit all the other things in. So like last year, I had to stop something, I was just too busy. I am still doing too many different things, something has to go, at the moment I am not sure what. You need to organise your life well, which is much easier to do everything (Cindy).

Lucy did not want to make her friends suffer from her study, for example:

My friends, they have to take their backseat, like I don't see them as much, during the semester, I have to just sometimes make sure phone calls to them, because I don't have time to see them as much as before. And that is adjustment, I realise from the first semester, I nearly to make them sacrifice, that's what I realise that I can't spent so much time to go and see them. And that's the change I made this semester. Yeah, you have to limit, you have to limit what you can do in a day (Lucy).

Tracey appeared not to be involved in social activities.

Right as we do, you don't have a social life, when you doing postgraduate studies…. I found, anyway, the postgraduate study, is too, quite significant contributing factors to your social life declining greatly for you doing study, for me personally… One is that even if you've got a little bit time to do something social, you usually so tired you just can't be bothered (Tracey).

Jenny enjoyed her social interactions:

I work sometimes, part-time, yet, not too much. (You work part-time, do you think it influence your study or not) I'm a bit selective, I only do little work, just so that I have something else to do, my main reason to get a job, actually, if I want to be honest, is not the money, is just so that I need to meet people, because I need to, otherwise I do not have any social life. And so, it helps a little, because it helps to get used to kiwi accent that ever things, it did that a bit (Jenny).

I have to be honest, I don't especially, I don't interact much with local people, I don't, it's just different life style, that's all (Jenny).

When asked about social activities, Susan acknowledged the fact of reduction, but she emphasised the quality of interaction:

Oh yeah, that's really gone down-hill. You know it's about sacrifices. And again it is about the quality of time you spend with your friends than quantity (Susan).

Salena had no time to socialise because of her many commitments:

I just, I don't think I get much time to socialize or any such thing, because even if I get, I don't have many friends out here, and most of time I get I spend on my readings and assessments, so all the time is to do with the course, or trying to find out how do I work, get a job, to stay at this country, these are the two things I keep doing all the time (Salena).

Tina spent most of her time at home and had limited connection with her friends.

… I did not go to some community. No, I just stay in home. (You by yourself) yeah, maybe I relate to people who come from [name of the country] as well, but not often (Tina).

Although students' social time is limited, they are favourable of the activities organised for meeting classmates or lecturers. Susan and Cindy recalled their experience in such meetings, for example:

I remember [lecturer's name] had an evening, it was end of the year, end of the semester, all postgraduate students went to his house, and had a sort of barbecue, that was nice, a good opportunity to socialise with people (Susan).

What a good one looks like. ..Also, you know we got to meet all the education lecturers recently (at a social function – students and faculty) which is excellent, I think it is really good. And I think that will help my study. .. It is still nice to know who these people are, what they are interested in, that is really good (Cindy).

Expectations

Students had a range of expectations. Some of them were presented here:

> I think like to stay on my back, like to keep asking me for work, (laughs) like to be, two weeks from the deadline of the assignment, to ask me for my draft, to say for me to come and meet with them so that can be discussed, to them, say, what needs to be changed, or what improvements, or what (?) trying to say, and then I think that would help me stay with my time management, to then produce the work on time, in a way not stressful, so I am really writing what I am trying to say, rather than just writing something under stress, that's not really good quality work (Lucy).

> I guess it's your responsibility as a student, but it would be helpful to have someone help you to reach that (Lucy).

> I expect promotion in my job, sure, primarily my most important reward is personally, it's gaining knowledge, it's personal development, second will be professional development, and I think there will be a position to me or to work towards social change (Tracey).

> Haven't I said that's a personal learning style too, I am very much, if I have could have a mentor, one person who is all knowledgeable, and I could follow them around everyday and learn everything, from that person, everything I just say why, and why why why, that's my style of one on one, one on one 24/7 (Tracey).

> I think, for example, for students come from overseas, for example, [name of the country]. If there are some [name of the university] teachers to give them a pilot guide before they enter the university and before they begin to study, for example, the teachers can tell the fresher what they should pay attention to at this school, what they should do, what they should prepare, for example, talking about little about independent thinking, independent learning and active learner, and critical thinking, that will be very helpful for the students. Maybe talk about little about assessment, pattern of the assessment, that's very helpful (Tina).

Influences on each participant

As far as each participant is concerned, they have their own unique characteristics, they might have different interpretations of the context they were situated in. The influences on the learning approaches of each participant are outlined as follows.

Participant A: Tracey

Tracey is interested in education. However, her areas of interest were not well developed because there was not much choice of papers in the masters programme. Sometimes she could not take the papers she wanted to because she is only part-time. Assessments appeared to be over-weighted. She did not have time for critical thinking about what she was learning and put those things into practice. Her concentration was

taken up on meeting the requirements of assignments. Her focus had to shift from obtaining a good grade to making sure she just received a pass. She encountered difficulties when starting her research.

Tracey understood quite well what was expected as a student, because she was a lecturer as well. Working with her classmates helped her, but for the majority of papers, she worked on her own. She was used to classes of four or five students, and thought the large numbers of students might detract her learning. Tracey is very good at time management. It's easy to find time she needs for her study. In terms of social life, Tracey did not think there was a social life when doing postgraduate studies.

Participant B: Lucy

Lucy was enrolled in three papers last semester, but she only completed two, because she did not adjust to the workload which is quite different from her first (undergraduate) degree and she did not manage her time effectively. Lucy developed a relationship with some lecturers finding other lecturers difficult to relate to. During the class time, there was a good collaboration between classmates. Lucy would like to have more interactions with the classmates, but it did not happen often.

Lucy thought personal interest was helpful to her study but the options of papers were quite minimal. Lucy wanted to maintain a balance between her personal life and her study life. In addition, she wanted to continue to enjoy her life while studying. Out of her university time, she spent most of her time on looking after her daughter, managing household, exercising, meeting friends and her spiritual life. Lucy's mother looked after her daughter when she came to the university.

Participant C: Cindy

Employment was an important factor to Cindy's study. She had to be fitting in with her job. She held the beliefs that everyone should make most opportunities to learn. She thought the lecturers in the school were quite diverse in teaching-styles and personal philosophies. Some lecturers were unclear about their expectations while some were quite supportive with clear feedback. Her stress mostly came from assignments, the academic writing, the pressure of deadline, as well as lecturers' preferences. Cindy was an independent kind of person. She did not tend to ask lecturers questions. If it was needed, she went to talk to peers in her discipline or her classmates.

Cindy started to think more about her thesis and studied in a broad area. She still used the same kind of learning patterns she studied before though she knew it was not the best way to do it. Her flatmate and sister are quite encouraging in Cindy's study. Cindy had to balance her social life, such as family, friends and church activities.

Participant D: Tina

Tina encountered difficulties in adjusting to a new learning environment, such as lecturer's teaching patterns which are quite different from those she had experienced, language problems as English was her second language, as well as the critical thinking styles. Orientations did not appear to provide necessary support for her academic study in the programme. All was new to her when she started her study. She was not clear what was expected in some papers. Lecturers were helpful, but she was not sure whether the lecturer would like to help her after the class, or just in the class. Tina felt it was unfair when she was treated in the same way as the local students.

Tina could not express what she really wanted to say in her assignments because of the limitation of language skills. When there was a problem, she tended to ask for the help from her classmates. The relationship between Tina and her classmates determined her involvement into the discussion in the class time. Her flatmate is a university lecturer, who helped Tina a lot in her study. Her parents provided the financial support for her study, but the inflation of New Zealand dollar in the recent years made her study more expensive.

Participant E: Jenny

Jenny was impressed with the small class setting and discussion in the class. She really did not know what to do in such a class environment in the first couple of weeks. Kiwi English accents and terminologies in the educational research field seemed to be the difficulties in her initial stages of study. She felt lost when she started in the first semester.

Jenny thought lecturers' teaching-styles differed from one another. She was not really interested in some papers as she did not think that there was a personal choice. For the paper, she was not clear where she was going. For each assignment, Jenny was clear about what lecturers wanted, but the academic writing was a big problem. She copied writing style from the journal articles. Most of her knowledge was gained from reading. She gained help from lecturers she knew in other university if it was needed. The

interaction with teachers and students in the classroom was good. But outside of that, she was really free to do with them. She did not interact much with local people because of the different life-styles. The part-time job helped Jenny get used to Kiwi accent.

Participant F: Susan

Susan had a meeting with the programme leader before she was enrolled. They discussed what papers were available and planned the order of papers Susan would do. Susan was also told that she could think about the thesis topic and start working on it while doing the papers. Susan thought most of the assignments had focused on research and prepared her well for working on the thesis.

Susan acknowledged the personalities of lecturers. She played a personality game with one lecturer, chose something the lecturer had an interest and obtained a good grade. Her observation of the lecturers' teaching styles informed her teaching practice.

She did not like the timeframes of the course, as she thought it did not allow her to do other things in her life. When there were a lot of family commitments, it was hard for Susan to arrange a time for the assessment. Susan had incredible support from her father and her husband. Her husband had worked part-time and taken the primary care for their children. Out of university time, Susan was seeking a balance between study and family life, quality and quantity of learning. There was little time for her friends and social activities.

Participant G: Salena

Salena was not used to the skim-reading and critical analysis as required by the lecturers when she started her study. The teaching-style was quite different from what she was used to. The way of greeting people, the form of talking and being seated in the classroom were thought to be inappropriate in her home country.

The written form of assignments was also different, but she could improve her writing with the detailed feedback from the lecturers. One international student in her class was also a great support to her with regard to preparing the assignments and getting used to what was expected here. It appeared that there were so many assignments in her study that Salena sometimes had to do the assignment for the sake of just doing it, rather than for a deeper understanding and application of the material. She also pointed out the disconnection between the assignments and the future research. She wanted to

incorporate some of the knowledge she gained in her study into practice when she went back to her home country. Salena took a student loan from her government for her study. She had expected to support her life easily by finding a job here, but the reality was not what she expected. She found a job and worked part-time in the second semester.

Summary

The findings outlined in this chapter have been articulated for each participant. Furthermore, the findings sought to identify some emergent themes across the participant as a group.

In addition, the learning approaches of the participants in this study were influenced by a wide range of factors. How do these factors influence students' learning approaches? To what extent are students influenced? Common themes as well as individual characteristics will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter V: Discussion of the findings

In this chapter, themes emerged from the data are discussed. The prior experiences and orientations to learning students brought with them seemed to influence their learning approaches. Contextual factors such as lecturers, courses, assessments also played an important role. Furthermore, student-student relationships, work responsibilities, financial problems, family commitment as well as students' expectations are discussed in this chapter.

Prior experiences

All of the participants had a Bachelor's degree to meet the entry requirements of MEd programme, one of them held a Masters degree in another field. Two participants went to university for their first degree as adult learners; another two undertook diploma study before the bachelor degree study; three of them entered the University for Bachelor's study soon after their graduation from the secondary school. The majors of the participants' undergraduate study covered science, health, languages, and public relations.

The participants in this study brought their educational experiences with them when they started the postgraduate study. The length of formal education provided participants with opportunities to acquire and master a variety of study strategies in an academic context. These strategies seemed to continue to influence their ways of study at the postgraduate level. For example, Cindy still has the same kind of patterns of study as she used before. She knew it was not the best way to study, but it was hard for her to change it. Tracey felt more at ease in her postgraduate study, partly because of her ways of learning at undergraduate level suited her situation at postgraduate level.

An alternative explanation might be the differences of the majors of their previous study. The research shows that it was possible that different learning approaches were associated with better achievement in different subject areas (Zhang, 2000). It might be true that Cindy was successful with her methods when dealing with her undergraduate study subjects. But in the School of Education, the characteristics of subjects are quite different. Some of Cindy's successful learning experiences need to be modified. Tracey continued her postgraduate study after her undergraduate study.

Students like Tina, Jenny and Salena had greater difficulties in applying their previous learning experience into their new learning environment. They had studied in various educational systems which are quite different from the one in New Zealand. Like critical thinking, skim reading and assignment writing are new to Tina, Salena and Jenny respectively. They had to change some of their previous learning strategies and ways of thinking to suit the new learning environment

Although participants had various subject interests, they shared another commonality, that is, all of them had teaching experiences in educational settings. Three of them are current lecturers of universities in Auckland. One had been a university teacher outside of Auckland for nearly six years, and another used to teach in a secondary school for more than ten years. Two of them were a university teacher and secondary school teacher respectively. One had a part-time job in early child education field, while the last one used to be home tutor during her undergraduate study.

The teaching experiences of the participants helped them understand the lecturers, educational theories and the relations with teaching practices. Tracey teaches at university. She writes booklets for her students. So she quite understands what is expected. Susan realised there was a gap between theory and practice. She observed lectures teaching practices and adopted more practical ways to improve her teaching. Salena sought possibilities to implant the educational theories and practices in her teaching context when she went back to her home country.

The teaching and learning experience of the participants might contribute to their understanding of knowledge. They would not take the knowledge from the lecturers passively. Rather they are going to analyse it critically. Students like Susan acknowledged the knowledge of lecturers, the knowledge of other people, but also recognised that they had their own knowledge. Their prior experiences would play an important role in the process of building new knowledge with the combination of their own understanding and those of other people, including lecturers.

The ages of the participants are from twenties to fifties. Most participants returned to their postgraduate study in their thirties onwards. The time-period of their completion of the most recent degree and their present study at AUT is between zero and more than ten years. Jenny and Tracey continued their postgraduate studies as an extension of undergraduate careers, while the other five participants returned back to study part-time

or full-time after having been working for years. Why were they enrolled in the MEd programme? I will discuss this in the next section.

Orientations to studying

Participants have a variety of reasons for enrolling in the MEd programme. Tracey and Jenny had interest in education; Cindy and Tina wanted to improve their teaching practices; Susan wanted to focus her career as a lecturer; Tracey expected a promotion in her job; Lucy wanted to expand the scope of her choice of job; Salena wanted to gain some international exposure in the field of education.

Jenny and Lucy believed that their postgraduate study would benefit their future careers, though they were not sure what kind of job they would have. The other five participants hoped that their postgraduate study would improve their own teaching practice.

Cindy and Lucy's personal beliefs were part of the reasons of their enrolment. Another reason Lucy expressed was the positive influence of her masters study on her daughter. Despite personal interest, Jenny also came to postgraduate study for her parents' expectations. It seemed there was an association between the reason for studying and employer assistance. The tuition fees of Cindy, Susan and Tracey were paid by their universities. They were encouraged to pursue their career development with financial support.

The orientations to learning provided a means of gaining insights into the complexities of students' learning and how these influence learning. In this study, all participants were motivated by academic concerns. Most of them were seeking higher qualifications as well as update knowledge to help them advance in their career. Students like Jenny and Lucy were preparing for a better career. They appreciated the usefulness and relatedness of knowledge. They are more likely to seek courses that meet their specialised professional and personal concerns and they are 'discerning and frequently demanding students' (Knight, 1997, p.3).

The main tenet of a professional development model is that development is continuous, owned and managed by the learner and begins from the individual's current state of learning (Haistead, 1995). Young (1995) argues that individuals need to be prepared to change direction during their career and that the self-directed, enabling framework of continuing professional development is key. If people operate on this model, then it is

expected that they would look at course content closely, to identify whether it would provide not only skills and knowledge but also opportunities to develop their practice. Students like Tracey, Cindy, Tina and Salena in this study stated that personal satisfaction and a theoretical perspective on their professional practice were important.

Wierstra and Beerends (1996) assume that a student's learning orientation determines to a large extent the kind of learning environment preferred by him or her. In agreement with this, Vermunt and Verloop (1999) state that the learning orientation can be more or less (in)congruent with the learning environment as experienced by the student. The orientations of the participants were at the general or domain-specific level as reviewed previously. These orientations were responsible for the relative stability of students' learning approaches. Their finally actualised learning strategies were on the one hand dependent on these learning orientations, and on the other hand on their situational study orientations, which were determined by learning environment.

In this study, students like Tracey and Cindy had a similar orientation to study, that is, for the improvement of professional practice. They preferred to adopt strategies which were consistent with that orientation as described in the literature. However, they have to shift their focus and change their strategy under the pressure of assessment. It appeared that students might hold the same orientation with a range of strategies in the learning context. Learning orientations showed a possible direction of future learning. But the extent to which the strategies are congruent with orientations is determined by the contextual factors.

Entwistle (1997) pointed up the potential discrepancies between students' general orientation and actual learning approaches. The relationships between orientations of learning, perceptions of learning environment and approaches towards learning can be changed through teaching and assessment methods. Teaching methods and assessment are seen to coordinate with learning quality to such an extent that the student will find him/herself 'trapped into engaging with appropriate learning activities' (Biggs, 2001, p. 226). I will have a look at these contextual factors in the following sections.

Lecturers

Postgraduate students often have closer relations with their lecturers than undergraduate students because of the class size and programme structure. Because of students' prior knowledge or interest in educational area, they are more likely to have given

consideration to relevant issues, more sensitive to what happened in the classroom and aware of lecturer's priorities and teaching conceptions.

The participants in the study experienced a range of different lecturers. Cindy said the lecturers had quite different philosophies and teaching-styles; Tracey found there were huge variations between lecturers and their teaching styles and guessed that came through individual learning; Jenny stated that lecturers' styles differ greatly from one another. Salena felt the requirements of each lecturer were so different whereas, Susan noticed that the lecturer had his/her preferences.

From lecturers' own educational experiences, their personal preference and favourite philosophy or methodologies in certain area of knowledge would be brought into their teaching and judgement of their teaching result. Lecturers had different views and differing levels of knowledge and therefore their expectations of the students' levels of understanding vary and emphasis may be on different aspects.

There has been a great deal of research on conceptions of teaching. Prosser and Trigwell (1998) distinguish basically two conceptions: teacher-focused and student-focused. Teacher-focused strategies are transmission theories of teaching; that is knowledge is conceived as being transmitted from expert teacher to inexpert learner. The focus is on what the teacher does. Student-focused strategies see the focus as being on bringing about conceptual change in student's understanding of the world, and it is what students do to achieve understanding that is important, not what teachers do.

Teachers' conceptions of teaching have an impact on students' approaches to learning. Conceptions are far more influential than knowledge in determining how they teach (Pajares, 1992). Two teachers may have similar knowledge but teach in different ways. Teachers with the knowledge transmission orientation tended to depress the students to use of a deep approach to learning. Teachers with the conceptual change orientation are less likely to promote a surface approach to learning.

As practical educators, Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) found their conception of supporting student learning only in the context of postgraduate teaching. This does not necessarily mean that it is exclusive to this level, it may just mean that most academics or courses do not reach these standards of teaching at the undergraduate level.

However, even the essence of postgraduate education programme structure provided a climate for the lecturers with the orientation of teaching as conceptual change to use consistent approaches in their teaching practice, the diversities of lecturers influenced their impact on student learning.

This possibly would explain why Susan played a 'game' with her lecturer, using lecturer's favourite methodology which she did not like; why Salena was trying to suit each lecture and meet their requirements; might also be the reason why Cindy sought external support with caution. They are trying to find out what lecturers want and what he favoured in that area. Students doing in this way are considering about the pass or better grade of assignment. It appeared that, to some extent, they might neglect the essence of 'critical thinking', or, they might realise the emphasis on 'critical thinking' in education, but they have to leave it aside temporarily for that specific assignment.

In this study, lecturer's preference appears to be one important factor that influences students leaning approaches. It means, from the interview data, even lecturers hold student-focus conceptions of teaching, they might be unaware of the personal preference influence on how student will study that course. Of course, even in this study, this might not happen to all lecturers who have taught these participants. To what extent lecture's preference influences students' approaches to learning could not be explored in this study.

The research into teachers' experiences of teaching shows that the way teachers approach their teaching and perceive their teaching context is a function of their previous experiences of teaching and the way the department in which they are teaching structures the teaching context (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999b). Briefly, teachers who adopt more student-focused and more conceptual change-oriented approaches to teaching, rather than teacher-focused and more information transmission-orientated approaches, perceive that they have more control over their teaching, that their class sizes are not too large, that their workloads are not too high and that their department values teaching.

Based on this finding, in the present study, lecturers teach a relatively small-sized class, but their workload and school values remain to be a question. It is assumed that lecturers had their dilemmas.

Howitt (2000) summarises a number of the difficulties currently facing many lecturers in Western universities:

> their concerns about changing patterns of government funding, increased class size, deteriorating teaching facilities in many institutions, market intrusions into curriculum process, industrial organization of the labour process of teaching, reduced academic autonomy and increased administrative demands on teachers are repeated in many higher education systems (p. 317).

The academic staff seemed to be under considerable pressure. Scheyvens, Wild and Overton (2003) argued that although they tried to provide the best support they could, there was no incentive to provide additional assistance to students because this work was not recognised. Their reputation in academe still come largely from research and publications rather than teaching.

Participants in the study had different expectations of lecturers. Cindy and Susan were quite independent students, they did not want to use lecturers' time though lecturers were approachable. Jenny did not want to use the lecturers' support because she felt uncomfortable. She did not know the Kiwi limits. Tina and Lucy appeared that they expected more assistance.

As far as lecturer-student relationships were concerned, Cindy, Tracey and Susan were equal with lecturers in some ways as they also taught at universities. They are both colleagues and students of lecturers. It seemed to be easy for them to keep an ideal relationship with lecturers. Students like Jenny, Tina and Lucy appreciated their interaction with lecturers in the classroom.

In such a context, it might be better for the participants to realise the diversities of lecturers and their dilemmas, build up a situated understanding of the courses and lecturers' styles. They also might be aware of that "there is not one 'academic culture' that students have to important if it is accepted that there is not one 'academic culture' that students have to be 'inducted' into, but that the academy consists of a range of diverse and often contradictory cultures that students have to learn to negotiate and survive" (Haggis, 2003, p. 101).

Assessment

Familiarity with the assessment style

How to write an assignment seemed to be difficult for some participants. Cindy and Jenny were taken as examples. Cindy knew nothing about a literature review or annotated bibliography before she did it last year. She had to find out the information about the topic as well as the way to format it. Same happened to Jenny. She never did academic writing like the assignment required before. Her first assignment got very bad marks. The only way she could think of was to copy writing styles of journal articles.

From the student's perspective, the diversity of student population embraced the varieties of student levels, including cognitive, academic, and communication levels. Their educational backgrounds did not necessarily make all of them ready for academic writing at postgraduate level. Jenny did not receive such training in her home country, nor did Cindy in New Zealand. On the other hand, Tracey had no problem in academic writing as she was well trained at her undergraduate study. One possible explanation was that they were in different undergraduate disciplines.

From lecturers' perspective, some lecturers might tend to assume that because postgraduate students are educated they should know how to write (Brown, 1994). The students should be familiar with the academic writing styles. They should understand the requirements and meet the criteria. The lecturers assumed these students have been well prepared for their study at postgraduate level. The lecturers' task seemed to extend students' knowledge in educational area rather than teaching the structural characteristics of writing. Some lecturers might overlook the difficulties students encountered. While these lecturers were skilled in their disciplines, they were not necessarily skilled in identifying students' difficulties (Strauss, Walton & Madson, 2003).

There were times when the lecturers' assumptions about these students' abilities were higher than the students' actual abilities. Like Jenny said, the instruction did not help as much as a good example. She wanted to see what it looked like. Students had programme and module handbooks. These handbooks contain detailed information on learning objectives, syllabi, lecture topics and reading lists. Lecturers might think those provided the detail information. For some students, however, these might not be enough. They need examples of previous assignments. Those examples might help them

get a real understanding of the structure and content of assignment. They would be able to make better performances in their initial stage of academic writing.

Workload of assessment

How assessment occurred was a great concern of all the participants. This is both understandable and logical given the impact of assessments and grades. The time constraints of assignments appeared to change their ways of going about study.

Lucy wanted to understand, absorb the knowledge and reflect on it. A lot of new information and readings were put in front of her, although she was expected to submit assignments before the due date. There was not enough time for her to do what she wanted. So she sometimes did not understand completely before she wrote it down.

Salena would apply what she learned in New Zealand into her future practice when she went back home. Understanding of the theories and critical thinking about practical applications were equally important for her. It was assumed that she would like to present her unique perspectives in the assignments. All these required a lot of time. But the deadlines of assignments did not allow her to do so. She then had to do some assignments 'for the sake of doing it'.

Tracey was in a similar situation. As a teacher, she wanted to put what she was learning into her teaching practice. She intended to relate her teaching context to the learning subject and assignments and expected an improvement through critical thinking about what she was learning. On the other hand, as a student, she had to be sure that could meet the deadlines and pass the assignments. When this contradiction occurred, she had to shift her focus from what she should be learning to pass the assignment. If there was a great time pressure, she had to lower her personal standards, from getting A grades to just making sure she passed.

Assessment is a factor which has been shown to have an impact upon learning approaches (e.g. Thomas & Bain, 1984; Kember, 2004). The effect is sufficiently strong. Lucy, Salena and Tracey's general predispositions were incongruent with the actual strategies they adopted in the real context. Changing approaches is extremely difficult as Haggis (2003) noted they may have experienced a period of struggle and difficulties in making the decision. They finally chose to meet the needs of lecturers and

the requirements of assignment. The strategies they adopted would possibly lead to a reasonable successful learning in terms of results.

Zhang (2000) states that the way students were assessed determined 'the ways by which students pursued their knowledge' (p. 49). The case study reported by Gibbs (1992) suggest that students taking postgraduate taught courses may be forced to adopt undesirable study approaches by virtue of an overloaded curriculum and the pressure of assessment studying. However, in contrast, Richardson (1998) rejects the results presented by Gibbs and concludes that postgraduate students are capable of adopting appropriate orientations in their studying.

It appears that the data in the present study seems to be consistent with Gibbs' finding. This might raise the question of the extent to which lecturers in the school are aware of the conflicting value-systems which they are operating from. When assessing students, do they assess what they value? Do they assess what students value? In terms of professional development, what do they value? As an employee in the School of Education, can they assess what they value? What does the school value? What does the programme team value? Can they assess what students value? These are all pertinent rhetorical questions and issues, however, it is outside the scope of this thesis to elaborate upon these here. Moreover, this might be a fruitful area for further research in this area.

Again, as discussed previously, students might tend to be aware of the complexities of their learning environment, consider about the existing unchangeable straits, and adjust learning strategies to best fulfil their expectations.

The influence of assessment in a more positive light can be seen in Susan. In her opinion, a lot of assessments had focused on research, the papers she had learned well prepared her for her thesis. One possible explanation would be that she had a big picture of her postgraduate study from her meeting with the programme leader before she started. She related each paper to her future research and collected useful knowledge in that subject for her thesis. Her perceptions of the papers were assumed to be important in her study.

Participants' perceptions of courses

Course choice

Participants in the study would like to choose those subjects they have interest in. But it seemed that there were not many choices for them. Lucy thought the options were minimal and her degree was formulated on what was offered. Jenny acknowledged that there were some very interesting papers, but she had to do some others which were the only ones available. Tracey said there were not many papers focusing on her interest on specific research area.

It might be true that students could gain knowledge easily while developing their personal interest. However, it was impossible for the programme to design varieties of papers to meet the needs of all students because students in the programme held a range of interests and priorities due to their diverse backgrounds. Even if papers are available, they might be only available in specific semester. Part-time students like Lucy and Tracey might have to miss the chances. Just as Rogers (1969, as cited in McLean, 2001) claimed, students in higher education are not free to charge off in new directions dictated by their own interests.

The MEd programme is small in terms of student numbers. This is an advantage because of the small classes. However, because of its small postgraduate student population it would not be feasible or economically viable to have a large suite of paper options with only a few students in each. Thus the issue of student choice has to be traded off or balanced with the economic complexities of a new, small, yet growing programme (Giles, 2005).

When the papers were set in the programme, it was assumed to be prepared to offer adequate knowledge and meet the needs of students to its best extent. However, it was the student's perceptions of the courses which shaped their learning approaches (Ramsden, 1992). These perceptions could often differ considerably from the intentions of the course designer and the expectations of the lecturers (Kember, 2004).

Perceived relevance

The findings revealed that students like Tracey and Susan had different feelings when starting the research and thesis writing. Tracey encountered more difficulties. The papers or assessments Susan did constituted a large part of her big picture – focus on the

thesis. On the other hand, Tracey viewed the course as over-assessed, viewed each course separately, the assignments influenced her understanding of the meaning and learning focus. Knowledge in each paper could not be integrated into thesis writing and research work when 'it should be there'.

It seems likely that the assessment related to thesis writing was a factor in encouraging the students to commit themselves to study without complaining of excessive workload. When students were experiencing the transition from the highly structured course-work in their undergraduate study to the independent work at the postgraduate level, their understandings of the links between papers, and the relationship between their papers and their proposed thesis were vital in the determination of their learning approaches.

This raised the crucial question of the extent to which the coursework prepared students, particularly in terms of developing their understanding of research design and methodology. Students like Tracey and Salena expressed concerns that they had not sufficient or adequate training in preparing thesis. It is assumed that they did not have a general understanding of each the correlations between course papers and thesis writing.

It could be argued that Tracey and Salena were not as lucky as Susan who was given an opportunity to discuss with the lecturer and think about thesis at an earlier stage. Moreover, like Salena said in the interview, studying research methodology in separate courses was inadequate in preparing students for the thesis component and to become independent researcher. She gradually understood that she was being prepared for thesis, but realised that there might be better ways in doing it.

Students are required to submit a thesis after the completion of 120 points (usually eight 15 point papers) for the qualification of a masters degree. Students might not be highly motivated if they view each paper separately when doing that. Furthermore, they might encounter difficulties when doing the thesis. This suggests that attention needs to be given to making concrete links between the course-work and research and to developing a synergy between the proposed research topic and coursework modules.

This was supported by Zhang's (2000) findings. That is, students may perceive some subjects as meaningful and useful in their future careers, personal interest, or practical application, and thus use the deep or achieving approach; students may perceive some other subjects as irrelevant to their future careers or their personal interest, and thus use

the surface learning approach. Besides the concerns of this thesis, participants tended to relate their study to other aspects of their lives.

Tracey, Cindy and Susan were all teaching university students, whilst also studying. Tina, Lucy and Salena had been teachers teaching students including early childhood, secondary and university students. Jenny's personal future development would be in educational settings. The papers they were studying (or had studied) appeared to relate to their past, present or future careers. All of them aimed at understanding things and regulating their own learning.

Their intentions of employing deep learning approaches were influenced by contextual factors as demanding assignments. They still gain useful knowledge in other aspects. For example, Susan improved her teaching from the observation of lecturers' teaching practice; Cindy obtained a better understanding of theories in educational field; Jenny learned a lot from interesting reading material. Even though most of them seem to use strategic, even surface learning approaches to some extent when doing the assignments, they still related their career or interest to their daily learning activities. This could possibly be described as a situational approach of learning.

It could be conjectured that there are better ways to relate course-work to students' teaching practice. For example lecturers could model theory with their teaching practice given that the majority of students have had teaching experience. In addition to their observation of lecturers' practice, students might have other opportunities to gain knowledge which informs their practice if lecturers take students teaching practice into account and ensure that presentation of abstract theory is at some point followed by demonstrations of how this theory can be used to inform practice.

Adjustments

In entering a new type of education, Vermetten, Lodewijks and Vermunt (1999, p. 273) described this as "a period of friction". Participants in this study have experienced difficulties in adjusting to the postgraduate study programme appeared to have beed a problem for Susan, as she had a lot of others things to do in her life. Tracey perceived the assignments were over weighted. There should be more time for her absorbing and practicing knowledge. Lucy failed in one paper as she did not know how to deal with the large amount of information in the beginning of her study. Cindy needed to address her concerns about her own academic writing.

International students like Jenny, Tina and Salena had more difficulties than those local students. Generally, they need to adjust to the social and cultural settings in New Zealand. For, example, Salena was uncomfortable with the ways of greeting people and students being seated in the classroom, as it was unacceptable in her home country. Secondly, assignment styles and critical thinking were completely new to them. They needed to change their academic goals and practices, especially in relation to critical writing and to studying in a different postgraduate research culture. During the initial stage of their study, international students were spending most of their time and energy on being familiar with the learning processes.

Furthermore, language difficulties appeared to be the greatest obstacle to academic adjustment of these international students. Students in this study confirmed that the challenges associated with reading (Salena) and writing (Tina) in English at the postgraduate level were the biggest impediment of their academic success. The difficulties Jenny had experienced are commonly found in previous research which reported that students are often unprepared for the ways in which the local accent and the speed of their lecturers' speech dramatically reduce their level of understanding of lecture content (Mills, 1998). Such linguistic difficulties are a primary source of stress for international students.

These findings possibly point toward the importance of lecturers' or programme provider's attention to students' learning processes in this period. Cadman (2000) suggested an Integrated Bridging Programme (IBP) played an important role in helping students adjust to a new learning environment. With this typical period in mind, lecturers might want to help students reflect on their learning conceptions and orientations, explain how the course will be carried out and what students are expected, and offer students opportunities to develop skills for successful acculturation in a postgraduate study culture.

Student-student relationships

Salena had help from her classmate in preparing her assignment. Her classmate was a semester ahead of her, who had experienced same difficulties and gotten used to the learning process. The discussion between the students about the requirements of the assignment would enable both students to more easily complete the task. Tina tended to

be more active in the discussion with those of close relationships in class, and asked her classmates for help if there were any difficulties after class hours.

Tracey worked together with her classmates in some classes exchanging ideas with other students. She felt it was really helpful. Unfortunately it just happened in few papers. She had to work on her own in the majority of papers. Lucy experienced a good collaboration with her classmates during class time. She wanted more interactions with her classmates after class. She wanted to talk with other students, share experiences, share difficulties, and learn from others, thus growing a class and postgraduate culture.

Good student-student relationships appeared to be a positive factor in helping students cope with their work. By working together students could help each other understand difficult concepts, brainstorming data toward assessment tasks. It also appeared that strong friendship groups within a class had some effect on mediating perceptions of heavy workload. By working together students would share difficulties, solve the problem with joint efforts. There would be less stress than working alone.

Students' experiences in the study are in line with the findings reported by Kember (2004) that student perceptions of workload are influenced by student-student relationships, and workload and surface approaches are interrelated. The importance of developing student-student relationship is also consistent with Tinto's model (1975, as cited in Kember 2004) of integrating students with college society through developing higher levels of affiliation between students.

At postgraduate level, students are more likely to have a substantial professional knowledge base to share. In this masters programme, students might have more common topics talk about, such as their teaching career, educational theory, assessment, and personal life experiences. Interactions with classmates were likely to be fundamental to learning at this level.

However, participants in this study did not interact much as they expected, especially after class hours. This might relate to other commitments of students out of their university time.

Work, finance and family

Tracey, Cindy and Susan are working full-time as university lecturers. They had to enrol in masters study part-time, therefore, they had to fit in with their everyday job. To

complete their programme of study, they needed to arrange time off and resources from their employers, as well as coping with the demands of high-level study. This might be an alternative explanation of Cindy's dissatisfaction with the timeframe of the programme, Tracey's lack of time for understanding the materials and Cindy's difficulties at her initial stage of study. Fortunately, their employer paid fees for their study. They had no financial problems some international students might have.

Salena and Tina are international students. They left their previous teaching jobs and came to study full-time. They had left paid employment to return to higher education and gain a career-advancing qualification at their own expense. Salena got loan from her government for his study which would be expected to pay back when she got a better job after graduation with the masters degree. Tina used her own savings and financial support from her parents. The inflation of New Zealand dollar caused more financial stress to both of them.

Susan and her husband cared for two young children. Lucy took the primary care of her daughter. Their family commitments seemed to shape the limited time for study. They also were seeking a balance between their study and family life.

It would be reasonable to assume that students had invested much of their self-worth in their further education. They expected to be rewarded in the future personal or professional development. Thus these students were highly motivated and possibly hold high level self-efficacy. Their work responsibilities, financial status or family commitment might distract their study. On the other hand, their self-efficacies would support them in regulating learning activities, overcoming obstacles and achieving their goals (Pajares, 1992).

Cindy balanced her study, work, social activities and her family. She thought these were part of her life and they were interrelated, they influenced different spheres of her life. Jenny did part-time job for the sake of being familiar with Kiwi English and local culture, rather than for the money. Salena was in different situation as Jenny, she worked part-time mainly for solving her financial problems. Being emotionally and financially secure was important for the quality of her learning.

It could be seen that these students employed different ways managing many kinds of activities or factors relating to their postgraduate study. As they chose studying for masters degree as means for their future development, they invested much in the

learning process, and what they were doing was likely to serve the better quality of their learning at postgraduate programme.

Expectations of lecturers' support

Students' preferences influenced their approach to learning in this study. For example, Tracey would prefer small-size class, having an all knowledgeable mentor who was always available; Lucy would like to have lecturers ask her for the draft and discussion which might help her time management. She recognised her own responsibility but still hoped to have someone help her to reach her goals. Tina was looking for lecturers who would consider her difficulties and assist her actively.

With these considerations in mind, these students might experience more difficulties in their studies as their needs are not possibly being met in the real teaching and learning context. What these students expected might be in the ideal student-centred learning model, or what it should be done from a student perspective.

However, there is an existence of the common gulf between rhetoric and reality (Lea, David Stephenson & Troy, 2003). One of the possible reasons for this gulf is that implementing a truly student-centred approach to learning and teaching takes a considerable amount of effort (Felder & Brent, 1996). As lecturers are under the pressure to publish, devotion to innovative teaching methods is unlikely to be seen as a high priority. Although it is acknowledged that lecturer research could bring about benefits like "lecturer enthusiasm, currency of lecturer knowledge and scholarship, and enhanced credibility of individual staff members and the institution as a whole" (Lindsay, Breen & Jenkins, 2002, p. 311), postgraduate students in their study still associate some disadvantages with lecturer research, including "reduced availability, competitive with teaching, and curriculum distortion" (p. 322).

A further disincentive is about resources. Student-centred learning requires more in the way of resourcing than other methods. The class size in postgraduate programme is relative small when compared with other universities in New Zealand. The smaller-size class requires more lecturers' time, and more technology facilities. The university needs to invest more money in supporting these intentions. This might be at the risk of higher tuitions fees to cover their expenses. The reality of what lecturers were expected from the school and university appeared to make this ideal model impossible. It might be

better for student taking the main responsibility of their learning (as independent, autonomous learners), especially at the postgraduate level.

In contemporary pedagogy, the recommendation for a shift of emphasis in responsibility from teacher to student is common. Candy, Crebert and O'Leary (1994) suggested adult learners have, among other things, an ability to interrelate aspects of knowledge, and a capacity to manage learning. In the study of Geelan (1999), students were prepared to accept greater responsibility for their own learning. In a summary of the characteristics of effective learners, De La Harpe, Kulski and Radloff (1999) noted good learners:

- Have clear learning goals

- Have wide repertoire of learning strategies and know when to use them

- Use available resources effectively,

- Know about their strengths and weakness

- Understand the learning process

- Deal appropriately with their feelings, and

- Plan, monitor, evaluate and adapt their leaning process (p. 110)

With all these characteristics in mind, students might be better in regulating their learning activities and monitoring their learning process.

On the other hand, from lecturer's perspective, understanding student perceptions is one of the central elements in the development of appropriate and effective learning environments (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). It is true that some expectations that students have may not be met within the educational context, due to pedagogical or resource limitations. Students may be disappointed in the reality. Having raised expectations, failure to satisfy them without just cause or explanations could lead to negative influence on the learning process. It might be necessary to show students, like what Salena said in the interview, 'what is possible and what you had expected would be possible'. Students then might be willing to involve and take a high level of personal responsibility in learning.

Summary

A discussion of the findings in this chapter continued the dialogue in relation to the emergent themes with each participant's transcript and across the range of transcripts. In summary, participants in this study were influenced by a range of factors in their postgraduate study. Each participant held their unique characteristics. One single factor did not necessarily influence all the participants, even if it did, the extent of influence might be varying. In the next chapter, I will make conclusions of these findings and discussions. Then the limitations of the study will be identified. Also the implications to students and lecturers will be outlined. Finally the direction of future research will also be presented.

Chapter VI: Conclusions

In this chapter, after briefly summarising the research findings, the strengths and limitations of the study are discussed. The implications of the findings for enhancing students learning in the School of Education are proposed with potential future research being suggested.

This research sought to address the following research question, *What are the factors that influence postgraduate students approaches to learning within the School of Education*? The findings presented in this thesis represent some of factors that influence the learning approaches of some postgraduate students within the School of Education in a New Zealand university. Different factors appear to underpin the motivations of the students who have enrolled in the Master of Education programme. While some students appeared self-motivated to meet their own personal goals that may relate to their professional development, others were more likely coming for personal interest.

The general orientations of studying were influenced by the contextual circumstances. The actual studying strategies were unlikely to be consistent with their predispositions. The workload of assessments appeared to be vital in the process of change. Lecturers' preferred teaching and research styles, adjustment to the postgraduate study, perceptions of courses, and student-student relationships appeared to contribute to the adoption of actual studying approaches in the specific situation.

The findings also revealed differing sets of pressures in the daily lives of the postgraduate students that might affect their approaches to study. On some dimensions, some students appeared to be favoured over the others. For example, difficulties in financial circumstances appeared to influence international students, whereas family commitments were clearly an issue for those students with children. Work responsibilities appeared to influence most part-time students in the research.

In summary, while the findings from the present study confirm a number of related factors explored in previous studies which influence students' learning approaches, lecturers' preferred teaching and research styles and students' expectations of lecturers' support appeared to be additional factors which influence students' approaches to learning in this study. Furthermore, the knowledge base of the postgraduate students seemed to contribute to their interpretations of their subject learning. At postgraduate

level, students' approaches to learning might embrace broader meanings than the conventional meanings of undergraduate students.

The strengths and limitations

A number of strengths can be identified in this research, these include the following:

1. The appropriateness of the methodology. This research has sought to explore the factors impacting student's approaches to learning in the first instance, rather than prematurely construing these factors as problem based or necessitating a programme evaluation. Moreover the intricacies of each participant's approach to learning reveals a complexity that is best shown through case study methodology.

2. The exploration has identified positive features in the student's learning as well as constructive suggestions for ongoing improvement of student's learning and the development of the programme and postgraduate learning culture.

3. The significant contribution to the scant New Zealand literature of students' perceptions of postgraduate study.

4. The engagement of colleagues / other postgraduate students has provided the opportunity for the students' voices to be heard and furthermore, it validates their learning experience.

5. The impact of the research process on my personal and professional learning and understanding. Moreover considerations of the underpinning epistemologies of various quantitative and qualitative approaches to research continue to challenge my thinking on the nature and purpose of postgraduate education.

While this study might be the first to capture the characteristics of postgraduate students' approaches to learning at an individual level in a New Zealand higher institution, the findings need to be considered with some caution. Some limitations of the study need to be noted, particular in relating to the level of generalisability. The present research project was conducted in a School of Education. Students in other disciplines may not have the same experiences in their learning contexts because of the considerable influence of discipline characteristics on students' approaches to learning. It was also noted that participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the range

of papers they had completed or were studying. Generalisations across a range of potentially diverse papers in the MEd programme may be problematic.

Comment should also be made on the age difference between the participants. Given that age has been found to be a significant variable with regard to student's learning approach, in this study, the potential relationships between student' age and their learning approaches were not explored due to the privacy of research information.

While limitations exist, I am confident with the strong points this research has brought to me and others. The present study provided insights into the influences that may not be included in large-scale research designs. In particular, using a case study approach and interview technique, students' characteristics were captured at an individual level. I have shown that different students within a particular discipline may well experience common obstacles but are also affected by them to different degrees and in different ways. The findings serve to highlight the importance of exploring beyond broad categories often used to cluster students so that contributing factors that can impact on postgraduate students' approaches to learning can be identified more accurately.

Consideration need to be given to the existence of the influencing factors identified in this study and their significance to the improvement of teaching and learning at a postgraduate level. Reflections on the research findings will possibly bring changes into teaching and learning practices.

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, what suggestions can be made for better practice? That is, how would this study contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning in the school? I suggest that the that the findings in this research highlight the need for greater considerations to be given to a number of aspects in the lecturers' teaching and students' learning processes in this specific postgraduate programme. I would argue that the findings of the present study could bring awareness to the school administrators, lecturers and students in the following ways.

First, given that findings of the present study indicated that various factors influence students' learning approaches, the question that arises is how to create a learning environment that is more conducive to effective learning for all the students. The School might want to look to create different approaches and a more conducive

environment for lecturers which would directly benefit students learning. This could be achieved by greater and on-going dialogue between the teaching staff and students in the programme.

In this globalised world characterised by rapid technological, economic and cultural changes, the need for students to acquire skills and update knowledge has been repeatedly highlighted (e.g., Knapper & Trowler, 2000; Kreber, 1998, 2002). Students in this study were motivated by their professional development or improvement of their current working practices. Studying at postgraduate level, students need to become self-directed learners who are capable of managing their own learning as well as thinking independently and critically.

On one hand students themselves may acquire the skills necessary for self-directed learning. On the other hand, these findings suggest that changes in the design and choices of courses affect how students tackle those courses, and in particular that desirable approaches to studying could be promoted by appropriate course design, teaching methods and modes of assessment. The school appears to have a responsibility to create learning environments that promote such deep-level learning.

Lecturers teaching certain papers keep the primary contacts with students. Their ways of teaching and assessing determine the extent to which the effective teaching and learning happen. But the lecturers' teaching practices are linked to the structure of the programme and the culture of the school. The school culture and programme characteristics influence their adoption of teaching approaches. For instance, lecturers teaching papers to new students must also consider possible induction processes for these students. On the other hand, lecturers teaching the final paper in the course-work must consider the arrangements and processes associated with the next step of readying the students for their research proposals.

Lecturers in higher education operate in a challenging environment characterised by rising pressures (e.g., Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Martin & Ramsden, 2000). In addition to teaching an increasingly diverse student population, lecturers have to remain competitive in their research areas. If lecturers are in an environment which values research over teaching, they are not likely to hold the same level of commitment, rigour and incentives in teaching as in other aspects of their academic development. The school might want to create an environment that encourages good teaching, and then by

extension, promotes students learning. For example, in the Pew Scholar Fellowship Programme (Cambridge, 2000), lecturers are encouraged to actively explore teaching and learning issues within their own discipline. The academic teaching staff relate their teaching practices to pedagogical literature, develop research on the issue, and subject their work to peer-review. Their academic work is evaluated accordingly. Though the evaluative criteria within one particular school may not remain unquestioned, this might be an attempt in seeking different approaches to the enhancement of student learning.

In the light of course design, the findings suggest that attention needs to be given to broadening the availability of course choices, making concrete links between the course-work and research and to developing a synergy between the proposed research topic of the thesis and coursework modules.

Secondly, the findings might cause lecturers in the academic programme to recognise individual differences in their classrooms and to make an effort to motivate students to learn in a more effective way. Given that students bring with them different learning orientations and prior knowledge, lecturers might want to come to an understanding that students at this postgraduate level are not likely to accumulate more and more information assumed to be important in an academic view, rather they want to see that information in relation to their own experiences, interest or personal development. To some of these students, learning throughout the lifespan has been recognised as an important prerequisite for a successful career and fulfilled life. Given that students' perceptions of the amount and type of work they have to do appear to impact on the extent to which they 'cope with' rather than learn the content, lecturers might want to afford attention in the subject design process, typically in the value of assessments. Lecturers may also want to find ways to identify the students' perceptions of the obstacles preventing school circumstances leading to those perceptions. Once appropriately supportive school environments are created, negative outcome expectations about school could be lessened.

Thirdly, given the situation that the findings of the present study suggested the diversity of students' characteristics, and the reality of lecturers' commitments besides teaching, student-centred teaching and learning might be a theoretically existing ideal model. Students might want to be an active learner rather than solely relying on expectations of lecturers' support.

The students became aware of the variety of factors that influence learning. Each student has his or her own concerns. Even experiencing the same problem or issue, students have their different perspective and feelings. It is true that university staff should facilitate student learning and meet students' needs with their best efforts. However, despite the fact of increasing external (such as the Performance Based Research Fund, PBRF) and internal (e.g. securing income through increasing student numbers) pressures upon universities and lecturers, it does not seem to be realistic for lecturers to find an effective way to cover all those problems encountered by the diversity of student populations. It seemed that, in reality, what students hoped student-centred learning might be was probably an impossibility in the actual climate. As a result, it might be necessary for students to assume a higher level of personal academic responsibility in the learning situation and be actively choosing their goals and managing their learning.

Mutual understanding between lecturers and students appears to be imperative in evaluating the learning environment and adopting appropriate learning approaches. Sharing responsibilities and joint efforts seem to be important in achieving more effective learning.

Suggestions for future research

Assuming mutual understanding between lecturers and students contributes to effective learning, I would continue my study in this area by seeking multiple perspectives to understand student learning. My future research will investigate the lecturers' conceptions of teaching and their teaching strategies, as well as postgraduate students' conceptions of learning and their learning activities. The changes between their general predispositions and actualised teaching/learning strategies will be examined. The methodologies will involve interviews with students and lecturers, or matched questionnaires given to students and teachers in order to systematically compare their interpretations of individual situation, and task dimensions. The potential gaps between 'what they are' and 'what they are expected' will be identified, the ways to minimise those gaps will be discussed aiming to enhance effective teaching and learning in higher education.

A range of possibilities exist for the researcher as a consequence of this research. One such possibility is the extension of my research into the research culture that exists

within, and surrounding, the postgraduate programmes within the School of Education. Alternatively, I could undertake a replication study in a Chinese university as a comparative study. Still further, these are options of investigating the factors influences students' approaches to learning in other disciplines.

It is my hope that other researchers will draw upon, and extend my findings into other areas of research on postgraduate student's approaches to learning. Should a broad range of methodologies be applied to this area of study, it may well be that our understanding of the complexity and intricacy of factors influencing postgraduate student's learning is deepened. My challenge to current and future postgraduate students and researchers is to agitate and advocate for rich, positive change leading to reciprocity and mutuality in postgraduate education in New Zealand higher education institutions. These are issues that I believe require further research and investigation.

Upon publishing the findings of this research and the story of my research experience, I intend to further my research activity through in-depth doctoral studies. To this end, I have relocated my family to New Zealand to share in this experience.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

AUT
AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

18 April 2005

Project title: Factors influencing students' approaches to learning: A case study of postgraduate students at a New Zealand University

(As part of a qualification for MEd)

Project Supervisors: David Giles, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, AUT

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Background

There is an increasingly diversity amongst the postgraduate student population in universities in New Zealand. Students now come from different social and cultural backgrounds bringing with them different experiences and varying levels of education. A range of literature exists regarding students' approaches to learning. However, the majority of studies have been carried out with Australian or European undergraduate students. This study intends to investigate factors that influence students' learning within a postgraduate context in New Zealand, and explore whether previous findings are relevant to the New Zealand context.

I am looking for students who are completing postgraduate studies at the School of Education asking them to take part in a research project where they will share their experiences.

Benefits of participation

The researcher wishes to explore the factors that may influence a student's learning. Students participating in the research may benefit directly and indirectly. Students may want to reflect on their learning experiences and implement personal changes as they pursue higher educational goals. The findings of the study will also benefit lecturers who are seeking to improve the design of their courses by considering those factors which influence students' learning approaches while also informing the adjustment of the programme processes that might better facilitate students' learning.

Your participation

Participation is voluntary – you do not have to take part in this project. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw from the research project at any time without giving reasons. You may also withdraw information you have provided if you do so before the information has been analysed.

If you agree to take part you will be invited to have an interview of about 30 minutes with the focus being on your postgraduate study experience. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. Before the data from the interview is processed you will be sent a transcript. You will then have the opportunity to edit or add to the material in the transcript. If at any stage before collation of the data you wish to withdraw from the research process all transcripts and material will be destroyed.

All the information you provide will be confidential. No one except the researcher will have access to any of the original material. Your identity will be kept secret – you will not be asked to give your name or student number for use in the research. If you are unhappy about the answers you have given in the interview or the feedback to the written material, the tape will be erased and/or the written answer shredded.

For further information

If you have any questions about the project please contact the project supervisor David Giles, Ph: 917 9999 ext 7344, email david.giles@aut.ac.nz. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research team please contact the Executive Secretary AUTEC, Madeline Banda, Ph: 917 9999 ext 8044 email madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 8 October, 2004
AUTEC Reference number: 04/165.

Appendix B: Consent to Participation in Research
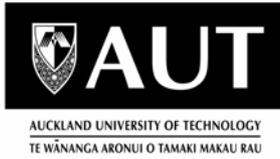
This form is to be completed in conjunction with, and after reference to, the AUTEC Guidelines (Revised January 2003).

Project title: Factors influencing students' approaches to learning: A case study of postgraduate students at a New Zealand University

Project Supervisors: David Giles and Richard Smith

Researcher: Xiaomin Jiao (Email: jiaxia04@aut.ac.nz)

I have read and understood the information provided about this research project (Information Sheet dated   /   /   ).

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.

I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.

I agree to take part in this research.

Participant   signature ....……………………..

Participant name: ………………………………………………………….

Participant Contact Details (if appropriate):

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 08 October. 2004. AUTEC Reference number: 04/165.