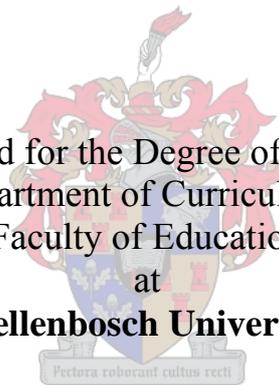


**ACQUIRING ACADEMIC LITERACY:  
A CASE OF FIRST-YEAR EXTENDED DEGREE  
PROGRAMME STUDENTS  
AT  
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY**

**Susan C van Schalkwyk**

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at  
**Stellenbosch University**



Promoter: Prof EM Bitzer  
Co-promoter: Prof C van der Walt

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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:.....

Date: .....

## SUMMARY

In this study the experiences of a group of first-year Extended Degree Programme (EDP) students were explored in order to obtain insight into their acquisition of academic literacy. The study was undertaken against the backdrop of a higher education sector that is facing an increasing influx of first-year students on the one hand, and poor retention rates on the other. In South Africa, where the opening up of access to higher education for all citizens has become a political imperative, the need to address the undesirable dropout rate is self-evident.

Students' poor performance at university is often linked to their under-preparedness for higher education studies, and an important aspect of such under-preparedness is their academic literacy. In this context academic literacy is seen as knowing how to speak and act within a particular discourse, and the reading and writing that occur within the discipline as tools through which to facilitate learning. While some students acquire academic literacy by virtue of their participation in the discourse community of the relevant discipline, this is not always so for students who are less prepared for higher education studies.

In response to the disconcerting retention rates, higher education institutions have implemented academic support programmes to address the needs of students who enter university with poor school results. One such intervention at Stellenbosch University is the Extended Degree Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, which makes provision for students to extend their first academic year over two years. Since 2006 EDP students have also been required to register for an academic literacy module and it is this group that comprises the focus of this study.

Using a case study design, this qualitative, interpretive inquiry was characterized by multiple data collection methods. In this way qualitative data that pointed to the perceptions of the students and some of the lecturers who taught the EDP classes were generated via semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observation and content analysis. In addition, descriptive quantitative data was collected and this further contributed to generating the rich, in-depth data that characterize case study research.

The analysis of the data was undertaken according to a three-tiered approach, in which the results of the empirical inquiry were first analysed per data source and then themes and trends

across all the data sources were identified. Ultimately, these findings were interpreted according to an explanatory framework. The study highlights a number of important issues, key of which is that providing an academic literacy module for under-prepared students can facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy, particularly when such provision seeks to support the different discipline-based mainstream modules. Another important finding of the study emphasizes the extent to which institutional factors, such as increased student numbers, have placed pressure on university infrastructure and human resources. The impact of this situation filters down to the first-year classroom and negatively influences student learning. Finally, the results of the study question prevailing notions about under-prepared students as all of the students in the study, irrespective of their backgrounds and levels of sophistication, attested to the significant challenges that entry into the academic community posed for them.

The findings of this study, while specific to the context in which it was undertaken, contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the field of academic development within higher education and the role of academic literacy in student learning.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie verken die ervaringe van 'n groep eerstejaar Verlengde Graadprogram (VGP) studente om sodoende insig te verkry oor hulle verwerwing van akademiese geletterdheid. Die agtergrond waarteen hierdie studie onderneem is, is dié van 'n hoër onderwyssektor wat eendersyds met 'n toename in eerstejaarstudentegetalle en andersyds met 'n swak retensiekoers te kampe het. In Suid-Afrika, waar die verbreding van toegang tot hoër onderwys vir alle landsburgers van politieke belang is, het dit kritiese noodsaaklik geword om die onaanvaarbare hoë uitvalsifers aan te spreek.

Die swak prestasie wat studente op universiteit behaal, word dikwels aan 'n ondervoorbereidheid vir hoër onderwys toegeskryf. 'n Belangrike deel van hierdie ondervoorbereidheid is die student se akademiese geletterdheid. In hierdie konteks is akademiese geletterdheid die kennis van hoe om binne 'n bepaalde diskoers te praat en op te tree en ook die mate waartoe lees en skryf gebruik word om leer te fasiliteer. Terwyl sekere studente akademiese geletterdheid verwerf deur middel van hul deelname aan die diskoersgemeenskap van 'n bepaalde dissipline, is dit nie altyd waar vir daardie studente wat minder voorbereid is vir hoër onderwysstudies nie.

In antwoord op die kommerwekkende lae retensiekoers het hoër onderwysinstellings verskeie akademiese-ontwikkelingsinisiatiewe geïmplementeer om in die behoeftes van studente met swak skoolresultate wat tot die universiteit toetree, te voorsien. 'n Voorbeeld van so 'n inisiatief aan die Universiteit Stellenbosch is die Verlengde Graadprogram in die Fakulteit Lettere en Sosiale Wetenskappe. Volgens hierdie program word studente sedert 2006 die geleentheid gebied om hul eerste akademiese jaar oor twee jaar te verprei, met die vereiste dat hulle vir 'n akademiese geletterdheidsmodule moet registreer. Die fokus van hierdie studie is die VGP-groep van 2006.

Deur 'n gevallestudie-ontwerp te gebruik, is verskillende dataversamelingsmetodes kenmerkend van hierdie kwalitatiewe, interpretatiewe bendeering ondersoek. Sodoende is kwalitatiewe data wat die persepsies van beide die studente op die program en die dosente wat VGP-klasse aangebied het deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude, fokusgroeponderhoude, waarneming en inhoudsanalise gegenerer. Verder is beskrywende,

kwantitatiewe data versamel om sodoende verder by te dra tot die uitbou van die ryk, indiepte data waardeur gevallestudienavorsing gekenmerk word.

Die analise van die data is volgens 'n drievlak-benadering onderneem. Eerstens is die resultate van die empiriese ondersoek binne elke databron ontleed; tweedens is temas en neigings met inagneming van al die databronne geïdentifiseer en derdens is die bevindinge binne 'n beskrywende raamwerk geïnterpreteer. Die studie het 'n aantal belangrike sake beklemtoon waaronder die kernbevinding dat die aanbod van 'n akademiese geletterdheidsmodule vir ondervoorbereide studente inderdaad akademiese geletterdheid kan bevorder, veral waar hierdie aanbod ten doel het om die verskillende dissiplines binne die hoofstroommodules te ondersteun. 'n Verdere belangrike bevinding van hierdie navorsing dui op die mate waartoe institusionele faktore soos 'n toename in studentegetalle, toenemende druk op die universiteit se infrastruktuur en menslike hulpbronne plaas. Die impak van hierdie situasie wentel af na die eerstejaarklaskamer waar dit 'n negatiewe uitwerking op studentleer het. Laastens het die bevindinge van die studie daartoe gelei dat sekere van die huidige persepsies ten opsigte van ondervoorbereide studente bevraagteken word aangesien al die studente in die studie - ongeag hul herkoms en vlak van gesofistikeerdheid - melding gemaak het van die besondere uitdaging wat hul toetredende tot die akademiese gemeenskap vir hulle gebied het.

Die bevindinge van hierdie studie - alhoewel konteks-spesifiek – lewer 'n bydrae tot die groeiende kundigheidspoel in die veld van akademiese ontwikkeling in hoër onderwys en tot die kennis oor die rol wat akademiese geletterdheid in studenteleer speel.

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*The moon is out ... pickup sticks have magically formed a solid bridge*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

*If South Africa is to create a more equal society, the crucial issue is not of granting formal access to the institution, but rather of granting epistemological access to the processes of knowledge construction which sustain it.*

Boughey 2002:305

#### 1.1 Introduction

In South Africa one out of every three students will have dropped out of university by the end of their first year (Groenewald 2005). This statistic, which includes universities and the former technikons, as well as students enrolled for distance-education, paints a bleak picture for the sector, particularly when one realizes that there has been no improvement since the 2001 publication of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE). At that time the figure was set at about 25% for students entering the system for the first time (Department of Education 2001:3). These national figures, while disconcerting, should come as no surprise to those involved in higher education, particularly at undergraduate level. Concerns about the typical characteristics of school-leavers applying to university in South Africa have been voiced for more than a decade, with “increasing numbers of students in the educational system who for reasons of language, socio-economic status, or cultural background, experience serious and persistent problems in interpreting academic tasks” (Shay, Bond & Hughes 1994:21). Internationally, for some time now, there has also been the recognition that with the widening of access to higher education has come a shift from the homogeneity typical of an elite structure, to a diversity that is reflected in language, socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, race, and mass higher education (Northedge 2003a; Asmar 2005; Reay, David & Ball 2005). In a country such as South Africa, where access to education, particularly higher education, is one of the main thrusts to addressing issues of social injustice and inequity, it is obvious that such a statistic is undesirable and needs to be addressed.

Under-preparedness has repeatedly been cited, both nationally and internationally, as one of the most common causes of the current impasse (Grimes 1997; Amos & Fisher 1998; Lea & Street 1998; Northedge 2003a; Van Dyk & Weideman 2004a; Coughlin 2006). In the South African context it often carries political overtones. The 1997 White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education 1997:22) noted that the preparedness, in particular, of

talented black students for higher education had been undermined by the effects of Bantu education, the chronic under-funding of black education during the apartheid era, and the impact of repression and resistance on the culture of learning and teaching. Alexander, Badenhorst and Gibbs (2005) similarly describe the impact the discrimination of the apartheid system had on education, namely that resources were predominantly invested in white schools and this undoubtedly affected the readiness for higher education of many of the young people who had not been beneficiaries of the system. Thus, the massification of higher education in South Africa has inevitably been accompanied by a strong political agenda, which has provided for “a deliberate attempt to broaden participation in higher education as one means of reducing the highly stratified race and class structure of the country” (Fraser & Killen 2005:26). This has led to students entering higher education not only with extreme differences in academic ability, but also with considerable social, economic and cultural differences (Fraser & Killen 2005). The diversity that characterises first-year classes at many South African universities is thus multi-layered and complex.

The higher education system in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, was challenged to respond comprehensively to the gap between learners’ school attainment and the intellectual demands of higher education programmes. With the publication of the NPHE three years later, this vision was given shape in the form of a number of strategic objectives that included improving throughput and graduation rates, providing for the funding of academic development programmes and ensuring that equity of access leads to equity of outcomes (Department of Education 2001:10).

In response to these national imperatives many higher education institutions, including Stellenbosch University, have endeavoured to establish support interventions and academic development programmes to improve throughput rates on the one hand, while addressing the needs of the so-called under-prepared students on the other (McKenna 2003a; Alexander, Badenhorst & Gibbs 2005). Yet, the results of these well-intended and sometimes costly efforts have often been disappointing (De Klerk, Van Deventer & Van Schalkwyk 2006). Dropout rates continue to rise across a broad spectrum of school achievement, and lecturers increasingly cite students’ inability to read and write in a critical and analytical manner, to discern between fact and opinion, to recognize what is deemed evidence for an argument and to grasp the discourse of the discipline - in essence, academic *illiteracy* - as central to the problem (Moore, Paxton, Scott & Thesen 1998; Van Dyk & Weidemann 2004a; Woollacott

& Henning 2004; Fraser & Killen 2005). Conversely, therefore, it would appear that having a level of academic *literacy* could play a crucial role in the academic success of students in higher education.

The notion of academic literacy has been around for some time, but its definition is problematic. Weingartner (1993:3) said that “[i]f the pedagogical activities of the undergraduate years are to be effective, students ... must ... have the knowledge and abilities that enable them to march successfully toward the educated state that merits a culminating degree”. If so many students are not soldiering on to graduation, but leaving the ranks early in the battle, can we assume that it is because they do not have the “knowledge and abilities” that Weingartner refers to? If so, this then further prompts the question “what knowledge and which abilities”? Weingartner’s (1993:14) answer was formulated in subsequent reference to a series of proficiencies including that of literacy where he described literacy as being the oldest and most fundamental of all proficiencies when viewed within an educational context. In discussing such literacy, however, he suggested that it is difficult to pin down because “what is adequate in one era is insufficient in a subsequent one” (Weingartner 1993:16), and because it is part and parcel of the subject being read or written about. Literacy in an academic connotation is similarly fluid.

Nevertheless, many scholars provide definitions. In discussing the work of Ballard and Clanchy, Moore (1994:37) wrote that academic literacy is “a compound of linguistic, conceptual and epistemological rules and norms of the academe” and that these rules and norms are “seldom explicit”. Leibowitz (2001:2), writing some years later, expands on this definition by stating that academic literacy “can be summarized as a culturally specific set of linguistic and discourse conventions, influenced by written forms utilised primarily in academic institutions”. Her definition includes notions of culture and a focus on writing as dominant influences on one’s academic literacy. The importance of writing in any discussion on academic literacy is also taken up in the work of Lea and Street (1998:160) who provide a most useful description: “[A]cademic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study”.

Any discussion on academic literacy ought to include some reflection on the role of language in learning and the importance of language proficiency. Leibowitz (2004:49) contends that

linguistic competency is a necessary, although not sufficient, pre-condition for academic literacy. Given the multilingual context that characterises many higher education institutions both nationally and internationally, new students are increasingly dealing with the challenges of university study in a language that is not their first language (L1<sup>1</sup>). It can be assumed that this challenge is even greater for students who are also not adequately prepared for university.

The way in which academic literacy is acquired is described in the work of many researchers. Gee (1998:58) reports on children in the mainstream who acquire academic literacy “as a surreptitious and indirect by-product of teaching-learning”. Paxton (1998:136) speaks of students in higher education serving an apprenticeship during which they become acculturated into the discipline. Lecturers often assume that students, simply by virtue of being immersed in the subject discipline, will become familiar with its discourse and thereby enhance their academic literacy competence. But students, particularly weaker students, often miss these discipline-specific codes, making the process more difficult. In her later work, Paxton (2007:46) suggests that indeed many first-year students arrive at university not having “mastery over the new discourses they are acquiring” and suggests that “interim literacies” might be a more useful term when describing the writing and related practices of first-year students.

It would appear that having a clearer understanding of how students, particularly under-prepared students, deal with the academic challenges of university studies and how they experience the acquisition of academic literacy could contribute to the growing body of scholarship around the first-year experience and student success.

## **1.2 Description of the problem**

To date much of the research into the role of academic literacy in higher education in South African has included and mostly focused on the dominance of English as the language of instruction. These studies have investigated aspects of student learning, and particularly student writing, where the participants are not first-language English speakers, but rather have one of the different African languages as their mother tongue (Angelil-Carter & Moore 1998; Leibowitz 2001; Warren 2002; Van Dyk & Weideman 2004a; Paxton 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> L1 (first language): “a person’s mother tongue or the language acquired first ... often ... used synonymously with native language.” (Richards & Schmidt 2002:202)

The scenario at Stellenbosch University (SU) is somewhat different, with close to 60% of undergraduate students being Afrikaans-speaking and Afrikaans being the dominant language of learning and teaching (LOLT) at this level. The growing numbers of undergraduate students for whom Afrikaans is not a first language, however, has increasingly led to a more bilingual approach in the class. Typically, a first-year class is characterized by a fair amount of code-switching as students may be listening to Afrikaans being spoken by the lecturer while viewing English PowerPoint slides, receiving Afrikaans and/or English class notes and working from an English (often American) textbook – and there could be any number of variations to this approach. According to the University’s language policy, however, students require what is termed “academic language proficiency” in both Afrikaans and English if they wish to be successful in their studies (Stellenbosch University 2003:5).

The unusual dominance of Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching is, however, the result of an equally unusual context at the University when compared with most other universities in the country. Only 4.4% of undergraduate students at Stellenbosch University are African, a statistic which contrasts dramatically with the 60.2% for all contact, undergraduate students in South Africa (Department of Education 2006). Even if the coloured and Indian students are included in this group, the percentage of black students at undergraduate level only increases to 21% (Stellenbosch University 2007c). Similarly the profile of the students who are deemed to be ‘under-prepared’ at Stellenbosch University also differs from that found at most other higher education institutions in South Africa. Typically, under-prepared students in South Africa have had an impoverished schooling experience, are often first generation entrants into higher education, lack generic skills deemed necessary for academic success, are of a lower income group, are black, and English is usually their L2<sup>2</sup> or even L3 although it has often been their language of learning and teaching at school (see 4.3). However, at Stellenbosch University, while there are black students who fall into what the University describes as the ‘at-risk’<sup>3</sup> or under-prepared category, by far the greater number who currently fall into this group are coloured and white students who speak Afrikaans at home, and who were taught in Afrikaans at school (Stellenbosch University 2007c).

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<sup>2</sup> Second language: “any language learned after one has learnt one’s native language” (Richards & Schmidt 2002:472).

<sup>3</sup> At SU, students who have obtained between 50% - 57% in their final Grade 12 examinations are regarded as ‘at-risk’ or under-prepared and are encouraged, or required (depending on the faculty), to enrol for an Extended Degree Programme.

For more than ten years, a number of academic development interventions have been available to students who, based on their Grade 12<sup>4</sup> results, fall into the ‘at-risk’ or under-prepared category. Over the years, these interventions and in particular the Extended Degree Programmes (EDPs) have been reviewed, revised and evaluated, both externally and internally, and one cohort analysis has been undertaken (De Klerk *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, in recent years the South African government has, via the National Department of Education, made significant funding available to higher education institutions in support of academic development interventions such as the EDP, to help achieve their aims of widening access and enhancing student success. No study, however, has been undertaken to explore the students’ specific experiences while on these programmes, particularly with reference to the opportunities they provide for students to acquire the level of academic literacy that would enable them to participate successfully in an academic community.

This dissertation describes one such study that was undertaken amongst the 2006 Extended Degree Programme cohort in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University. In the sections that follow, a brief overview of the aims of the study and the research questions that guided the investigation are provided. This is followed by a description of the methodology, including an outline of the process of analysis. After giving a definition of the relevant key terms, the chapter closes with an overview of the dissertation as a whole.

### **1.3 Aim of the study**

The over-arching aim of this study was to explore the experiences of a specific group of first-year students so as to determine how under-prepared students on an Extended Degree Programme acquire academic literacy. A number of sub-questions guided the study, which sought to answer these questions:

1. How do under-prepared students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences experience existing interventions aimed at enhancing their academic literacy in the first year?
2. What are the academic literacy demands made on these first-year students in their different modules?

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<sup>4</sup> In South Africa, all learners write a national examination (the National Senior Certificate) at the end of their Grade 12 year. This examination is also commonly known as ‘Matric’. Learners have to obtain a ‘Matriculation Exemption’ ie. a minimum score in designated combinations of subjects, if they wish to enrol at university.

3. How does the bilingual, sometimes multilingual, context impact on the development of academic literacy of under-prepared students?
4. What are the challenges relating to academic literacy that affect a specific group of under-prepared first-year students?

In determining these research questions, a process that was refined and revised as the study progressed, I aimed to draw together the different aspects relating to academic literacy and under-preparedness as they influence the experiences of the EDP students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. In responding to the research questions, it was my intention to conduct an empirical study as well as an in-depth review of the relevant literature that would contribute to the growing body of scholarship specifically in the fields of academic literacy and student development in higher education.

#### **1.4 Research approach**

This study was set within a qualitative paradigm seeking to obtain an understanding of a particular phenomenon. The objective was to determine the *what*, *how* and *why* of a particular case or phenomenon and thus the focus was on the “qualities of the phenomenon rather than the quantities” (Henning 2004:3). Following an interpretive tradition, the research sought specifically to interpret and understand behaviours and attitudes within a natural setting. In addition, an inductive approach characterised the study, such as is also typical of qualitative work. Rather than starting out with a specific hypothesis, I endeavoured to gather extensive data about the case so as to systematically build constructs framing the data and eventually a theory that would make sense of what had been interpreted and observed (Babbie & Mouton 2001:273).

#### **1.5 Research design**

Use was made of case study research which Denscombe (1998:32) characterizes as an in-depth study that focuses on specific issues rather than general trends. He further suggests that it provides a holistic view of “relationships and processes” within their “natural settings”. Drawing on eminent researchers such as Robert Stake and Robert Yin, David (2006:xxvii) describes the usefulness of case study research: It can address “complex relationships that cannot easily be reduced to simple causal models or statistical tests ...”. Leibowitz (2001:66) also makes a strong argument for using the case study (again paraphrasing Yin) saying that

the case study “has no ‘control’; ... focuses on contemporary events; uses direct observation and systematic interviews; and uses multiple sources of evidence”. This all typified the research envisaged for this study, particularly in its use of interviewing and observation, and in collecting data from a variety of sources. To this end the case-study approach provided a suitable vehicle for the research design.

The focus for the empirical investigation comprised the 2006 Extended Degree Programme (EDP) cohort in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University seeking to interpret their experiences, the context within which they found themselves and the different phenomenon that influenced, or had an impact on, their experiences (Yin 1994:13). Only students who commenced the EDP in 2006 were considered for participation in this study.

### **1.5.1 Data collection**

This case study inquiry relied upon evidence drawn from multiple sources (Yin 1994:13) and in order to effectively manage the collection of data across the different data sources, the empirical investigation was undertaken in three phases: the preliminary phase, the core phase and the follow-up phase. During the preliminary phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four lecturers, each representing one of the four first-year modules with the largest enrolments in the Faculty. These initial interviews (conducted in the year prior to the 2006 EDP cohort arriving on campus) were exploratory in nature, as I wanted to determine the lecturers’ understanding of academic literacy and their perspectives of their first-year students. These interviews provided insights that were then used to draw up the interview schedule for the student interviews that took place the following year. Although I had not initially intended to use this interview material in my analyses, I later incorporated them as they contributed another layer of valuable data to the study.

During the second phase, the core phase, data was collected from a number of different sources. Firstly, descriptive quantitative data in the form of biographical data and information relating to the students’ schooling and Grade 12 results were drawn from the University’s Student Information System (SIS), while the students’ responses to the Alpha Baseline Questionnaire (ABQ), an extensive online survey conducted annually among all first-year students, were also reviewed. Secondly, the EDP students were asked to complete a reflective writing exercise in which they described their expectations for the EDP module, *Texts in the Humanities*, and their early impressions of it. Thereafter, semi-structured interviews were

conducted during the second semester of their first year with eight of the students from the 2006 EDP cohort. Each of the interviews, guided by an interview schedule, was audio-taped for subsequent transcription. During this core phase, four classroom visits of the *Texts in the Humanities* module were also conducted, where the class and the extent of student engagement during these classes was observed, and field notes were generated. In addition, the module outlines for the four modules with the highest enrolments (the lecturers of which had been interviewed in the preliminary phase) were reviewed, along with examples of their assessment tools used during 2006.

The final phase of data collection, the follow-up phase, took place in 2007. At the start of the year, the students' 2006 end-of-year results (which included any supplementary examinations that might have been written in the January of 2007) were drawn from the University's Student Information System (SIS) to provide the final piece of descriptive quantitative data. In addition two focus group and two semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants in these interviews included five of the students who had been interviewed during the previous year, and another five students from the same cohort. All of these students were in their second year at the University when the interviews took place.

Before embarking on the empirical section of the research, permission was obtained from the University's ethics committee, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the respective departmental chairs of the selected modules. All participation in the research was voluntary, with all of the student participants completing the required consent forms beforehand.

### **1.5.2 Data analysis**

The analysis of the data commenced almost immediately after the first phase of data collection had been undertaken, with each new set of data being subjected to a preliminary review, and a revisiting of earlier findings, even as the process of data collection moved forward. In this way the entire analysis process was characterized by a moving backwards and forwards through the data, each time reflecting on it from a different perspective. Nevertheless, to provide structure for this complicated process of analysing the different types of data from the different sources, and to eventually be able to construct an explanatory framework, a three-tiered approach of "analytic progression" (Miles & Huberman 1994:92) was followed. According to this approach, the first level focuses on preparing the different

texts (including the transcriptions, field notes and the students' reflective writing exercises) for further analysis. At this stage, the data are also coded, after which categories or "units of meaning" (Henning 2004:104) are developed from the data. This process was repeated several times for each of the different data sources. In this way several sets of categories were developed. During the next phase of analysis, these categories were reviewed holistically to identify themes and trends, first within data sets and then across all the data. These themes were finally drawn together so to establish six clusters of themes that represented all of the data (Level Two analysis). Finally, during the third level of analysis the findings were discussed according to an explanatory framework and were interpreted against the existing body of literature and in response to the original research questions.

## **1.6 Definition of terms**

There are two key terms in this study, that of academic literacy and under-preparedness. Given the complex nature of each of these concepts, considerable attention is paid in the literature review to exploring their meaning, particularly as they are understood in this study. For this reason, they are not included in the brief section that follows. To ensure clarity and a shared understanding, however, a number of other concepts which are relevant to this study and which will not be defined again later, are briefly explained.

### **1.6.1 Academic development**

Brew (2004:5) suggests that academic development "refers to the numerous activities which have to do with the professional learning of academics in post-compulsory, tertiary or higher education", and her definition is probably the one most often ascribed to internationally. However, within a South African context, academic development more often refers to "educational development in higher education that focuses particularly on promoting equity of access and of outcomes" (Scott 2006:1). In the Centre in which I work as an academic development practitioner, both aspects receive attention, as we are involved in both the professional learning of the academic staff and in the educational development of the student body. This dual role, therefore, provides a perspective for this research.

### **1.6.2 Teacher, lecturer, academic**

It may appear as if the three terms – teacher, lecturer, academic – are used interchangeably in this dissertation. However, the selection of the most appropriate term in each case has been

carefully considered in order to reflect a specific meaning. Accordingly then, the term ‘teacher’ is used in a holistic sense to portray the notion of one who enables learning, and in the context of this study the term refers to a “higher education teacher” (Northedge 2003b:169). Obvious deviations from this occur mostly in Chapter Six where the students (in their own writing or reporting) make specific references to their teachers in school. In such cases, the meaning is bound to the context. The term ‘lecturer’ should be seen in a narrower context, and here denotes the person who is responsible for a particular lecture and is involved in lecturing per se. The term ‘academic’ has been used where I emphasise the academic role, which includes teachers and researchers in a higher education setting.

### **1.6.3 Black students**

Profiling students along racial lines is an unfortunate necessity within the South African context where the history of education and higher education has been deeply and directly influenced by the political forces from the apartheid era. The influence of the former unjust society is still tangible across the entire education spectrum and many students, and potential students, have been exposed to poor schooling as a direct result of this. If higher education is to effectively manage the effects of the past, it will remain necessary to monitor and track student success in the different race groups for some time. In this dissertation therefore, in keeping with the conventions for reporting in the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS), ‘black students’ refers to the group of students that includes African students, coloured<sup>5</sup> students and Indian students.

### **1.6.4 Extended Degree Programme (EDP)**

In the South African system, most general undergraduate programmes comprise three years of study (e.g. Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Commerce and the Bachelor of Science). Students following an academic development programme such as an EDP, typically have one year longer in which to complete their studies and, therefore, in the case of the Bachelor of Arts, register for a four-year period of study as opposed to the three-year norm. These programmes give students the opportunity to follow a less intensive first year as it is spread over two years, together with additional support or foundation-type modules. The format of these programmes, however, differs substantially from one institution to another, and even from one faculty to the next. The specific format and structure of the EDP in the Faculty of

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<sup>5</sup> Students with African as well as white ancestry.

Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University are described in detail in Chapter Four. In order to differentiate between the EDP students and the other first-year students in this study, the latter group is referred to as 'mainstream'.

### **1.7 Positioning the study**

The study is located within an interpretive paradigm using a discursive qualitative approach, as described above. The focus of the study is on the acquisition of academic literacy and it is positioned within the field of higher education. The South African higher education sector is currently dealing with the very real challenge of providing for equity of opportunity and success across the entire system and to this end, the study should contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the field of academic literacy in higher education. In addition, by investigating the role that academic literacy plays in student learning, the study also links with Curriculum Studies as a field of inquiry. As higher education institutions grapple with finding effective measures to support and enhance student learning, especially among under-prepared students, the findings of this research could offer additional insights for academics seeking to develop appropriate curricula in this sector.

I would also like to highlight the lens through which I approached this study and the stance I have adopted with respect to the writing up of this dissertation. My work in academic development was not only the key catalyst for embarking on this particular research, but has also inevitably had an impact on every aspect of the work. Thus, while I have throughout the study made every effort to be both objective and critical, I have with equal endeavour allowed my voice as a practitioner-researcher to emerge. This 'own voice' is also reflected in the style and register used in the writing, an approach that is being increasingly recognized in research writing (Clark & Ivanič 1997; Belcher & Hirvela 2005). I offer as my credentials for adopting this approach, several years as lecturer in a first-year classroom where I taught the basic tenets of academic literacy within a communication skills module, followed by some years working directly in academic development. Throughout this investigation I have drawn on both the *epistemic* knowledge gleaned from the study of the literature as well as on the practical wisdom (*phronesis* knowledge) I acquired over the years of working with first-year students (Henning 2004:103). It is important to state that this study has not been conducted from the perspective of the linguist or the language expert, and although the influence of

these fields of study have not been ignored in this research, the key focus has been that of seeing academic literacy from the perspective of student learning in higher education.

However, in seeking to track the acquisition of academic literacy within a higher education context, I have, as newcomer to the academic community of doctoral researchers, experienced such a process of acquisition myself. I have participated on the periphery of this particular academic community as I have sought, through engagement with the ‘insiders’ (by way of the review of the relevant literature and in engaging with my promoters), to acquire an understanding of the disciplinary discourse and of the ‘ways of doing’ that characterize this particular field of study. It has been complicated and frustrating, challenging and invigorating. Following on the work of Clark and Ivanič (1997:134), therefore, I have also provided personal reflection on the way in which I negotiated my own entry into this knowledge community at different points in this dissertation.

## **1.8 The structure of the study**

This chapter provides an outline of the study that is described in depth in the chapters that follow. In keeping with Prosser and Webb’s (1994:131) recommended approach, the chapter closes with a brief description of how this dissertation has been managed. Chapter Two explores the nature of academic literacy, teasing out the many strands of meaning that add to the complexity of this concept. Having defined academic literacy, Chapter Three then discusses it situated in practice, highlighting the many ways in which it impacts on teaching and learning in action. Chapter Four contextualizes the study, first by describing the higher education context, both nationally and internationally, and then by addressing under-preparedness in the modern student body, given the current context. This chapter also provides an overview of Stellenbosch University as the site of this study.

The methodology chapter, Chapter Five, describes the research design, the process of data collection and the approach to the analysis used in this inquiry. In each case, the different decisions relating to design, collection and analysis are explained according to the extensive body of research that is available on qualitative research. This chapter lays the foundation for the presentation of the findings that is addressed in Chapter Six.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Seven, draws together all the results of the previous chapters, providing a synthesis of the interpreted findings with the theory that was discussed in the literature study within an explanatory framework. It closes with comments on opportunities for further research, recommendations for future practice and final reflection.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ACADEMIC LITERACY EXPLORED

*Tertiary literacy is a goal, not a starting point ... (d)eveloping it is, moreover, a tail biting game. Students cannot do without knowing, yet they cannot know before they start doing because doing means asking the kind of questions which lead to knowing.*

Bock 1988:26

#### 2.1 Introduction

In Chapter One the notion of academic literacy as an indicator for academic success was introduced. In this chapter the concept of academic literacy will be explored in some depth. I will provide a historical perspective by tracking the evolution of academic literacy drawn from the literature. More importantly, however, this chapter seeks to define academic literacy by describing the many different perspectives, approaches and models that comprise this extremely complex term. At the end of each section I include a synthesis of the research discussed. In closing, the most current work on academic literacy will be discussed, with particular reference to the paradigm that conveys most accurately my own understanding of and approach to academic literacy, that resonated most strongly with this research and which offered an appropriate lens through which the empirical work in this study could be analysed.

#### 2.2 The history of academic literacy

Tracking the chronological evolution of thoughts on and approaches to academic literacy is beneficial as it emphasizes the many facets of what it means to be academically literate. In addition, it goes some way in justifying what may appear to be a lack of clarity in conceptualization and approach and why institutions have employed so many different techniques and interventions through the years to address the apparent lack of appropriate levels of academic literacy in the student body.

In 1965, Pierre Bourdieu published his seminal work which, when translated from French into English almost thirty years later, was entitled *Academic Discourse: Linguistic misunderstanding and professorial power*. In this heading alone, the authors (Bourdieu, Passeron & De Saint Martin 1994) point to three of the conceptual pillars on which academic literacy and the broader work in the field stand. These are the role that academic discourse plays in higher education; the ‘linguistic misunderstanding’ resulting from the diversity in our

frames of reference; and the notions of power in the academic environment as they exist between student and teacher. Bourdieu and his colleagues sought to answer a number of questions relating to the extent to which students actually understood what was being said in the classroom and whether social background impacted on such understanding. Their research thus highlights a number of factors that are particularly relevant to this study. Apart from the fact that lecturer expectations differed somewhat from student abilities, their research also showed how “the ability to manipulate scholastic language” (Bourdieu *et al.* 1994:28) was closely linked to the sophistication of the student’s background. Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:4) assert that “many university students are unable to cope with the technical and scholastic demands made on their use of language... [and] cannot define the terms which they hear in lectures or which they themselves use”. So, said Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:4), they are “condemned to using a *rhetoric of despair* whose logic lies in the reassurance that it offers” as they try to include all the academically appropriate-sounding words in their own texts. Such student practices speak to the work of more recent researchers who reflect on issues of apprenticeships and acquiring entry into and recognition within specific ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 2000; Northedge 2003b; Jacobs 2005; Williams 2005) to be addressed later in this chapter.

Bourdieu’s reference to ‘linguistic misunderstanding’ needs to be explored a little further. Learning, he suggests, “implies acquiring both knowledge itself and the code of transmission” (Bourdieu *et al.* 1994:5) – the discourse. This code or discourse needs to be acquired within the discipline itself as the student becomes acculturated to its norms and practices. Thus, say Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:5), “pedagogical communication” is characterised by a determined effort to eliminate misinterpretation and “teaching is at its most effective not when it succeeds in transmitting the greatest quantity of information in the shortest time..., but rather when most of the information conveyed by the teacher is actually received”. An objective of teaching, therefore, becomes the elimination of misunderstanding, and the importance of communication is self-evident.

Despite this early work of Bourdieu and others, providing support in developing academic literacy among undergraduate students was initially characterized by an approach termed the ‘study skills’ model, specifically when related to student writing (Lea & Street 1998; Johl 2002; Warren 2002). This model was based on the assumption that students needed to learn a set of skills that would ensure them to be academic literate. Northedge (2003a:17) states that

this approach led to a number of *ad hoc* academic support interventions for weak students which some researchers suggested are akin to “charity” for the “intellectual paupers” who have been granted access to that elite institution known as the university. The study skills model is a deficit model with its roots in behavioural psychology and it focuses on helping students to find ways to “adapt their practices to those of the university” (Lea & Street 1998:159), ignoring issues of student identities and their own agency when entering university. It should be noted that, although this approach was soon replaced in the literature with a more holistic dimension that takes cognisance of the learning and the social context within which the acquisition or development of academic literacy might occur, academic support interventions which seek to skill students and fill gaps are still prevalent in higher education today.

The academic socialization perspective ushered in the second phase of the academic literacy movement and emphasised the need to provide for a learning context where students are inculcated “into a new ‘culture’, that of the academy ... [and] (t)he sources of this perspective lie in social psychology, in anthropology and in constructivist education” (Jones, Turner & Street 1999:xxi). This approach, while being “more sensitive to both the student as learner and to the cultural context” was still deemed flawed in that it appeared “to assume that the academy is a relatively homogenous culture, whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to the whole institution” (Jones *et al.* 1999:xxi).

Lea and Street (1998) gave shape to addressing this gap when they presented what they termed the ‘academic literacies approach’, where institutions are viewed as “sites of discourse and power ... (and) the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines” (Lea & Street 1998:159). Thus students should be able to “switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes” (Lea & Street 1998:159). This latter model of academic literacy “comes from the social and ideological orientation of the *New Literacy Studies*” (Lea & Street 1998:160), which is a term that “is increasingly used to characterise the work of literacy researchers who have taken both a social turn and a discourse analytic turn in their research” (Baynham & Prinsloo 2001:83). In fact, Paxton (2007) suggests that the New Literacy Studies have been instrumental in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology and education (as is the case in this study) in developing a focus on

literacy. In the section that follows, it will be seen that much of the most recent research in the field of academic literacy makes reference to this important movement (Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006) and that the many perspectives, models and approaches that will be expounded acknowledge the relevance of this work.

This short bird's-eye view of the history of academic literacy has been provided as a platform for the detailed conceptualisation that follows. This history raises two key issues relevant to this study, namely the difference between lecturer expectations and student abilities, and the extent to which students are able to manipulate language. As the chapter unfolds the relevance of each of these aspects will become clearer. It also alludes to a number of key concepts embedded in the study of academic literacy, such as literacy, discourse, power, identity, agency and communicative practices, and introduces the disciplines of socio-linguistics and discourse analysis. In addition it implies that the field of study encompassing academic literacy is constantly evolving and is consequently difficult to pin down. To provide clarity for this study, an in-depth conceptualisation of academic literacy now follows.

### **2.3 Defining academic literacy**

The term 'academic literacy' is complex at a number of levels. Its evolution over a period of time has resulted in it being applied loosely in a variety of situations by those who have not necessarily kept pace with the most recent definitions and approaches. In addition it has been claimed by different disciplines in different ways and aligned with a broad spectrum of traditions and paradigms. The work in this dissertation, for example, draws from the fields of anthropology, sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication, among others, and although my own stance is that of the academic development practitioner, I will review academic literacy from a number of different perspectives. Kern (2000:23) notes that "(L)iteracy is an elastic concept: its meaning varies according to the disciplinary lens through which one examines it". Any two people will thus seldom hold the same conceptual framework of the term.

In the 1988 seminal work *Literacy by Degrees*, Hanne Bock (1988:24) wrote of "academic literacy in action" suggesting that academic literacy as a concept was already firmly entrenched. Some eighteen years later, however, Hewings (2004:133) speaks of literacy practices that have "influenced work on what ... is *becoming* (my italics) known as academic

literacy””. A further aspect of the challenge to define academic literacy can be found in the multitude of appellations afforded the different elements - if indeed this is the correct term – that characterise the discourse, which can be referred to as ‘codes’ (Bourdieu et. al. 1994:4), ‘conventions’ (Ballard & Clanchy 1988) ‘groundrules’ (Amos & Fischer 1998), ‘norms and values’, ‘principles’, etc. In addition, the term itself is used both as noun and adjective, and researchers speak of “literacy in the university” (Ballard & Clanchy 1988) and academic literacy practices (Baynham 1995) or competencies, most often writing and reading (Amos & Fischer 1998), or interchangeably with terms such as academic discourse and so forth. A lack of clear conceptualisation was reflected in the series of preliminary interviews conducted with first-year lecturers (see 6.3.5.1), and this adds to the complexity inherent in the work of the teacher or academic support practitioner trying to address students’ needs in this regard.

To provide for a clearer, if not shared, understanding – and specifically one that will supply the premise on which this research has been based – this section endeavours to describe the term by drawing on a fairly extensive body of research. To reflect the development of the concept over time as it was tracked in the previous section, the discussion is arranged chronologically, exploring numerous sub-themes and related terms and concepts as they become relevant.

### **2.3.1 Literacy in review**

When discussing the difficulties inherent in defining ‘academic literacy’, Ballard and Clanchy (1988:7-8) attested to the “complexity of the phenomenon” and it could be mooted that the two-word nature of the term adds to this complexity. While the adjective ‘academic’ might suffice with a dictionary definition: “relating to education, especially at college or university level” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2004:7), the term ‘literacy’ requires more attention.

The overview to this research provided in Chapter One establishes a platform for a discussion on literacy and alludes to Weingartner’s (1993:14) description of literacy as an “ancient proficiency”. His words not only attest to the importance of literacy in an educational setting, but also suggest that a far longer historical perspective is required than the one given for *academic* literacy in the previous section. Baynham (1995:2) on the other hand suggests that literacy “is not something that can be neatly and easily defined ... [and] is not the same thing to everyone”. Furthermore, it has been my experience while surveying the literature that,

especially in recent years, some researchers (writing in an academic context) when referring to *literacy*, assume the placement of the adjective even if it is not there. Thus any attempt to ‘pin down’ literacy is sure to be fraught with contradictions and it will be necessary to keep this caveat in mind.

Before attempting to provide a framework in which literacy might be defined, Baynham (1995:1) set out a number of basic premises for literacy which also provide a useful context for this discussion. They are listed as follows:

- “Literacy is shaped to serve social purposes in creating and exchanging meaning;
- Literacy is best understood in its contexts of use;
- Literacy is ideological: like all uses of language it is not neutral, but shapes and is shaped by deeply held ideological positions, which can be either implicit or explicit;
- Literacy needs to be understood in terms of social power;
- Literacy can be critical.”

Each of these premises contributes to an understanding of literacy in practice, and resonates with the various strands of the definition of *academic* literacy that is given later in this chapter.

A further pivotal contribution that Baynham (1995) makes to the definition dilemma is in commenting on how literacy often, and unfortunately, defines itself in terms of its opposite, *illiteracy*. Such a mutually exclusive conceptualisation stands in contrast to the complex nature of literacy described thus far and yet this value-laden frame of reference still characterises the practice for so many in education today (Kern 2000). Baynham’s point also resonates with the work of Bourdieu discussed earlier that elucidates the notion of power that is, in this instance, in the hands of the *literate* and out of reach of those who are not. This is an important theme in this study. The extent to which students perceive themselves to be *literate* in an academic sense on the one hand, and the way in which lecturers deal with the elevated position that they hold on the other, will be explored in Chapter Three.

Baynham (1995:15) lists a number of literacy models that frame the research in this field at the time of his writing and several of these pick up on the earlier discussion, in particular the ‘skills development model’, the progression from discrete skills to a broader recognition of student identity and the social nature of literacy, but with the exclusion of the ‘therapeutic model’ (see Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1: Literacy models**

<b>Model</b>	<b>Description</b>
The skills development model	Acquisition of literacy related to the acquisition of a set of discrete skills
The therapeutic model	Literacy development through a psychological lens – working through problems
The personal empowerment model	Literacy development linked to confidence building and self-esteem
The social empowerment model	Beyond personal empowerment, literacy development provides for social change
Functional models of literacy	Emphasise social purpose and context, providing the student with the abilities to fit in and achieve within the prevailing social framework
Critical models of literacy	Also emphasising social purpose and context, but not accepting these uncontested, rather seeking to analyse them critically within the educational process

(Baynham 1995:15)

The list also appears to resonate with the autonomous versus ideological models of literacy put forward by Street (2003:77). The ‘autonomous’ model, suggests Street, ignores the cultural and social realities within which literacy resides and thus focuses on skills acquisition as in the ‘skills development model’ listed in table 2.1. An autonomous understanding sees literacy as being detached from and neutral towards the cultural and ideological realities that underpin it and therefore ignores the ever-changing and complex nature of literacy that has been implicit in the discussion thus far. On the other hand, a more sensitive cultural awareness underpins the ‘ideological’ model, acknowledging literacy as “a social practice, ... that (it) is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (Street 2003:77). As such, literacy is recognised as a dynamic concept that will differ from context to context, from culture to culture, and so forth (Street 2003). Later in this review of the literature, the potential implications of such an understanding of literacy in the classroom and for both lecturer and student will be discussed.

It should be noted that Street first identified these opposing approaches in 1985, but in his later research he acknowledges the need to develop a more critical stance – a notion that concurs with the last model listed in Baynham’s table – and this places his own research, particularly as it is situated within the New Literacy Studies, under a most critical spotlight (Street 2003). This view of a critical, reflective practice is also found in the work of others (Kern 2000; Johl 2002). Kern, for example, writing from the perspective of the additional or foreign language student, suggests that “(L)iteracy is construed as a collection of dynamic

cultural processes ... both public and private, both social and individual. It is about the creation and interpretation of meaning through texts ... (A)nd it is ‘critical’, involving a spirit of reflective scepticism” (2000:23). Kern’s (2000:25) definition seems aligned with the premises of Baynham, emphasising notions of power, social interaction, creation of meaning and the need for a critical stance. He describes literacy according to three different, yet interlinked, dimensions, namely the linguistic, the cognitive and the socio-cultural. Kern’s (2000:25) context, which he describes as being set within “communicatively-oriented language programmes”, does not mirror that found in this study (see Chapter Four). Nevertheless, his “multiple perspectives” (Kern 2000:23) approach is relevant, one which, he argues, recognises that the meaning of literacy will vary “according to the disciplinary lens through which one examines it”. In my research the disciplinary lens is that of educational research and is located in the field of academic development, exploring the terrain from the perspective of student learning. To this end, Kern’s discussion of how these dimensions might impact such learning and find practical application in the classroom is described in Chapter Three (3.2).

The difficulties inherent in defining literacy are evident from the discussion above. Each new definition appears to open another door by adding another theme or concept, or offering an additional or alternative perspective. In order to achieve some sort of coherence in the text and to provide an overview of the field of study, it becomes necessary at this juncture to leave some of the doors open, without going down any specific route in detail. As the process of conceptualisation and definition unfolds in the rest of this chapter and in the next, recurring themes will be highlighted and divergent trains of thought will then be drawn together.

### **2.3.2 What then is *academic* literacy?**

In the previous section ‘literacy’ was illustrated by way of definitions and a number of theoretical models. When Ballard and Clanchy (1988:7-8) wrote of the many different interpretations that could be found on university campuses for the term ‘*academic* literacy’, they acknowledged a need for the term to be addressed in a broader, more encompassing theory. The focus at that time was on literacy at university level with writing being the most obvious product, and academic literacy was described as “a compound of linguistic, conceptual and epistemological rules and norms of the academe”. Ballard and Clanchy described their concept of literacy as a ‘functional’ one (see also Table 2.1) and defined it as “a student’s capacity to use written language to perform those functions required by the

culture in ways and at a level judged to be acceptable by the reader” (1988:8). Language, they argued, could not be separated from the culture within which it was being used and a university has a very distinct culture that frames the way it requires language to function. Bock (1988:25) agreed, adding that in order for students to grasp academic texts they need to have knowledge of the context and be competent in the language.

In their work, Ballard and Clanchy (1988) made a number of references to specific conventions that they saw as belonging to an academic culture, and would thus be acceptable to the lecturer/reader, such as producing work that showed clear argument, analytical reasoning, critique and relevance. Students were expected to follow the rules for argument, providing evidence for assertions they make, they must define terms and use a style appropriate to discussion at university level. Adhering to these rules of engagement would, they argued, contribute greatly to being perceived as academically literate.

These perspectives describe the prevailing trend in thinking on academic literacy at that time (one which possibly still is the dominant paradigm) – the study skills model. Terms such as ‘perform’, ‘functions’, ‘levels’, ‘rules’ and ‘competence’, are all ‘skills-speak’. The power resides with the reader who will issue judgement on the level of expertise displayed. Student identity and agency are absent in these definitions, and no allowance appears to be made for a critical literacy that was alluded to earlier (Canagarajah 2002:33). In addition, while the notion that a university has such a distinct culture would not necessarily be contested, it tells only half the story, and omits the need to highlight the many layers of cultures and sub-cultures that comprise most modern societies. The potential for exclusion from the ‘university culture’ for students entering higher education from diverse backgrounds and with differing abilities and levels of preparedness is equally multi-layered and complex, and is another important theme that will be revisited later in this chapter (2.4). Finally, the importance of language competence, for example, in being able to grasp academic texts, may at first reading appear to be a relatively benign assertion. However, in a multilingual context it is immediately elevated to a prominent position in the debate around the acquisition of academic literacy and will thus be addressed towards the close of this chapter (2.6).

Baynham (1995:8), however, additionally postulated that functional literacy and critical literacy do not have to be exclusionary, suggesting that the relationship between them could be complementary. This perspective would resonate with the work of Lea and Street

(1998:159) who suggested that the *study skills*, *academic socialisation* and *academic literacies* perspectives described earlier (see 2.2) are not “mutually exclusive” and “that each model successively encapsulates the other, ...”. This is an important caveat within the context of this study, given its educational research lens. Among many academics there is a sense that academic development is inherently based upon a deficit model – moving from a specific position with students to one that is seen as ‘developed’. I would argue that this perspective, while valid, should also not be exclusionary and that the transformational nature of academic development work (another sub-theme of this study which will emerge over the next few chapters), should be regarded as fulfilling a similarly complementary role.

### **2.3.3 Expanding the definition: discourse**

Boughey (2000:281) provides a later definition of academic literacy, one that suggests that it “involves knowing how to speak and act in academic discourses” and that people will acquire such literacy when they participate with others within the discourse. Boughey’s definition introduces an important concept to the discussion, namely that of discourses, which Kress (1989:7) suggested “are systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that, they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say ... with respect to the area of concern of that institution, ...”. Kress’ definition was rather matter-of-fact, and appeared to intimate a rigidity and homogeneity within a particular institution that should be taken as a given. Gee (1990:143), offered a slightly different perspective when he described a discourse as “... a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaning group or ‘social network’ or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role”.

Gee’s definition of discourse is particularly significant for this study as it encapsulates a number of themes that are central to any discussion on academic literacy, such as its social nature, the importance of the group or network, the notion of a ‘way of doing’, the importance of identity and the need to play some sort of role. Indeed, Gee (1990:142) took the idea of fulfilling a role even further, suggesting that a discourse is “a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize”. Here, the student’s ability to play the role, adopt the identity, put on the costume and follow the instructions, will determine the extent to which he or she will be regarded as a participant in

the discourse or deemed to be an outsider. In his later work, Gee adds a rider to his initial theses, arguing that meaning is always situated, or pertinent to the actual context. “Here”, says Gee (2001:716) “context means not just the words or deeds, but also our purposes, values, and intended courses of action and interaction”. This introduces the theme of student agency that will be developed further in Chapter Three (3.4.8) and emphasises the fact that even as the student is seeking to adopt the ‘identity kit’ of the discourse, she or he will do so from within their own context and, one would suggest, their own proficiency. (Later on in this dissertation the students’ comments on the different strategies that they employed in attempting to adopt the identity kit will be shared (Chapter Six)).

Boughey’s use earlier of the plural when referring to academic discourses reminds us that each discipline has its own discourse – way of doing and saying – and that these may differ to varying degrees across a student’s selected basket of subjects. It further emphasises the many layers of cultures and sub-cultures alluded to earlier and cautions those who, when reading Kress’ and other similar definitions, assume a homogeneity that is, at best, only partial in higher education institutions. This is of particular relevance for students in an Arts Faculty (the site for this study) where they may register for a wide range of subjects across a number of disciplines with varying discourses. This too is considered in more depth later.

In discussing ‘discourses’, Gee (1990) differentiated between what he termed primary and secondary ‘Discourses’<sup>6</sup>. The former refers to the way we will have learnt to speak and act at home, within our families. It is the secondary Discourses that must be acquired as we move into a wider social context. Within the university setting, it is the students’ ability to master the discourse that will provide an indication of their being academically literate. One must, however, be careful not to read these discourses as being disparate from one another. Rather, what is of importance is the interaction between these two spheres of influence and their impact on the process of acquisition, and these are addressed in greater detail in Section 2.5.

Leibowitz (2001:26) suggests that identity is a concept that is “subsumed within discourse” and is therefore crucial to this discussion. Who students are and what they bring to the different discourses they encounter at university has largely been discounted in the discussion

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<sup>6</sup> Gee’s use of upper and lower case relates to another differentiation he makes between a basic definition of the term, and the more encompassing one being discussed here. In this study any reference to Gee and discourse will assume, therefore, the broader definition.

thus far. Yet, this is of particular significance and Canagarajah (2002:33), when discussing multilingual student writers, suggests that

(S)ome students want to bring to their academic communication the resources they enjoy from their vernacular in order to enhance their writing ... [and] to treat each use of deviation from academic discourse as a sign of unproficiency [sic] or failure is to underestimate the agency of the students.

This is a theme picked up on by McKenna (2004:279) when reviewing the discourse used by lecturers' to describe student learning. These discourses, she suggests, are what determine classroom behaviour. When students deviate from the ways of reading and writing that have been validated by the lecturers through their discourse, this is seen to be problematic. As higher education and particularly the institution which provides the site for this study, moves from its formerly elite position with a homogenous student body to one that enhances access and, in so doing, embraces diversity in the widest sense of the word, it will need to critically reflect on its stance in this regard. As will be seen in this study, there is a nexus where discourse demands and individual identity meet.

#### **2.3.4 What does it mean to be academically literate?**

Reading and writing are generally accepted as the core components of literacy (Gee 2003). The importance of reading and writing in any discussion on academic literacy is reflected in the work of Lea and Street (1998:160) who provide a most useful description of “academic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – [that] constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study”. Others develop this perspective by referring to the ‘elements’ of academic literacy which include “reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking, use of technology, and habits of mind that foster academic success” (ICAS 2002:35). The reference to ‘habits of mind’ emanates from the work of Costa and Kallick (2000:1) who suggest that a habit of mind refers to “having a disposition toward behaving intelligently when confronted with problems, the answers to which are not immediately known.” Such habits include persistence, listening with understanding and empathy, thinking flexibly and so forth, and are important for student success. In Chapter Three (3.2) the issue of students displaying an appropriate disposition or orientation towards their learning will be revisited.

Kern (2000:40) also considers the idea of literacy to embrace more than just being skilled in reading and writing, suggesting that “it is a matter of engaging in the ever-developing process

of using reading and writing as tools for thinking and learning, in order to expand one's understanding of oneself and the world". Leibowitz (2001:2) contends that academic literacy "can be summarized as a culturally specific set of linguistic and discourse conventions, influenced by written forms utilised primarily in academic institutions".

Van Dyk and Weideman (2004b:16-17) give flesh to these descriptions in a construct for academic literacy that was drawn up to serve as a blueprint for a test to assess its proficiency. In so doing they described what could be termed the different competencies (conventions) that imply being academically literate, suggesting "that students should be able to:

- Understand a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- Interpret and use metaphor and idiom, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity;
- Understand relations between different parts of a texts, be aware of the logical development of (an academic) text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together;
- Interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and show sensitivity for the meaning that they convey, and the audience that they are aimed at;
- Interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format;
- Make distinctions between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments; distinguish between cause and effect, classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons;
- See sequence and order, do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument;
- Know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;
- Understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and
- Make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence".

Their "blueprint" (Van Dyk & Weideman 2004b:15) for academic literacy is useful particularly when trying to describe to the uninitiated the difference between acquiring a language and becoming academically literate in concrete terms. It offers a sensible, coherent and apparently objectively measurable description of how students might demonstrate the

extent to which they are academically literate and is thus a very valuable construct. But this is also where it might be critiqued. The focus on the skills is seductive. The fact that the list lies so neatly in black and white on the page can, unless care is taken, undermine the haze and fusion that results from the dynamic social context within which learning takes place together with the identity of both the student and the lecturer.

### **2.3.5 The socio-political nature of academic literacy**

In the preceding sections academic literacy has been defined and described from a number of different perspectives and in several instances reference has been made to social and cultural issues and how these play out in the perception of being academically literate. In South Africa, given its rich yet complex cultural heritage, it is particularly difficult to ignore the often powerful socio-political overtones that inevitably become part of the debate around academic literacy and, in particular, academic writing. But the relationship between acquiring academic literacy as demonstrated in one's writing and the socio-political context within which such activities take place has not been extensively documented in the South African context. Starfield (2004) refers to the power relationships that exist in this context and her reference is an important one that may be linked to the notion of serving an apprenticeship within a particular discipline as they become familiar with its discourse (Paxton 1998:136).

In some instances, however, the social, historical and political forces impact on student's access into these apprenticeships in the "privileged discourses of the academy" (Starfield 2004:67). The identity of the student writer may thus be lost in a skewed power relationship where the written work of the student, typically the academic essay, "can be seen as a dialogue between unequal participants". The student seeks to respond to the task as set by the lecturer, but "(t)he lecturer, the institution and the discipline can be seen to map the parameters of both the topic and what might constitute an acceptable response ... (W)hat space is there in this tightly bounded sequence for students to challenge or respond asserting their authority?" asks Starfield (2004:67). Her sentiments are beautifully illustrated in a transcription of comments from a student during an interview conducted at another South African university. Although this student is speaking of her schooling experience, its relevance to university experience is clear:

And we, we had no freedom to express ourselves the way we want to. For example, we have to do according to the rules, but you can't say what is inside you. You have to say everything according to the rules (Leibowitz 2004:43).

How issues of identity and power play out in the academic writing of the under-prepared student will be further explored in Chapter Three (3.4.9).

In this section I have sought to define academic literacy by teasing out the multi-layered and complexly woven strands of thought that are pertinent to academic literacy as a field of study. Such a definition is important because our understanding of the concept determines our allegiance and serves to regulate our teaching practice. To me, as an academic development practitioner, the broad dimensions of literacy expounded by Kern are relevant and provide a theoretical base for my work in academic development, particularly in curriculum development (see also 3.2). This section, however, tells only half the story, and towards the end of the chapter a review of the most recent trends and developments in academic literacy will help to complete the picture. Before doing so, however, some thoughts on acquiring academic literacy will be discussed.

## **2.4 Acquiring academic literacy**

Studies that have investigated the ways in which students acquire academic literacy reflect the diversity in approach and interpretation described previously. In this section a number of these approaches, some of which have been alluded to earlier, will be reviewed in terms of how they contribute to the debate around acquisition.

Ballard and Clanchy (1988:8), whose understanding of academic literacy is given earlier in this chapter, postulated that to become literate at university involves “learning to ‘read’ the culture, learning to come to terms with its distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour”. This, they felt, does not imply negating the importance of conventional grammar rules and spelling, but rather that it requires a shift in focus to one where the distinctive “rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour” become explicit for the students. But this process is often not straight forward, particularly for the novice student and Moore (1994:37) later warned that these rules and norms are “seldom explicit”. Ballard and Clanchy (1988:9) also noted that providing clear definition and exposition was problematic and was often absent in the university classroom where the lecturer, as the one who sets the assignment, does so from a very specific vantage point and with a quite definite set of expectations which are often not shared (see also McKenna 2004:279). This emphasises the tension that can result from the unequal power relationship between the lecturer and the student alluded to

earlier. In their research, Ballard and Clanchy (1988:10-11) analysed the feedback given by a lecturer on a student's essay and drew from this a number of 'academic criteria' to which the lecturer was subscribing. These include issues such as 'relevance', 'clarity', 'appropriateness of style', 'rules for argument' and so forth, but it was clear from both the comments and the failure mark that the student was uninitiated into the importance of these requirements.

The process of learning the culture presupposes then that students will acquire a new set of values, a changed 'way of doing' things that may differ somewhat from that with which they entered the university. Novice students are expected to treat the rules of academe in general, and those of the different disciplines in particular, with respect, and, in my experience, they are often in awe of them. They are expected to adopt 'university-speak', mimicking, wherever possible, the style, register and approach of the academe. In addition, while the conventions described above may be generic to academia as a whole, discipline-specific codes also exist as part of "disciplinary sub-cultures" (Ballard & Clanchy 1988:9), which add to the students' dilemma. They have much to contend with. Bartholomae (1986:4) suggests that "(e)very time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion ... he has to learn to speak our language ...to appropriate a specialized discourse", knowing that any attempt at 'making meaning' will be subject to scrutiny. McKenna (2004:279) takes this even further suggesting that the student not only has to invent the university, but "[i]n order to gain access to the academic literacy of his or her discipline, the student has to 'invent' the expectations within the lecturer's mind."

It should be remembered at this point that criticism of the notion of 'coming over to our side' was alluded to earlier in this chapter in the discussion of the critical models of literacy, where careful scrutiny of the aspects of social purpose and context was advised. A focus of the empirical research conducted for this study was the extent to which students (in this study) had come to terms with the conventions and 'ways of doing' and had sought to critique their own practice and find their own voice .

Writing some ten years after Ballard and Clanchy, Gee (1998:58) reported on children in the mainstream for whom the acquiring of academic literacy may happen "as a surreptitious and indirect by-product of teaching-learning". Paxton (1998:136) spoke of students serving an apprenticeship during which they become acculturated into the discipline. This view has been supported by others (Johns 1997; Johl 2002) who also comment on how students become

members of an academic community as they are increasingly exposed to the discourse of that particular community. All of these studies echo Ballard and Clanchy (1988:14) who spoke of learning at university as being a “gradual socialization into a distinctive culture of knowledge”. However, drawing on the most current research, all of these studies adopt a position that is a step or two behind, for, as we have already seen, this notion has been supplanted by the New Literacy Studies (academic literacies) where the student, no longer passive, negotiates conflicting literacy practices (Lea & Street 1998).

Given the notions of apprenticeship described above, it is understandable that lecturers often expect that students will, simply by virtue of being immersed in the subject discipline, become familiar with its discourse, and thus enhance their academic literacy competence. And indeed, as students progress with their studies through the undergraduate years to postgraduate level, such assimilation of the discourse is sometimes apparent, particularly in the more senior years (Bock 1988). But students, particularly the weaker ones, are often not aware of and do not pick up the discipline-specific codes or conventions mentioned earlier, making the process more difficult. Thus the view that academic literacy can be acquired through a process of immersion in the discipline has been questioned by the socio-culturalists, who suggest that this process may not occur naturally for all students, as some may have not been “exposed to the implicit rules of mainstream, powerful cultures” (Niven 2005:779). This refers back to earlier definitions that see being literate as a social activity that is bound to one’s culture. Often too, ways of reading and writing that have been developed in the school years are somewhat different from the ways of reading and writing that could be expected at university level.

The impact of this perceived gap between school and university may be even more direct for under-prepared students. Niven (2005:779) suggests that “what is implicitly acquired and understood by learners from mainstream cultures needs to be deliberately and explicitly taught to learners from non-mainstream cultures”. Her comments resonate with Bourdieu’s call for an elimination of linguistic misunderstandings. She continues by suggesting that “the particular cultural literacies students bring into the academy may conflict with the literacies that are already powerfully established within the universities” (2005:780), which in turn underlines Starfield’s concerns described earlier. This raises an interesting dilemma in the context of this study. As shall be seen, a surprisingly large number of students who participated in this study and who were listed as ‘under-prepared’ according to faculty-

specific criteria, do not come from what, within the University's context, would be described as 'non-mainstream cultures', as is traditionally expected. The earlier reference to the many sub-cultures that co-exist within a university structure is also pertinent here, and in Chapter Four, the different connotations of these terms will be discussed more fully.

## **2.5 Recent developments in approaches to academic literacy**

The discussion in this chapter thus far has focussed on academic literacy in higher education, looking at aspects of its definition and chronological development over the past few decades. One of the underlying themes that emerges is academic literacy's link to the discourse of a particular discipline. It thus would appear that participating in such a discourse implies being part of a specific community who say and do things in a similar way. These ideas resonate strongly with the recent burgeoning body of research into what has been termed 'communities of practice'.

### **2.5.1 Communities of practice**

Hewings (2004:131) suggests that recent research has, in fact, moved to consider the roles that disciplines play in "creating and governing communities" and the importance of community in developing academic literacy (Canagarajah 2002). Pioneered by Lave and Wenger during the 1990s, "communities of practice [as] the basic building blocks of a social learning system ..." (Wenger 2000:229) provide a useful framework within which the acquisition of academic literacy can be framed. There appear to be many points of congruence between the most recent approaches to academic literacy and the role of communities of practice, and I believe that the latter provides a further progression in the evolution of the academic literacy movement than has been described thus far. Given the importance of communities of practice in the context of this research, it is necessary to describe the concept in greater detail.

In discussing social learning systems, Wenger (2000:226) provides a conceptual framework that defines learning "in terms of social *competence* and personal *experience*" and suggests that knowing "is a matter of displaying competences defined in social communities". The more that opportunity is created for socialisation within a particular community (discourse), the more likely are students to expand their range of competency within it (Cummins 2000:62). Competence in a community, says Wenger (2000:229), requires "understanding the

enterprise well enough to be able to contribute to it ... being able to engage with the community and be trusted as a partner ... to have access to [a shared] repertoire and be able to use it appropriately". Thus, by imitating the behaviour of those who are seen as entrenched in the community, "by modelling themselves on *insiders*" (Jacobs 2005:477) students can progress over time to become fully-fledged participants. Such modelling can be seen as the "learning to 'read' the culture, learning to come to terms with its distinctive rituals, values, styles of language and behaviour" described by Ballard and Clanchy (1988:8) and discussed earlier.

There is, however, another dimension that needs to be highlighted at this point. If one accepts an ideological view of academic literacy then it is necessary to emphasise that for both student and teacher the parameters that define the community are dynamic and fluid. Thus, even as the teacher is initiating the student into the discourse, the practices themselves might be evolving. Even in this study, the veracity of this observation is underlined. The difficulty in defining academic literacy, of trying to compartmentalise the different and even conflicting perspectives, approaches, models, terms and paradigms that have evolved over time, bear testimony to the way in which the discourse relating to the field defies being fixed. This is implicit as Wenger (2000:226) continues to describe the structural elements within a social learning system to include the "*communities of practice, boundary processes* among these communities, and *identities* as shaped by our participation in these systems". The boundary (parameter) that surrounds a community of practice is thus seldom clearly defined or fixed, and there is an area in-between, a periphery, where those who intend to become members of the community are often found. The progression towards becoming an 'insider', serving an apprenticeship, commences here. Interaction in this sphere can be meaningful for both the newcomers and the 'insiders', who themselves may change through being exposed to the knowledge and competence of the apprentice (Wenger 2000; Northedge 2003a). Brew (2002:116) follows on from this suggesting that there is a joint responsibility to be assumed by all who participate in the community, the academics and the students, to ensure that it is maintained and that newcomers are inducted into it. Canagarajah (2002:30) however warns that the access in the periphery must be legitimate if the student is to comprehend the discourses and the practice. In addition, he reminds his readers that students come to the community already having membership elsewhere and this may hinder or facilitate their participation depending on the extent to which there appears to be a discrepancy between the different communities' way of doing.

This idea of an in-between space is also found in the work of Paxton (2006:86) who speaks of ‘interim literacies’, which she views as being more relevant in describing “the transition process from school and home to academic literacy”, specifically when dealing with students who have been exposed to inadequate schooling and limited resources. She offers an analysis of the features of interim literacies that include:

- the way in which student writing initially displays the oral tradition which they have brought with them to the university;
- the social and cultural backgrounds which provide the basis for building meaning;
- the way in which students borrow from and copy the new discourse;
- the strategies that students adopt to avoid using terminology from the new discourse; and
- the lack of coherence in their work (Paxton 2007:48-52).

Paxton’s (2007:46) work speaks to my own experience when she argues that few first-year students have “mastery over the new discourses they are acquiring”, even as she offers critique of the ‘interim approach’ cautioning that this might lead to an undesirable labelling of students. Nevertheless, her conceptualisation of interim literacies, which she believes can serve as resource for “teaching and transformation” (Paxton 2007:53) is very useful. Canagarajah (2002:30) appears to have a similar understanding when emphasising the need for legitimate peripheral participation which creates opportunities for students to be engaged with the specific practice that characterises the discipline suggesting that such participation “is ideal till students have developed the insider knowledge and confidence to become full participants.” This is a key theme in this study and will be shown in Chapter Seven (7.2.4) to be significantly aligned with the findings of this study.

It is also important to realise that, particularly within higher education in South Africa today, learning communities may not be as homogeneous as they are often assumed to be and that even within a single community there may be a diverse set of discourses and values. Conversely, members of one community may also quite easily be members of several others and, therefore, be adapting their discourse within each different setting (Canagarajah 2002:31).

Another point of congruence between being academically literate and participating in a community of practice can be seen in the process of acculturation into a discipline which presupposes that students will acquire a new set of values and even identities that may differ

somewhat from those with which they entered the university. This need not mean, however, that former identities are shed. Rather, suggests Wenger (2000:239) “our ability to deal productively with boundaries depends on our ability to engage and suspend our identities ... opening up our identities to other ways of being in the world”. This is true for both insiders and newcomers. Hodkinson (2004:16) offers an interesting perspective on the activities within and between insiders and newcomers suggesting that within the community of educational researchers, “educational research practices change as members of the community try out different things, and as one generation of researcher is displaced by another”. This should be equally true of the undergraduate classroom where the joint participation of students and lecturers using a shared discourse in the teaching and learning situation is significant. Canagarajah (2002:32), however, takes this further by pointing out that if the students could be granted membership in the community without necessarily adopting entrenched practice, probing their reasons for not doing so might “develop a critical attitude to disciplinary discourse”. I am, however, not convinced that higher education is quite ready to accept this liberal stance and believe that much work is still needed in opening up discussion with academics so as to reflect on, and critique if necessary, current practice.

Canagarajah (2002:36) offers another perspective on the notion of communities and their boundaries, suggesting that the crossing of such boundaries is ‘made easy’ by the social process approach according to which “(E)ach group constructs discourses that suit its social practice, historical experiences and interests”. Practitioners in this approach would then make explicit the underlying premises on which the prevailing discourse in the particular community rests and “(H)aving thus demythologized the conventions of the academic community ... encourage their students to shuttle between their vernacular community and the disciplinary audience without conflict”. Essentially, the social process approach echoes much of what has already been raised in this chapter, which started out by highlighting the potential for linguistic misunderstanding and the need to make the expectations of the discourse and the discipline explicit to the student. Yet, Canagarajah (2002:37), in sharing his own experience at an American university, cautions that minority students will often find it difficult to accept a liberal view that sees vernacular and academic discourses as potentially having equal power. Often, he suggests, students will embrace the anonymity of the academic discourse in a detached fashion rather than “representing their identities through academic discourses”.

While the notion of communities of practice as described above appears to suggest a seamless transition from outsider to insider and from one community to another, the reality is that the experience for students is seldom so straightforward, nor, do I believe, should it be. If anything, it is at the nexus where discourse(s) and student identity(ies) meet, in Wenger's periphery, where a potentially rocky negotiation among unequal partners typically occurs. Zamel (1997:347) offers an interesting caveat with her model of *transculturaltion* that posits that academic discourses are essentially heterogeneous and that, for example, in multilingual contexts students are not necessarily "trapped by their home discourses". She argues for seeing value in what students bring to the learning situation from their own discourse and describes how creating opportunities for engaging in "meaningful academic work" contributed to the acquisition of academic literacy in an L2 (Zamel 1997:347). While there is much merit in the embracing nature of her approach, particularly in the South African context, it presupposes a level of openness and innovation that is not readily seen in our universities at this time – although one that could be argued for. The reality is that many students struggle for voice and their experience is more 'counter' discursive than 'trans' discursive, as will be shown in Chapter Seven (7.2.1).

### **2.5.2 A multimodal approach**

The field of academic literacy has grown substantially in the last twenty years and while this chapter provides an overview of this growth, it is impossible to explicate every different approach, model and interpretation that has been documented in this period. In addition, the discussion has had, as an underlying premise, a focus on academic writing, although not intentionally exclusively. A final comment in this instance on the importance of multimodality within the academic literacy debate is therefore relevant.

Although some interpret the focus on multimodality as a move away from the New Literacy Studies (Archer 2006), others suggest that it is taken up in their work on multi-literacies where they acknowledge the shift from verbal to visual and the role of technology (Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006). The result is that, for example, computer literacy has added a dimension to academic literacy that greatly compounds the level of complexity and adds to the barriers that both students and lecturers must deal with. Archer (2006:451) suggests that a multimodal approach may, however, contribute to enhancing equity and access if seen in its richest sense, a sense which provides for "modes of meaning, including the audio, the spatial and the behavioural". Thesen and Van Pletzen (2006:20) concur, arguing that for students who may

be marginalised through ‘text-based practices’, there is a reservoir of knowledge that can be demonstrated through movement and voice.

The way in which a multimodal approach to academic literacy can be applied in the classroom will become apparent in Chapter Three. It is important, however, to note that throughout this discussion that while the implications of new technologies on academic literacy and its acquisition have been assumed, in my own experience as a lecturer and as an academic development practitioner, I have on many occasions watched first-year students grapple with complex academic texts. I thus share Archer’s (2006:453) sense that these texts often represent “sites of struggle over discourse, meaning, subjectivities and power”. The need to seek alternative modes of learning particularly in response to the complexities that multilingualism has introduced into the South African classroom, and the potential for so doing given the dearth of new technologies cannot be underestimated.

The different models and approaches that have been discussed in this chapter are summarised in the table below. Although a linear pattern is suggested both in the vertical and along the horizontal, I would warn against viewing the table in this manner. What is of use, however, is that the table highlights the many points of congruence that exist between the different models and perspectives, and bears testimony to the broad spectrum of research that been generated in the field.

**Table 2.2: Summary of models and perspectives relating to academic literacy**

<b>Literacy models (Baynham 1995)</b>	<b>Discourse and literacy (Gee 2003; Street 2003)</b>	<b>Models of student writing (Lea &amp; Street 1998)</b>	<b>Other approaches</b>
Skills development Therapeutic model	Autonomous; unitary; instrumental	Study skills (student deficit)	
Personal empowerment/social empowerment	Ideological, multiple literacies; empowering	Academic socialisation (acculturation into discourse)	Communities of practice (Wenger 2000)
Functional literacy		Academic literacies (student negotiating conflicting literacy practices - New Literacy Studies)	Social process (group constructs discourse to suit social practice, etc. – Canagarajah 2002)
Critical literacy (also Johl 2002, Kern 2000)		New Literacy Studies, updated (Street 2003)	Transculturation model (mixed discourses and identities – Zamel 1997; Canagarajah 2002);  Multimodal model (Kress 2003, Archer 2006)

## 2.6 Language proficiency and academic literacy

Any discussion on academic literacy will of necessity have to include some reflection on the role of language in learning and the importance of language proficiency, and it is clear that linguistic competency cannot be separated from the cognitive demands of a task. Leibowitz (2004:49) contends that linguistic competency, while being necessary, is not a sufficient precondition for academic literacy, and her contention is supported by Kern's multi-dimensional construct of literacy which suggests that the socio-cultural and cognitive dimensions are equally important. Thus, the issue of language (here used in the narrowest sense) adds another caveat to this multifaceted discussion. Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:40) describe language in an academic setting as "...not simply a vehicle of thought...it provides a syntax – in other words, a system of categories, more or less complex", which they suggested was directly influenced by the social background of the students themselves. "[L]anguage" say Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:8) "is the most active and elusive part of the cultural heritage which each individual owes to his background".

As will be seen in Chapter Three, however, the focus on academic literacy in higher education has, in recent times, come in response to the many complaints from lecturing staff that students no longer read, cannot write and that they need ‘language support’. If such statements are being made by those whose frame of reference is that of the autonomous model, and Boughey (2002:298) suggests this would be true for many in higher education in South Africa today, then the call for language support is couched in terms of language simply as a means of communication, a resource. The default is still the skills deficit model and the proliferation of language intervention modules seen on many campuses including my own, has strengthened the perception that it is grammar and vocabulary teaching that is needed for struggling students. Such modules are, however, increasingly being countered in the light of burgeoning research, both nationally and internationally that has led to a recognition that the difficulties students experience stem from issues relating to academic literacy and not language *per se* (Boughey 2002:296). And that literacy, and by implication *academic* literacy, is much more than just reading and writing – it is a social practice; it has power; it has multiple dimensions; and it “comes already loaded with ideological and policy presuppositions” (Street 2003:77). The tensions between ‘unitary’ and ‘multiple’, between ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’, between language support and academic literacy are overtly current at the site at which this research has been undertaken. One of the foci of the study is to make a contribution towards diffusing them.

The Stellenbosch University Vision 2012 includes an imperative to promote Afrikaans as a language of teaching and science in a multilingual context (Stellenbosch University 2000). In Chapter Four the implications of this for the university, for the staff and particularly for the students will be reviewed. Suffice to say that most students at the university experience their studies in a bilingual, if not multilingual setting. For a large number of students, particularly those in extended programmes (the focus of this study) the language of learning will not be their mother tongue (L1). Throughout the chapter, the role of language in academic literacy has been played down in spite of the recognition of its linguistic dimension. In the context of academic literacy, language becomes the tool - the vehicle - that the student needs to learn to manipulate in a very specific way when writing within the academe (Boughey 2002:300). But surely there can be no participation or even assimilation if there is no basic understanding of the language? Cummins (2000:58) makes a useful distinction in this regard between “conversational and academic aspects of language proficiency” which he labels “*basic interpersonal communicative skills* (BICS) and *cognitive academic language proficiency*

(CALP)”. It is the latter that is an objective of academic literacy development, but the existence of the former in the language of learning is also crucial. The reality of the South African context where most learners relinquish mother tongue education for a bilingual or even multilingual classroom is one that, while it is not a focus of this study, cannot be discounted.

## **2.7 Academic literacy in the context of this study**

A group of academic development practitioners from a neighbouring institution who participated in a language development project, recently published a comprehensive work entitled *Academic literacy and the languages of change* (Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006:11). In this they state that, some critique notwithstanding, the New Literacy Studies “ha(ve) provided fertile ground for the range of activities that have characterised (their) work”. Although the context for their research differs from my own, the extent to which the New Literacy Studies have highlighted the relevance of multiple literacy practices within a socio-political environment resonates with my own stance in this regard. However, possibly because the point of departure for this study is cross-disciplinary (i.e. the Extended Degree Programme) as opposed to language development specifically, and because of my work in curriculum development, I have also found the notion of discourse communities to be particularly useful. How these communities can impact on teaching and learning is addressed in Chapter Three.

The title of Thesen and Van Pletzen’s book, however, implies more than simply an analysis of academic literacy. The inclusion of the word ‘change’ is potentially loaded. Academic development in South Africa is, or ought to be, transforming by nature. Work in academic literacy should provide for such transformation and to this end the need to encourage a critical literacy in our students is paramount. Johl (2002:57) suggests that the focus of critical (academic) literacy should be to make students aware of the following:

- the different and competing discourses that are present in society, specifically in academe;
- the way in which dominant discourses can (and do) suppress more marginalised discourses and that this can create a sense of inferiority among the members of those less dominant discourses; and

- that it is possible to challenge the prevailing discourse and to contribute to the reconstruction of academic discourse so as to contribute to the emancipation of all students, irrespective of language or culture (translated from Afrikaans<sup>7</sup>).

Johl's list not only expands on Baynham's basic premises on literacy that were cited earlier in this chapter (2.3.1), but more importantly her list is transformational. In essence, it's about giving students a voice, a critical voice.

The sceptic, and probably the realist too, could criticise these sentiments as being idealistic and, even in my own experience working predominantly with first-year students and with the lecturers of large, diverse, first-year classes, there are occasions where my focus blurs. Nevertheless, the acquisition of academic literacy, like learning, ought to be an ongoing, lifelong endeavour. And although the focus of this study is on the first-year student, it is the longer-term perspective that guides its practice.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter academic literacy has been explored as a term, a concept, and a paradigm. Several definitions have been offered and discussed, while the many approaches to and interpretations of academic literacy have been highlighted. Many might differ from the review provided and may wish to question the description and summation I offer. This would not be unexpected, however, as it is implicit in the complex nature of literacy, and also academic literacy, "that any definition is likely to be contested" (Street 2003:78).

The notion of the emergent writer obtaining access to the 'privileged discourse' has confronted me as researcher on the one hand, and as a student on the other. Writing a doctoral dissertation in a qualitative paradigm has to a certain degree enabled me as a researcher to experience firsthand the challenge faced by the students who make up this study. Albeit perhaps on a different level, it has required some considerable time spent in serving an 'apprenticeship' while attempting to navigate the complex, daunting and often conflicting

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<sup>7</sup> Kritiese geletterdheid het ten doel om 'n kritiese bewussyn by studente (én akademië) te kweek van die kontesterende diskoerse wat in samelewings sirkuleer, van die maniere waarop dominante diskoerse gemarginaliseerde diskoerse kan onderdruk en 'n minderwaardigheidsgevoel by lede van nie-dominante of gemarginaliseerde groepe kan wek, van die moontlikheid om dominante diskoerse uit te daag en van die moontlikhede om vanuit 'n verskeidenheid posisies mee te werk aan die konstruksie en herkonstruksie van akademiese diskoerse wat die emansipasie van alle studente, ongeag kulturele herkoms en taak, ten doel het, ...

theory that underpins social research. Northedge (2003a:21) reminds us that progression of this nature is slow, requiring “substantial investment of time and effort”.

My own identity as a mature and older student who waited many years before entering academe, led to some hesitancy on my part before I felt comfortable to project myself as an academic or scholar who has “anything worth saying” (Clark & Ivanič 1997:152). In academic discourses having an opinion “is constructed out of scholarship, which involves examining the work of authorities and building a case that is personally meaningful out of their work and one’s own research” (Boughey 2005:645). After an initial submission of this chapter, I was required to revisit the extent to which I had been critical of the body of research that I had discussed. This process of revision, however, has proved invaluable. It has served to crystallise my own understanding of academic literacy and to adopt a clear position from which to critique and adapt my own practice, both as academic writer and as an academic development practitioner.

In Chapter Three the theory that has been explicated in this chapter will be revisited from the perspective of the practitioner in the classroom.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ACADEMIC LITERACY IN PRACTICE

*The inseparable skills of critical reading, writing, listening and thinking depend upon students' ability to postpone judgment and tolerate ambiguity as they honor the dance between passionate assertion and patient inquiry.*

ICAS 2002

#### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter Two the concept of academic literacy was explored in some depth. Apart from providing a historical perspective on how academic literacy has evolved over a period of time, the chapter also sought to unravel the many strands of thought, the plethora of research and the wide spectrum of traditions and paradigms that comprise the academic literacy terrain. In this chapter an equally large body of research will be reviewed to determine how theorists and research practitioners view the ways in which academic literacy ought to manifest in practice. I commence, however, with a brief consideration of student learning as it is relevant to this study on acquiring academic literacy. This is then followed by an overview of some of the different models of academic literacy provision as they are found in higher education institutions. Both of these sections serve to provide a context for the discussion that follows on how the acquisition of academic literacy takes place in the first-year classroom.

#### 3.2 Student learning and the acquisition of academic literacy

According to Lea (1999:103) theory on student learning within a higher education context has “tended to ignore the role of academic literacy practices in constituting knowledge in university settings”. Academics often perceive academic literacy to be something that is lacking in students, particularly weaker students (Lea & Street 1998; Boughey 2000; Johl 2002; Warren 2002; Northedge 2003a; Van Dyk & Weideman 2004a). Research conducted into academic literacy often occurs on the basic premise that it is the struggling student who needs support in this area. And perhaps this view is not totally inappropriate. Although few students enter academe fully prepared to participate on equal footing with the members of a particular discourse community, it is true that a large group will, by virtue of being immersed in the discipline, assume the practices and purpose of that particular community. Such students may pass through their undergraduate years quite successfully, having adopted the ‘accepted’ practices that enable them to manipulate language so as to best present the

knowledge they have acquired. However, the overview of the most relevant theory on academic literacy provided in the previous chapter pointed quite clearly to the fact that, for weaker students, the task of negotiating entry into a discourse community, trying to resolve the conflicting literacy practices within and across these communities, is more complex than either the students or the lecturers sometimes think (Williams 2005:157).

The student's approach to her or his own learning and perspective of what knowledge is and how, and indeed why, it is to be acquired, are relevant. Students enter higher education for many different reasons and their resultant "*orientations to learning*" (Beatty, Gibbs & Morgan 1997:72) significantly impact the way they go about their studies and experience learning. Students, for example, often see a university degree as their ticket to success. When one comes to university, one pays fees and, in return acquires knowledge. In this context knowledge becomes a 'commodity', a perspective that encourages "reproductive conceptions of learning" (Boughey 2000:282), where the student works toward reproducing what the teacher has relayed during the class. This stance is in direct opposition to more constructivist approaches to learning which see the student involved in creating links between existing knowledge and the new knowledge that is being shared (Buckridge & Guest 2007:134). Such application is transformational and should have an impact on how the student thinks and perceives the world around her or himself (Boughey 2002:282). However, this also has implications in terms of preparedness and/or proficiency, what was learnt at school, the student's own 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986:243). Various issues relating to levels of preparedness for higher education will be addressed in Chapter Four (4.1; 4.3).

Boughey's comments, however, echo the earlier findings of a group of eminent researchers - Marton and Säljö, Biggs, and Entwistle and Ramsden - whose work on student approaches to learning has become clustered around the notions of *deep*, *surface* and *strategic* learning. Students who adopt a surface approach generally seek to do just enough to meet the demands made on them by the particular module or programme. Rote learning, even if they do not understand the work, is a typical study method. Deep learning, on the other hand, is characterised by an endeavour on the part of the student to obtain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. Such students will often read beyond the minimum and seek out opportunities to discuss what they are learning. For strategic learners, however, achieving the highest possible marks for an assessment becomes the driving intention, often resulting in the application of "well-organised study methods, and effective time

management” (Entwistle 1997:19). Table 3.1 provides a summary of the key features of this classification.

**Table 3.1: Defining features of approaches to learning**

<b>Deep Approach</b>	
Intention:	To understand ideas for yourself <b>by</b> transforming
Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experiences Looking for patterns and underlying principles Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically Becoming actively interested in the course content	
<b>Surface Approach</b>	
Intention:	To cope with course requirements <b>by</b> reproducing
Studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy Treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge Memorising facts and procedures routinely Finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented Feeling undue pressure and worry about work	
<b>Strategic Approach</b>	
Intention:	To achieve the highest possible grades <b>by</b> organising
Putting consistent effort into studying Finding the right conditions and materials for studying Managing time and effort effectively Being alert to assessment requirements and criteria Gearing work to the perceived preferences of lecturers	

(Entwistle 1997:19)

Students who follow a deep approach are not necessarily motivated by high marks, nor are students who follow the surface approach necessarily characterised by poor results. Indeed, the opposite can often be true depending, most often, on the nature of the assessment. In addition, the same student can employ alternative strategies from one situation to the next and from one discipline to the next (Toohey 1999:9-10). Stated from a slightly different perspective, it “is the way students conceive of the learning task [that] affects their approach to learning in that situation and subsequently to the outcomes” (Prosser & Webb 1994:126). To this understanding of the ‘learning task’, I would add the impact of assessment. Biggs (2003:269) concurs, recommending that outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment should all be aligned if one wishes to create a learning environment “from which the student cannot easily escape without learning.” The individual’s “dispositions and habits of mind”, drawn from a number of different extrinsic and intrinsic motivators and subject to a

number of ‘in’ and ‘out’ of class variables, where the latter are carefully aligned, will guide student learning and should “enable students to enter the ongoing conversations appropriate to college: thinking, reading, writing, and speaking ...” (ICAS 2002:13). As teachers we can influence our students’ learning only so far and to varying degrees, depending on the students themselves. If, however, academic literacy is about knowing “how to speak and act” (Boughey 2000:281) within a community of practice where one seeks to use the tools of reading and writing “for thinking and learning” (Kern 2000:40), then the potential for facilitating such a process, to a greater or lesser extent, is of relevance if we wish to contribute to student success. Similarly deep learning, as described above, appears to suggest the sort of engagement - reading more widely and soliciting discussion - that would contribute to participation in the discourse community and the critical literacy described in Chapter Two (2.8).

In Chapter Two (2.3.1), Kern’s (2000:38) three dimensions of literacy, the linguistic, the sociocultural *and* the cognitive aspects, were discussed. He describes the cognitive dimension as incorporating the following:

- “Existing knowledge (schemata) – allowing a person to establish relationships among pieces of information and to predict, infer and synthesize meaning
- Declarative knowledge – the ‘what’ -facts, ideas, stories embedded in cultural contexts
- Procedural knowledge – the ‘how’-strategies for reading, writing, and understanding, also embedded in cultural contexts
- Ability to formulate and discern goals and purposes – included planning, monitoring, and revising – in line with cultural norms
- Ability to create and transform knowledge”.

Kern’s description neatly encapsulates not only what researchers discussed above seem to be saying, but also some of the sub-themes surrounding the acquisition of academic literacy that were discussed in the previous chapter. The student brings existing knowledge into the higher education setting, and such knowledge ought to be useful in creating new meaning and ‘transforming knowledge’ through a culturally defined lens. Clearly if the student perceives there to be a currency in the knowledge that she brings to the discourse community, this will impact positively on her approach to learning. In the section that follows, an overview of

some of the approaches to dealing with academic literacy in higher education will be provided.

### **3.3 Academic literacy on offer**

Models for incorporating the acquisition of academic literacy into higher education reflect a shift in emphasis that has, to a greater or lesser extent, kept pace with the emerging research that was discussed in the previous chapter. Early models (particularly those emanating from the UK or Australia) reflected the skills deficit paradigm with, typically, weaker students being required to follow additional, non-mainstream autonomous modules which would focus on teaching the necessary skills for success at university (Hermerschmidt 1999; Northedge 2003a). These modules usually fell within the ambit of academic development and were taught by academic development practitioners as opposed to faculty staff.

It is important to keep in mind that academic literacy practice in South Africa was born out of academic development interventions aimed at supporting students for whom English was a second language. McKenna's (2003a:61) description of the "cycles of academic development 'language interventions'", which depict a move from remedial to integrated, is of significance here.

She identifies three cyclical periods from her institutional perspective, which can be summarised as follows:

**Table 3.2: Cycles of academic development**

English Second Language (ESL) 1991-1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Only for students identified as ‘weak’</li> <li>▪ Focus on grammar and language use</li> <li>▪ Generic material (with some subject specific)</li> <li>▪ Approach based on assumption that students lack an overt understanding of grammar rules, which would improve their academic reading and writing</li> <li>▪ No transfer to mainstream, no application of acquired language proficiency in context reduced, cognitively demanding situations</li> </ul>
English for Academic Purposes (EAP) 1997-1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ For students identified as weak</li> <li>▪ Skills based – usually ‘generic’ skills such as note-taking, writing a conclusion, reading strategies</li> <li>▪ Some subject specific materials</li> <li>▪ Often skills taught were not relevant to the discipline</li> <li>▪ Limited transfer</li> </ul>
Academic literacy (AL) 1999 and beyond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Integrated into mainstream</li> <li>▪ Overt instruction (through mainstream texts, lectures and assignments) in the norms and expectations of the discipline</li> <li>▪ Focus on Foundation into literacy ‘by degrees’ e.g.: writing intensive courses, writer-respondent projects, development of explicit assessment criteria rubrics</li> </ul>

(Adapted from: McKenna 2003a:61)

McKenna’s model describes a process that other higher education institutions in South Africa will recognise, although the process in other contexts might have occurred earlier in some institutions and later in others (see also Van Wyk 2002; Wood & Olivier 2004; Thesen and Van Pletzen 2006:5ff.).

Warren (2002:87) makes a distinction between *separate*, *semi-integrated* and *integrated* approaches. He suggests that his understanding of these is congruent with the study skills/academic socialisation approaches on the one hand and the academic literacies model of student writing on the other, with the semi-integrated somewhere in between. Warren’s most useful categorisation, based on his experiences in the United Kingdom and South Africa, is of relevance to this study as the approach being followed in the Faculty of Arts and

Social Sciences, the site where the research was undertaken, largely falls into his semi-integrated band.

**Table 3.3: Warren's approaches to academic literacy provision**

Type of provision	Description	Target group	Interventions
Separate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Remedial; educational intervention.</li> <li>▪ Offered in advance or alongside mainstream modules which are usually of a traditional kind</li> </ul>	'Non-traditional' <sup>8</sup> students Could include alternative access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tutorial programmes</li> <li>▪ Supplementary instruction programmes</li> <li>▪ Language-based modules</li> </ul>
Semi-integrated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Academic development</li> <li>▪ Closely linked with the rest of the curriculum</li> <li>▪ Developmental rather than remedial</li> </ul>	Those requiring more guidance and practice (often still largely 'non traditional' students) Could include alternative access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introductory modules</li> <li>▪ Foundation modules</li> <li>▪ Academic literacy modules</li> </ul>
Integrated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recognises that learning in higher education is a complex social and cognitive process</li> <li>▪ Requires becoming familiar with the specialist concepts, theories, methods and writing conventions of specific subjects</li> </ul>	Can be all students (undergraduates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mainstream modules based on AD principles</li> <li>▪ Core entry-level modules</li> <li>▪ Adjunct language-based programmes</li> </ul>

(Warren 2002:86-92)

According to Warren (2002:87), it is within the integrated provision approach that the skills agenda in reading and writing takes a back seat as they become rather "the very means through which academic learning and knowledge occur", and he cites a list of constructivist and applied linguistic researchers, many of whom were mentioned in Chapter Two, to provide the theoretical base for his position.

In spite of the shift towards academic literacy modules being fully integrated with mainstream teaching, this is not necessarily the default in many institutions (Boughey

<sup>8</sup> Warren (2002:86-87) differentiates between 'traditional' students who "enter university shortly after completing their secondary education, and who, owing to their prior socialisation, schooling and attainment, are relatively well-prepared for academic study" as opposed to 'non-traditional' who "are far more mixed in terms of age and educational, class, cultural and linguistic background."

2002:299). The inclusion of ‘writing-across-the-curriculum’ courses, particularly at first-year level, has, for example, become common practice across the American college system (ICAS 2002). In spite of their stance being that of encouraging integration, they remain adjunct courses. There are a number of reasons for this apparent absence of integration with mainstream teaching, not least of which is the resistance, or the lack of awareness on the part of discipline-specific lecturers of the importance of addressing academic literacy, particularly at first-year level. Making the sort of changes required to provide for students to become participants in the discipline often requires “fundamental questions being asked about the syllabus, teaching methodologies and other aspects of the curriculum” (McKenna 2003a:64) – a process not always welcomed or understood – and one might question the extent to which lecturers are prepared for it. However, Warren (2002:89), although he acknowledges the disadvantages such as stigmatisation and additional workload, contends that even within the separate approach there may be advantages. Often the smaller more cohesive group provides a ‘safe space’ for students who lack confidence. His comments will be seen to have relevance in this study.

Recent developments in South Africa indicate a move towards a more integrated and holistic approach to academic development (Warren 2002; De Klerk *et al.* 2006; Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006), but this has not necessarily been unproblematic, and the current status in the country will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. At my own institution there are examples across the campus that would fit quite comfortably into any of the three cycles described earlier and/or into one of the three approaches just discussed. In addition, there are proposals currently before the Programme Advisory Committee at the university<sup>9</sup> that will lay the foundation for the implementation of an embedded academic literacy-type module for all students in certain programmes, e.g. MBChB I. This study, however, focuses on an Extended Degree Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences that has been designed for students who, based on faculty entry criteria, need additional guidance and support, and which incorporates what could most probably be described as a semi-integrated academic literacy module. Similar models have proved to be effective in contributing to the success of ‘at-risk’ students in a number of instances, (Warren 2002; De Klerk *et al.* 2006).

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<sup>9</sup> The Programme Advisory Committee at Stellenbosch University serves as an advisory body to the Academic Planning Committee (which reports to the Senate) on all aspects relating to programme (new programmes, programme changes) and curriculum development.

Before closing this section it is necessary to revisit the discussion in Chapter Two (2.6) that highlighted the role of language proficiency and language acquisition, and the way in which it adds an additional layer of complexity to any discussion on academic literacy. The multilingual profile of students in higher education in many countries and most directly in South Africa has meant that language proficiency is not only of fundamental importance, but is also often the source of much confusion, frustration and inappropriate expectations on the part of both students and lecturers. Students will resist having to attend an *English for Academic Purposes* module because they did not come to university to ‘do grammar’. Similarly, academics will complain that after a year in such a module, students still cannot write. Even among the academic development practitioners and the language specialists, a difference in perspective can often be detected as to what a module in academic literacy as opposed to a module in language acquisition could entail. Such blurring of the boundaries is to be expected given the interwoven relationship between mastering a discourse and having Cummins’ (2000:58) “*cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)*”, but needs to be given some thought, particularly as it will affect the motivation or orientation that the students will have towards advancing their own understanding. The responses of both students and academics who participated in this study are discussed in Chapter Six, and will be seen to illustrate these often unproductive perceptions.

This brief overview of some of the ways in which universities, particularly within the South African context, seek to deal with academic literacy provides a context for the section that follows which focuses on the acquisition of academic literacy in the first-year classroom.

### **3.4 Academic literacy in the first-year classroom**

If the acquisition of academic literacy is to be read in the context of participating in the disciplinary discourse, then it would appear that the most appropriate models for steering this process would be those that integrate the acquisition of academic literacy into mainstream offerings (Lea & Street 1998; Jacobs 2005). Classroom practice and first-year curricula should respond to the criteria for facilitating communities of practice (described in Chapter Two (2.5.1)) by providing increased opportunities for socialisation with the particular discourse. Such an approach, however, might easily be seen as too simplistic as it could lose sight of the reality of “multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, ... contested in relations of power” (Street 2003:77). Street (2003:82), who is a contributor to the many

theoretical perspectives that are part of the New Literacy Studies, has warned that this network of researchers will “face their sternest test” when they seek the “practical application [of the theory] to mainstream education”. Although there is consensus that mastery of the discourse is not achieved by being ‘taught’ the discourse, “teaching (for acquisition) and teaching (for learning)” will enable students “to achieve ‘liberating literacy’ (where students are able to critique and change a discourse)” (Jacobs 2005:477). It is, therefore, necessary to respond to the question: how does one put theory into practice and what sort of teaching will achieve such ‘liberating literacy’?

In seeking a framework within which I might review academic literacy in practice, I returned to some of the themes that emerged from the theoretical analysis provided in Chapter Two starting with issues relating to the teaching in general and then moving on to consider aspects of writing, reading and student identity as might influence what happens in the classroom. At this point, however, it should be noted that the discussion that will follow is based on an understanding of there being an actual classroom where the students and the lecturers meet face-to-face. A limitation of the study, therefore, is that it has not explored these classroom issues from a distance education perspective.

### **3.4.1 An environment conducive to learning**

In the introduction to this thesis, mention was made of the plethora of academic support interventions that characterise the offerings of most universities in South Africa, and indeed to some extent world wide. What has emerged from the discussion thus far is that a space conducive to acquiring academic literacy, by developing one’s academic literacy practices, needs to be provided in faculties, especially at first-year level. Following on the work of Bizell some years earlier, Amos and Fisher (1998:19) caution that “higher education ought not to pretend to allow people access to higher education...and then prevent them from really attaining higher education by not admitting them to the various discourse communities that characterize each discipline”. Aligned to this is Gee’s observation of the acquisition of academic literacy as being part of the end-product in a teaching and learning situation, which automatically raises the question: what sort of teaching and learning situation? What actions and activities encourage students to take up residence in the appropriate community of practice? And how does this all need to be adapted, enhanced, intensified when dealing with ‘at-risk’ students?

In Chapter Two reference was made to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others specifically with regard to linguistic misunderstanding. This is, according to Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:10), not the only factor that might impede the learning process. He proclaims an indictment on the role of the teacher, referring to the “ethnocentrism of the profession”, and describes the typical classroom space as “a source of pedagogical distance”. The lecture format, for example, keeps the students at a distance with the physical environment dominating the relationship between professor and audience. I contend that this distance is maintained in the 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom where lecture theatres are now characterised by huge overhead screens that project the visual exposition of the content. Students can now gaze mindlessly as the screen taps out the key issues, in the worst cases, being repeated by the lecturer who now, in semi-darkness, has moved off centre-stage. Bourdieu *et al.* (1994:11) points out that even though the professor may make overtures to encourage more open dialogue (sometimes he found that students would even request it) it remains, at best, lip service with questions often being “mere rhetorical gestures”. As part of my function at the university to which I am affiliated, I am required to conduct class visits – most often for newer lecturers. My experience in these classes would suggest that Bourdieu’s description is still apt. When lecturers pose the question, “Is that clear?” there is seldom a response. This question remains a rhetorical one.

At Stellenbosch University, the Learning and Teaching Policy (Stellenbosch University 2006a) foregrounds a student-centred approach, and in so doing aligns itself with the work of academic development researchers such as Ramsden (1994) who suggests that a learning (student)-centred environment is one that makes learning possible. The principles of a learning-centred approach include flexibility, interactive learning, variety in design and assessment, continuous feedback, tasks requiring student decision-making, etc. These resonate with Chickering and Gamson’s (1991) principles of good practice in undergraduate education which are embedded in the University’s policy and which state that good practice:

1. Encourages contact between students and lecturers
2. Encourages cooperation between students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasises time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

These principles ring true with much of what has been suggested might enhance the acquisition of academic literacy, and it is ironic that one of the advantages of offering adjunct academic literacy modules to selected groups of students (i.e. weaker students) is that the class size is often much smaller than in the mainstream. This not only provides greater opportunity for lecturer-student engagement that could, for example, influence assessment and feedback, but also typically sees such classes being offered in venues that allow for greater flexibility (i.e. seminar rooms) than do lecture theatres. As will be seen in the Chapter Six, where the students' responses are shared, this is regarded as one of the positive features of such classes and that students felt they had more confidence to speak out and ask questions. Large classes – which typically follow the lecture format – are, on the other hand, often found to be more intimidating and students find it easier to adopt a passive stance and remain anonymous, simply receiving whatever is being dished out. In fairness to the modern-day lecturer of first-year classes, limited resources and the ever-increasing size of first-year classes present many daunting challenges and places additional demands on both their organising and facilitating skills (Bodenstein & Van der Walt 2000). Weingartner (1993:108) has argued that “(t)he economics of higher education will assure the continued prevalence of lecturing, whatever its limitations, as a way of inducing learning and this characteristically in large classes”.

In the faculty where the empirical data for this study was generated, the first-year class has grown by over 23% in the past five years, while the number of academics has hardly increased at all (Stellenbosch University 2006b). The implications of this are significant, especially when it comes to the size of first-year classes. The reality is that while there is a rich body of research that highlights many alternative and innovative approaches for dealing with large classes, and there are pockets of such practice across the campus, many academics are simply bogged down by the administrative workload and logistical arrangements that characterise first-year teaching. Such institutional realities are beyond the focus of this study yet, as will be seen in the analysis of the data, class size has become a determining factor in the way teaching is being conceptualised at first-year level. A tension exists between what is perceived as the optimum environment for teaching and learning at, specifically, undergraduate level on the one hand, and the reality of a lack of resources, facilities and capacity on the other.

### 3.4.2 Facilitating participation

It is, however, insufficient to establish a suitable learning environment if within that environment the participation of the student in the knowledge community is not facilitated. Thus it is necessary to consider the question: how does a student become a participant in a knowledge community? How does she cross the boundaries that have been established and ‘engage and suspend’ her identity and how might such activities be facilitated? Amos and Fisher (1998:20) offer a response that suggests that:

The ground rules are learnt from socially meaningful literacy activities where the experiences, the cognitive skills required to complete the activity and also the socially or culturally accepted way to evaluate the meaning and relative success for that activity, are internalised.

This is of significance for the university teacher who, in a student-centred teaching environment, needs to shift the focus to the students and their learning rather than the “covering of course content ...” (Stes, Clement & Van Petegem 2007:100). However, while Stes *et al.* (2007:100) argue that the role of the teacher is no longer that of expert, Northedge (2003b:173) suggests that it is precisely because of her expertise, that she, as facilitator, enables students to “frame the meanings of a specialist discourse by opening up ‘conversations’ with them and sharing in a flow of meaning”. Often the teacher will provide signposts for students (‘this is just for background’; ‘this is fundamental to understanding this section of the work’, and so forth) that could encourage deep or surface learning, or even a mix thereof depending on how the information has been framed. Such sharing in the flow of meaning, indeed in making meaning, are crucial for acquiring academic literacy. While the role of the lecturer as expert-facilitator is crucial, this too may even be enhanced in the process. Consider Wenger’s thoughts on the potential of boundaries. When the lecturer meets the student on the periphery of the knowledge community, he suggests, there is a chance for the lecturer to “learn something entirely new, revisit ... little truths, and perhaps expand ... horizon(s)” (Wenger 2000:233; see also Canagarajah 2002). It is, therefore, unfortunate that academic development interventions, especially those that focus on language, often adopt “...the normative attitude that the discourses of the academic communities are not open to negotiation or criticism” (Canagarajah 2002:32). This issue was also raised in Chapter Two (2.5.1) and is of concern because students often lose their opportunity to participate in the community if they fail to utilise the entrenched disciplinary discourses (see also Boughey 2000:283).

All of this does, however, mean that the students need to make themselves available for such an encounter in the community. The challenge of motivating students to become actively involved in conversations both with their fellow students and their lecturers, as well as with the different texts so as to ‘create and transform knowledge’, that is, to encourage a deep approach to learning, is of significance (Toohey 1999:17). Clearly, teaching that creates space for students to engage in the periphery so that they eventually become participants in the discourse, would seem to be an ideal. The university teacher who is able to reflect on her own practice based on the new identities entering her area of expertise is to be valued. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge the complexities and demands placed on the university teacher within the modern-day paradigm, and to recognise that not all will respond in the same way (Gravett 2004:22).

### **3.4.3 Curriculum design**

David Scott (2008:6), in his recent work that provides a historical and critical review of those whom he regards as the major curriculum theorists over the past fifty years, highlights the way in which curricula and teaching and learning are intimately interwoven. Thus a logical progression from the previous discussion that has focussed on facilitating participation within suitable teaching and learning spaces, is to consider the role of the curriculum in the acquisition of academic literacy in a higher education context. Ian Scott (2006) contends that there are numerous examples of how a careful approach to curriculum design, one that creates such spaces for interactive learning and teaching and that carefully selects, orders and presents content, can contribute to student success. Johl (2002) takes this further suggesting that the success of academic literacy and related interventions is dependent on those responsible for developing the curricula being aware of the multiple levels that make up such literacy, and that this is far more complex than simply addressing the technical skills (reading, writing, computer and so forth) of the student. It is also crucial to recognize that issues of academic literacy cannot simply be addressed at the level of language alone, but that the level of cognition required within the particular context needs to be addressed at the same time in an integrated manner. In light of the above, and as was seen earlier in this chapter (3.2), many in the higher education sector, across a wide range of disciplines, have made a case for integrating academic literacy components in either their academic support offerings or more recently as an integral part of their first-year programmes. The idea of such additional support has resonated in higher education institutions in South Africa and most

now offer some form of *Language in the Humanities* or *English for Academic Purposes* type modules.

Addressing academic literacy in the curriculum speaks to the very core of the teaching and learning process, however, and requires a critical, reflective practice on the part of the curriculum designer (Warren 2002:86). Johnson and Kress (2003:5) suggest that given the changes in society and the impact of globalisation, there is an urgent need to review the ways in which literacy is “conceptualised, taught and assessed” and argue for “a curriculum and forms of pedagogy that foster in a non-trivial way dispositions towards ease with difference, with change, creativity and innovation” (2003:11). Although they write within a schools context, the same argument could be made for higher education. Their comments also resonate with the list of goals or foci for academic literacy provided by Johl in Chapter Two (2.8). Again, notions of change, ‘dealing with difference’ and so forth remind us of the transformational potential inherent in encouraging a critical approach to academic literacy and the need for such an approach, therefore, to be integrated into the curriculum.

What contributes to making the curriculum process so complex, however, is the dynamic nature of what one is attempting to capture as new research contexts usually generate new problems (Street 2003:85). In South Africa there are many different influences seeking to impact the curricula at higher education level, over and above the discipline-specific content - “massification, internationalisation” and the effects of globalisation, as well as national agendas, including “responsiveness, gradueness and [recognising] different forms of knowledge” (Breier 2001:1). In this context, incorporating academic literacy acquisition in curricula, by overtly creating opportunities for engagement, needs to stand in line. Posner (1992:47), also working within the school tradition, identified five different perspectives on curriculum suggesting that “[e]ach perspective represents a particular, coherent set of assumptions about education”. These included the traditional, the experiential, the structure of the disciplines, the behavioural and the cognitive. Toohey (1999:49-66), in reviewing this list from a university perspective, argued for a slightly different set of approaches (Table 3.4).

**Table 3.4: Approaches to curriculum design**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Relevance for curriculum design</b>
Traditional or discipline-based	Knowledge exists independently. Teacher selects what is important for the student to learn.
Performance or systems-based	Focus on what it means to use to achieve certain desirable ends. Evidence of knowledge is in the form of performance. Acquisition of knowledge and skills.
Cognitive	Function of the university is to develop the mind, provide opportunities for students to use and strengthen their intellectual faculties. Knowledge is personally constructed. Students integrate new knowledge with previous experience.
Experiential or personal relevance	Knowledge focuses on what is deemed personally valuable and of use. Teacher's role to make students aware of the knowledge and skills that their profession or discipline requires of them.
Socially critical	Develop a critical consciousness so that there is an awareness of the present ills of society and are motivated to alleviate them. Knowledge is constructed within cultural and historical frameworks. Students and teachers engage together in working on collaborative projects with a social slant.

(Adapted from Toohey 1999:49-66)

The above approaches appear closely aligned to general educational goals and, if asked, most university teachers would claim an allegiance to most of what the different approaches stand for. Toohey (1999:67), however, explains that few attempts at implementing curricula that adopt so broad a range of goals have been successful. Time pressures, she suggests, both in terms of class time and preparation time, offer limited scope for any single teacher to approach a topic from so many different vantage points, and often the discipline-based approach emerges as winner.

Northedge (2003a:21), however, argues that “[i]f a course presents compelling flows of richly textured meaning, a wide range of students will be able to participate and all will advance from their prior level of discursive skill”. Irrespective of the theoretical perspective that guides the crafting of curricula, spaces and opportunities for students to engage with such material need to be made. It becomes everyone's responsibility because it underpins the learning process in such a fundamental manner, and it is interesting to note that a strategy proffered by researchers to bring about revision of methodology and curriculum renewal has been that of encouraging collaboration between lecturer and academic development practitioner (McKenna 2003a:64; Jacobs 2005:475). The curriculum is an important mechanism in the teaching and learning environment, one that is dynamic and needs to adapt

to the constantly changing context within which it must reside (Scott 2008:13). Even the most dedicated and creative teacher cannot fully overcome limitations that may be imposed by a narrow or exclusionary curriculum. If deep approaches to learning can be encouraged by the way in which the curriculum is designed (Toohey 1999:18) then the acquisition of academic literacy should be similarly enabled, for the two are intimately intertwined. To this end it is necessary to encourage a deeper understanding of literacy so that university teachers can be better equipped to “analyse their curriculum decisions and the possible consequences of such decisions for students’ life trajectories” (Carrington & Luke 1997:98).

These different perspectives on curriculum are of relevance in this study. First of all, there are obvious similarities between the different perspectives listed in Table 3.1 and the different models of academic literacy that were discussed in Chapter Two, with the traditional, content-focus approach again serving as default mode – this even though Canagarajah (2002:29) has lauded the work of several faculties of humanities and the social sciences for placing the “pedagogical activities (around academic writing) in the specific discourse communities one is writing in/for”. Secondly, it is important to bear in mind that one’s understanding of knowledge and of how learning occurs is what determines one’s approach to teaching, to curriculum issues and to academic literacy. What is of concern is that, as was the case earlier in this chapter, external forces and institutional demands are often the barriers to lecturers following new and different approaches that might be better suited to a more diverse student profile. Student diversity, suggest Thesen and Van Pletzen (2006:7) has become “an important signifier for the expansion of [their] work [as academic development practitioners] into mainstream curricula” – a move that has also seen strong institutional support and which has encouraged the dissolution of at least some of the barriers listed above.

Scott (2008:19) suggests that a curriculum comprises four dimensions: aims or objectives, content or subject matter, methods or procedures, and evaluation or assessment”. While the first three dimensions have been addressed or mentioned in the discussion thus far, it is necessary now to consider the latter.

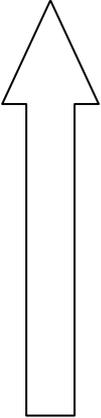
#### **3.4.4 The role of assessment**

Following on the discussion on designing significant curricula, it is necessary to consider the role of assessment in this debate. Can one assess academic literacy? Surely the extent to which a student is ‘academically literate’ will be present in the way in which she reads,

reflects critically on what she has read, puts such critical reflection into writing and then can interpret, draw conclusions and create new understanding. This should be included into any university assessment task whether explicitly or implicitly. Assessment, however, that encourages rote learning (surface learning) and the replication of information from lectures and textbooks is often the norm (Toohey 1999:14). Such assessment, similarly, does not encourage students to seek entry into a new discourse community. More often they are rewarded for mimicking the lecturer rather than critically engaging with her. And, as was mentioned earlier, there are many reasons for lecturers adopting this approach to assessment, not least of which is the large first-year groups and the considerable implications this has on a lecturer's time, whether in preparing innovative assessment or in marking it.

Earlier in this chapter reference was made to the importance of aligning the assessment of student learning with desired outcomes and teaching and learning approaches (3.2). Biggs (2003:269) recommends making use of an educational taxonomy to facilitate the achievement of such alignment. While he specifically refers to his SOLO taxonomy which follows on the cognitive stages of development as put forward by Piaget (Chan, Tsui, Chan & Hong 2002:513), a simple taxonomy that could be used effectively in this regard is that of Bloom (Krathwohl 2002:218). Bloom's original taxonomy was first published in 1956. At the time he identified three learning domains namely cognitive learning, psychomotor learning and affective learning, but it is the cognitive domain that is of relevance here. Through the years Bloom's Taxonomy, which has achieved recognition across the world, has been revisited and more recently revised, but the six dimensions which characterised the original version still stand, albeit that some names have been changed (Krathwohl 2002:218). The six categories in Bloom's Taxonomy moved in a hierarchical fashion from the more simple and concrete to the more complex and abstract and are reflected in Table 3.5.

**Table 3.5: Bloom's taxonomy**

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
	Evaluation	Evaluation and judgement in terms of internal evidence and external criteria
	Synthesis	Brings together parts or elements to form a whole
	Analysis	Analysis of elements, materials, etc so as to understand the relationship between the different parts within them
	Application	Apply what has been learned in new and concrete situations
	Comprehension	Understand and interpret facts and principles
	Knowledge	Remember or recollect what has been previously learned

(Adapted from: Chan, Tsui, Chan & Hong 2002; Krathwohl 2002)

The relevance of both the taxonomy and the notion of alignment between outcomes and assessment relates back to the earlier discussion on student learning and how the assessment can play a determining role in the way in which students learn. As will be seen in Chapter Six, the lecturers had very specific expectations of their students, particularly with regards to their level of academic literacy. However, the extent to which these expectations were embraced in the stated outcomes for the modules and the way in which the assessment similarly embraced the outcomes will be seen to reflect a significant non-alignment. Such non-alignment adds to the complex web that the first-year student, and particularly the under-prepared first-year student, has to try and untangle and this brings to mind another important theme that was raised in Chapter Two, namely the importance of making the conventions and expectations of the discipline clear to the students.

### **3.4.5 Making the rules explicit**

If students are to understand or even be made aware of the conventions and norms of a particular discipline, these conventions and norms need to be made explicit. The language used in the classroom should reflect the discourse of the discipline and provide for the methods “of analysis and argument appropriate to the subject, ...” (Amos & Fisher 1998:20). In studies where students were asked to assess their own work, it was clear that the students were using criteria and measures of quality that were quite different from those that were expected by the lecturer (Bock 1988). For example, the students admired writing that seemed to flow and read well, but appeared to be unaware that this same piece of writing displayed a misinterpretation of the author's stance. They also questioned the value of text that seemed to

be just a summary of what “other people had said” (Bock 1988:34). There are indications that providing an explicit definition and exposition of the ‘rules and norms’, or put differently, overtly sharing the appropriate repertoire, is often absent from the university classroom where the lecturer is working with her own definite set of undisclosed, yet assumed, expectations. Lecturers have often been members of their particular discourse communities (university, discipline, research tradition, etc.) for some time, to the extent that “the rules governing their participation have become tacit” (Lea & Street 2000:4; McKenna 2003a:64; Williams 2005:157). Other researchers, however, offer a different perspective, pointing to “an inability of university teachers to explicitly articulate or openly explore the discursive and literacy expectations of their professed discipline ... [leading to] complex and often unrecognised language and disciplinary demands, ...” (Richardson 2004:506-507). Either way, these issues all point to the potential for the linguistic misunderstanding highlighted in Chapter Two (2.2).

In a study that investigated the misunderstandings that existed between first-year students and their lecturers when it came to interpreting assessment (task) verbs, Williams (2005:162) shows that there was a considerable gap, to the extent that it required the lecturer to make a considerable alteration if assessment was to be deemed fair. This study illustrates a number of the issues that were raised in Chapter Two, and that could impact on the acquisition of academic literacy. These include the fact that students enter university with a frame of reference that has been moulded by the school system and that usually differs from what they will encounter at university, as well as the way in which the meaning of key terms and concepts can differ across disciplines. Williams’ findings provide a practical example of the discussion on the different layers of cultures and sub-cultures that exist in a university context, and the differences that exist in discourses across disciplines that was established as an underlying theme of this study in Chapter Two. Another, possibly less-expected finding was the discrepancy that existed across the interpretations provided by the four lecturers who participated in the research. Williams (2005:166) explains that two of the lecturers were senior professors while the other two lecturers were younger and provided responses that he describes as being “closer to the common-sense responses of the majority of the students”. I can attest to this from my own practice where I have encountered students who have asked that each question in the exam paper indicate which lecturer teaching on the module had set the particular question. This information, they said, would guide the way in which they formulated their response and is typical of a student adopting a strategic approach to learning.

A further rider to this was that even within their own practice, the lecturers appeared to use the same assessment verb for different types of questions within an exam, clearly not expecting the same type of response (Williams 2005:167). Many lecturers do go to some lengths to provide students with descriptive lists at the start of the course or module that are intended to explain what their expectations are of each such verb. Such an approach, however, is of little value if the student does not engage with the list and negotiate a shared understanding with the lecturer within the dominant discourse.

In Chapter Two (2.2) reference was made to the perceived gap between the lecturer's expectations and the student's understanding of what is required. This was also clear from the interviews conducted with four first-year lecturers in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences during this study. They expected students to produce work that was coherent and critical with clear argumentation and their students were told this prior to embarking on a particular assignment. What was equally clear, however, was that the lecturers felt that the students either ignored their instructions, or simply seemed incapable of applying them. Ballard and Clanchy (1988:13) argue that "few seem to recognize the problem (student's perceived 'inability') for what it is – an unsteady transition between cultures ... trying to fathom what constitutes acceptable behaviour in a new cultural context where the 'deep' rules are rarely made explicit".

In addition, we should not forget that these rules may differ from one discipline to the next and from one year to the next. Collaboration between lecturers and academic development practitioners could be beneficial in the process of ensuring overt explication of the way in which knowledge is constructed in a particular discipline. Such collaboration could be equally meaningful in curriculum renewal and classroom practice (Boughey 2005:649). However, adopting a semi-integrated approach to academic development, based on the premise that those with experience of working with under-prepared students might best be positioned to make the rules of the game explicit and help students to "first crack the basic code" (Ballard and Clanchy 1988:11), is more often the rule. By conversing with students on the extended degree programme who attended such a module, I sought to draw on their experiences as they attempted to deal with the challenges of the first year so that I could determine what may have been useful in facilitating the transition into an academic culture.

A closing comment in this section is reserved for the role that feedback on tasks, tests, examinations and assessment in general can play. Lea and Street (2000:43) pose a question as to the way in which feedback is used to encourage students to integrate specific practices into their writing, cautioning that even in the feedback discourse there is potential for misunderstanding. The messages that feedback may convey about themselves, their writing and institutional values and beliefs make for communication that is as complex and as loaded as the word 'literacy' itself (Ivanič, Clark & Rimmershaw 2000). However, I would suggest that this is one of the most crucial areas of engagement between student and lecturer or student and tutor, one that cannot be ignored.

### **3.4.6 Academic writing as the common denominator**

Throughout this review, student academic writing has served as the common denominator and most of what has been discussed is of implicit relevance to academic writing. In this section, therefore, I will briefly address some of the key issues more overtly.

The importance of writing in higher education is self-evident and most lecturers will acknowledge that "writing is a form of thinking and that sustaining arguments and synthesizing ideas" (ICAS 2002) is fundamental to a university education. When we give students a written assignment we are inviting them to join an academic conversation, says Gee (1990:142). From the perspective of a community of practice, therefore, every time students are required to write in an academic setting they are being given an opportunity to participate in the discourse. Participation in the discourse, however, requires more than just competence in the students' written language. Rather such participation is reflected in the extent to which a student demonstrates "an ability to understand relationships of visual and verbal forms in contexts of written communication"– language notwithstanding (Kern 2000:27). Boughey (2000:285) argues that the different ways in which writing is perceived covers a full spectrum of approaches. She reports on students who saw the writing they had done at school simply in terms of a medium through which they could reproduce what they had been told in the classroom. Conversely, many academics recognise, and research has shown, that the act of writing is one within which the making of meaning, and therefore learning, takes place (Boughey 2000). Writing helps to clarify our own ideas - any post-graduate student will attest to this. At first-year level, entry into a particular discourse community is acquired by learning to write an essay in that discipline (McCune 2004:257). The specificity here is again fundamental. Lea and Street (2000:41) report on students who

stated that their biggest challenge in the first-year was moving from one subject to another and “knowing how you’re meant to write in each one”. The students who participated in this study provided their own descriptions of how they approached written assignments and the problems they encountered, and these are discussed in Chapter Six.

### **3.4.7 The importance of reading**

Despite the focus in studies on academic literacy being on students’ writing practices, researchers have also explored the importance of reading in a university context. Studies show that students who have poor reading skills seldom achieve academic success (Pretorius 2005). Although Niven (2005:778) postulates that “academic reading is pre-eminent: it precedes academic writing and determines its depth and quality”, her study found that students seldom employed reading strategies that would ensure the sort of comprehension that is aligned with the required level of learning. When lecturers’ reading frames are explored, there is a marked and significant gap between lecturer expectation and student realities, as was suggested earlier in this chapter. Niven (2005:783) describes how first-year students are, from early on in their academic careers, “expected to become self-directed, reflective readers, driven by personal interest, independently locating a wide range of relevant reading materials”. However, the students in her study were most often not reading in their own language and thus “the struggle for basic, textual comprehension” rather than deeper meaning, was often a survival strategy. They frequently referred to being able to pronounce the word correctly while missing textual clues and gave intuitive answers instead of drawing answers from the information provided. Thus, they displayed a tendency “of interpreting text content to confirm to prior knowledge, giving an opinion rather than generating an inference” (Niven 2005:783), and this meant that the opportunity was lost for learning through attending to textual information that would enable them to construct meaning more accurately during reading.

It is necessary to reflect on the interdependence that exists between reading and writing. It would appear that research to explore the connections between reading and writing has burgeoned during the last fifteen years to the extent to which Ferris and Hedgcock (2005:35) describe it as having become a focal point of research pertaining to literacy. In summarising some of this research, the two authors list “the construction of meaning, the development of complex cognitive and linguistic skills, the activation of existing knowledge and past experience, and the ability to solve problems to control thinking” (Ferris & Hedgcock

2005:36) as being integral to reading and writing. It is also interesting to note that the body of research that Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) discuss in their book also considers the potential for transfer of students' reading and writing skills from L1 to L2 and that there appear to be some contradictions in the findings. There does, for example, appear to be a difference between the potential for "interlingual transfer" from L1 to L2 for reading as opposed to writing which highlights "the complex interaction among factors underlying linguistic proficiency and literacy skills ..." (Ferris & Hedgcock 2005:38). Thus they caution that while for L1 students it is likely that good readers tend to be good writers, and good writers usually display more regular and more sophisticated reading patterns, the transfer to L2 should not be assumed too readily. Although only a small percentage of the students who participated in this study are L2 students (see Chapter Five for a detailed description of the respondents and the case as a whole), the multilingual context at Stellenbosch University that will be described in Chapter Four (4.4) makes this discussion relevant.

It is clear, therefore, that the importance of reading at university, particularly in the Humanities – the site for this study – cannot be overemphasised. Most of the students who seek out my assistance at the Centre for Teaching and Learning speak despairingly of the texts that they are expected to 'read for comprehension' that seem to be out of reach because of the sheer volume, the complexity and the foreignness of the discourse. As was noted in Chapter One, the way in which students on an Extended Degree Programme respond to the academic reading (and writing) demands that they encounter during their first-year is one of the key foci of this study.

### **3.4.8 Beyond writing and reading**

As was mentioned in Chapter Two (2.5.2), one cannot ignore the importance of adopting a multimodal approach to academic literacy acquisition as we head towards the end of the first decade in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the impact of technology on university teaching and learning and the growth of e-learning in this area is not addressed in this thesis, there are some who argue that research into academic literacy overemphasises importance of writing, and that there should be greater awareness of the different modes, particularly the visual, in which scientific discourse can be realised (Archer 2006:457). In a discussion such as this where teaching practice is being reviewed through an academic literacy lens, cognisance needs to be taken of the potential that inculcating a multimodal approach into one's curriculum can have on advancing academic literacy, particularly among a diverse student

population such as characterises higher education today (Archer 2006:460). Similarly, as the size of first-year classes continues to grow, often making opportunities for face-to-face engagement and oral communication more complex from a logistical and sustainable perspective, the potential for adopting such an approach is equally pertinent.

### **3.4.9 Student identity**

A sub-theme throughout this review of the literature has been that of student identities, their agency and their position in the power relationships that characterise higher education. The identities that students bring with them when they enter university have, depending on the perspective, been seen to be both a hindrance and an enabler to their success. It can be a hindrance when it is at odds with what is deemed to be ‘appropriate’ with the ‘academic way of doing things’, and an enabler when “one makes use of established ‘available designs’ for particular, personal purposes, but in so doing one effectively ‘redesigns’ them” (Kern 2000 citing the New London Group 1996). The way in which some of the approaches to academic literacy appear to negate student identity on the one hand, while desiring to embrace it on the other, has been described earlier in this chapter. The fact that it is deemed to be core to discourse and by implication, academic literacy, validates its importance in this study and there is a sense that in negotiating multiple, often conflicting, literacy practices, students are required to adapt existing identities or adopt new ones if they are to participate effectively in the discourse community.

Identity, as interpreted in this study, is seen as comprising “an individual or group’s conceptions of the past and the present, as well as their aspirations for the future” and will, therefore, vary from context to context (Leibowitz, Adendorff, Daniels, Loots, Nakasa, Ngxabazi, Van der Merwe & Van Deventer 2005:25). It is this identity that is at the core of the choices a (student) writer makes, but, says Leibowitz (2001:26) “[t]hese choices are often subconscious, made in the tension between writers’ current affiliation, allegiances and sense of self, and their sense of what will be in their best interests in the social context in which they are writing”. And it is in that ‘sense of self’ and the student’s agency or human capability, which Walker (2006:4) describes as “the realised capacity ... to act upon their world ... to act purposively and reflectively ...”, that the key to student engagement and learning lies – even within an unequal relationship. Walker (2006:7) cites Ranson who when describing deep learning suggests that it takes “effort and time and requires an agentic motivation to learn, grounded in the view that such learning has a purpose”. Fundamental to

such an attitude to learning, however, is a learner who is confident and secure about his or her identity. This approach to learning holds particular implications for this study. The students placed on the Extended Degree Programme are selected precisely because they have had limited success at school yet their identities as learners, as will be seen, were quite diverse. Creating opportunities for engagement, facilitating participation, crafting significant curricula that will strengthen agency in diversity and give students a voice is the challenge that is to be faced.

### **3.4.10 Summary**

In Chapter Two the dynamic nature of academic literacy was emphasised on more than one occasion, and the impact of such fluidity is that it complicates description and analysis, requiring ongoing critical review. Practice requires similar critical review. In this section a number of different issues relating to teaching and learning have been highlighted from a practical perspective through the lens of academic literacy acquisition. The importance of considering practical application cannot be underestimated and internationally there are examples of funding being provided to investigate these issues. This research is now not only feeding back into the ever-evolving debate described in the previous chapter around what academic literacy is, but also into how it should be addressed (Lea & Street 1998). Ultimately, however, it must be emphasised that despite the collaborative nature of education that has been described in this chapter, students must take responsibility for their own learning (ICAS 2002).

### **3.5 Contradictions in practice**

Earlier in this chapter, the notion of collaboration between the discipline expert and the academic development practitioner was mooted as one possible approach in avoiding ‘linguistic misunderstandings’ between student and teacher. Boughey (2000:289) shares her experiences in working alongside a mainstream lecturer in an attempt to make the conventions of academic literacy clearer to students “by making space for discussion on what constitutes ‘good’ learning and writing within the academy as a whole and within the discipline ... in particular”. The approaches and endeavours she describes mirror much of the good practice that has been discussed in the previous sections. Yet, as a reflective practitioner, she ponders on whether in so doing she may “be accused of colluding in assimilating students into dominant discourses” (Boughey 2000:289). Her dilemma resonates

with my own experience, and to this end I have sought to emphasise the student's responsibility in making the appropriate choices, and to highlight the importance of a critical literacy that will lead students to question and critique what they encounter at the university. Nevertheless, my experience of teaching first-year students, both at a university and a technikon, and more recently my work in academic development, makes me cautious and I question the agency or capability of some of these students in carving out their own path. Like Boughey (2000:289), therefore, I find some consolation in the knowledge that my work might give some students a better chance of success at university, but recognise my responsibility in making them aware of the ideological notions that reside in the conventions of the knowledge community and that I may, through my work, be serving the ongoing legitimising thereof.

Wenger (2000:230) cautions that communities of practice “are born of learning, but they can also learn not to learn. They are the cradles of the human spirit, but they can also be its cages”. In the South African context where the widening of access to higher education is a nation-building imperative, practitioners have to be vigilant to ensure that their institutions do not become instrumental in establishing unnecessary boundaries.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter academic literacy in practice has been reviewed. The chapter commenced with a brief exposition of the theory on the different student learning approaches, in which student learning as core to the acquisition of academic literacy was described. Thereafter a number of different models and approaches that have been implemented in South Africa over the past two decades were discussed. This was followed by an overview of the key themes or concepts that emerged from the different theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter Two. The chapter closed with some reflection on the contradictions that are implicit in seeking to effect in practice what the theory puts forth.

It has been said that “academic literacy is an institutional obligation” (ICAS 2002:35) and in this review there has been some implicit, even at times overt, critique of the current practice among university teachers and the institutions they represent in addressing such an ‘obligation’. This, argue Lea and Stierer (2000:5), is an issue that “bedevils education research at all levels”. It has not been my intention to offer a criticism of individual lecturers,

but rather to offer a critical review of examples of prevailing trends. On a daily basis I work with dedicated, innovative and incredibly hard-working academics whose teaching is, for them, of fundamental importance, and as a fellow colleague I am acutely aware of the national and institutional imperatives which define the space within which we all must work.

By entering higher education, students “gain the ability to participate in prestigious and powerful knowledge communities” which gives them “intellectual” and “social power” (Northedge 2003a:22) and this can have a significant impact on the future of a country. Perhaps herein lies the obligation. Having insight into how they negotiate their entry into such knowledge communities can provide both academic development practitioners and academics with equally powerful levers that could facilitate the crossing of discourse boundaries and the acquisition of academic literacy.

This review of the body of knowledge that currently characterises the field of academic literacy has, thus far, been punctuated by suggestions that the acquisition of academic literacy may be a more complex process for some than for others, particularly those who for one reason or another have been deemed ‘under-prepared’ for university studies. In the chapter that follows the different perspectives on being classified in this manner and the context within which this study has been undertaken will be explored.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **UNDER-PREPAREDNESS AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY**

*The identity effect is that working class students, students with no family history of higher education, and students from cultural backgrounds different from that which dominates a university are less likely to enter higher education equipped with the cultural and linguistic capital which higher education pedagogies take for granted.*

Walker 2006:2

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In the introductory chapter of this thesis I highlighted the poor success rates among first-year students that currently characterises the higher education sector in South Africa. I also made mention of the multiple, often dissenting, voices that can be heard when the issue of a student being ‘under-prepared’ for higher education is raised. The role that academic literacy plays in perceptions surrounding ‘under-preparedness’ was also briefly introduced. In Chapter Two and Chapter Three academic literacy was explored in some depth and its relationship with student learning was discussed. In Chapter Four the notion of a student being under-prepared for university studies will be addressed as I highlight some of the current thinking around first-year success internationally and specifically in South Africa. The chapter then moves on to describe the context within which this study has been undertaken and to delineate the niche area for this research. Thus the focus of this chapter, as has been the intention in the previous two, is to fulfil the requirements of the traditional literature review (Henning 2004).

Before I commence, however, it is necessary to emphasise that my labelling of students as ‘under-prepared’, or any other synonym that may be applied in this thesis, is not meant to be insensitive nor derogatory. It is of paramount importance that the higher education sector both internationally and in South Africa face, address and monitor the current realities that see increasing numbers of differently prepared students, many of whom will have come through a disadvantaged education system, to embark on post-school studies (Claassen 1998; Fraser & Killen 2005; Scott 2006). In order to do this, studies such as the one described in this dissertation are both necessary and desirable. Whether reference is made to ‘under-prepared’ (Grimes 1997; Boughey 2002) ‘at-risk’ (Claassen 1998; Eiselen & Geysers 2003; Maloney 2003), ‘unprepared’ (Troskie-De Bruin 1999), ‘non-mainstream’ (Niven 2005), ‘non-traditional’ (Northedge 2003a; Warren 2002) ‘educationally disadvantaged’ (De Boer & van Aardt 1998), ‘underserved’ (National Center for Academic Transformation) and so forth,

the categorisation remains an uncomfortable one. In addition, the terms, although often used interchangeably, carry different connotations in different environments and contexts. I hope that the need for applying these terms will be condoned in the interests of research. Therefore, although the term will not be placed within inverted commas from hereon, my hesitancy in bracketing students in this manner should be understood.

## **4.2 A historical perspective**

Given that over the past two decades higher education has been characterised by significant change, it is impossible to conduct a meaningful discussion on under-preparedness among first-year students without placing it within a historical context. In this section, therefore, a brief overview of the dominant forces in higher education during this period will be provided.

### **4.2.1 Higher education in flux**

It is common knowledge that the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were characterised by a period of unprecedented change. Widening participation in higher education has become a common goal across Europe, the United Kingdom and OECD countries, and has led to significant growth in student numbers (Archer 2005:21). In the United Kingdom, the participation rate in higher education has risen over a twenty-year period from 12 to 44 per cent (Reay, David & Ball 2005:ix). This increase has not, typically, been accompanied by a corresponding increase in resources, with many having to do more with less (Reid & Johnston 1999; Hubball & Burt 2004). In some countries, for example Australia, widening participation has not only seen an increase in numbers, but also a significant increase in the enrolments of foreign students (Asmar 2005). This in itself has added to the existing tension of having to deal with greater numbers and larger classes with reduced resources, as the influx of foreign students is seen as a threat to “traditional institutional values and practices” (Asmar 2005:11). The impact of globalisation and the resulting massification and internationalisation (often referred to as the ‘Big Three’ (Breier 2001)) on higher education is no longer up for question. Consequently, recent researchers in this field have turned their focus to the effects of this phenomenon, particularly in paving the way for knowledge to become the new currency easily available to the masses (Troskie-De Bruin 1999; Barnett 2000; Giddens 2000). Some describe how universities have been forced to shed their elitist mantle and open their doors to a diversity of students – a diversity that goes far beyond race, gender and culture to include “age and physical traits, sexual

orientation, ethnic and religious background, socio-economic status, birthplace and hometown, social and political affiliations, seniority and experience, education and training and so forth” (Cross 2004:391).

The opening up of access *per se*, however, is only half the story and scarcely hints at the challenges that this has brought. Barnett (2000:255), writing of what he terms the “supercomplexity” of the current age, alludes to a number of external influences, such as the growing student market and employer interests, which may influence the crafting of curricula to focus on the development of skills. Barnett (2000) questions whether this will encourage the development of “human qualities” that this complex age will require. In addition, there is a sense that even as universities are being required to transform, the mass system of higher education is “neither equal nor common to all” (Reay *et al.* 2005:iiv). Northedge picks up on this theme noting the phenomenal growth and diversification of the student body, but suggesting that little has been done to fully integrate this diverse group, many of whom are rather “treated as ‘charity’ cases to be rescued from ignorance” (Northedge 2003a:17).

Of particular relevance to this study is the impact that globalisation has had on the ‘literacies’ that not only are used in everyday life, but also in academe. The growth in multilingual and culturally diverse societies, together with the exponential growth in new technologies and media, has foregrounded the “many different ways in which people make shared meaning” (Johnson & Kress 2003:5). Although the idea of multiple literacies was raised in the previous two chapters, it is useful to see the link from the broader higher education perspective as well. Worldwide universities are being challenged to do things differently, to move away from traditional approaches to teaching and to consider activities that previously might not have been deemed appropriate to higher education (Johnson & Kress 2003, Northedge 2003a, Reay *et al.* 2005). Johnson and Kress (2003:6) for example speak of how the diversity that has come to characterise higher education has brought with it “different ways of knowing and different ways of doing” that have the potential “to transform and re-create” approaches to, in their case, language learning.

Globalisation, massification and internationalisation have not been the only drivers of change in higher education. While Breier (2001:2) includes them in her list of “international concerns in higher education”, she adds several more, such as responsiveness, disciplinarity, lifelong learning, graduateness, citizenship, freedom and accountability, and distance education, as

well as the recognition of different forms of knowledge and knowledge creation. The particular issue of different forms of knowledge and different ways of making meaning lies behind international moves towards student-centred education (Barr & Tagg 1995). Although Breier (2001) reflects on the impact of each of these concerns for higher education from a curriculum perspective, their influence reaches a far broader audience. Across the world, higher education institutions have been confronted with these concerns, which in South Africa have added to the complex political and transformational agendas that characterise the post-apartheid era.

#### **4.2.2 Post-apartheid realities**

The racial divisions on which the schooling system was based prior to 1994 resulted in considerable inequity in terms of provision, resources and level (McKinney & van Pletzen 2004; Williams 2005). In the university sector, similar inequity was observed and even though parity in funding had all but been achieved by 1994, the categorisation of some universities as previously ‘advantaged’ and others ‘disadvantaged’ held firm, as it still does, to some extent, today. A further stratifying aspect could be observed in the distinction between universities and what were previously known as ‘technikons’, the latter providing for a more practical, skills-based training which could be entered into without a matriculation exemption. For many black students who did not obtain the requisite Grade 12 results, the technikon route was more accessible. Inevitably, when the new dispensation was ushered in, the key focus was on redressing the many imbalances in the education system, to provide for an equitable learning experience for all learners and students alike (Boughey 2004).

##### **4.2.2.1 Reform at school level**

Massive curriculum reform at school level was embarked on early in the new democracy, which culminated in the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) being implemented systematically from early 2000 only to be withdrawn shortly thereafter. After substantial revision, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) was released in 2003 and implemented over a period of time such that the first cohort from this curriculum will only be eligible for university in 2009. However, the cohort that is the focus of this study, students who wrote the national Grade 12 exams in 2005, experienced the impact of the implementation of the NCS that was later sidelined. This means that most of them probably followed the ‘new’ curriculum in Grade 7, 8 and 9, which was set within an outcomes-based paradigm, only to return to the traditional curriculum for Grades 10, 11 and 12. One can

speculate as to the impact, if any, that this might have had on students' learning, especially as it is known that in many under-resourced schools the implementation of the NCS never really got going. The 2006 cohort was the first group of school-leavers to have spent almost their entire schooling, short of a few months, under the new dispensation.

What is of importance is that while schools and their teachers were being shunted from pillar to post, Grade 12 results started to reflect a remarkable upward curve, such that by 2006, almost 40% of all first-year students entering Stellenbosch University did so with an aggregate of over 80% - as opposed to just over 32% five years earlier (Stellenbosch University 2007c). As will be seen from the retention rates discussed below (4.4.1) however, rather than indicating an improvement in the school system, the increase in Grade 12 results would appear to reflect an artificial inflation. It is thus sad but true that, despite considerable efforts on the part of some in government and many other interested parties, the situation in many schools across the country, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, is still far from optimum (Singh 2005; Essack & Quayle 2007; Vandeyar & Killen 2007).

#### **4.2.2.2 Higher education's mandate**

In the years since 1994, a number of key legislation and positioning documents have served to address education in general. These include the White Paper on Education and Training in 1995, which was to pave the way for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and which in turn led to the setting up of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to implement the NQF. Of equal significance for higher education was the promulgation of the Higher Education Act in 1997, which resulted in the establishment of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (Strydom & Hay 2001). These two bodies are responsible for the quality assurance function, which is addressed in more detail below. Finally, in 2001, the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) was published. This document outlines "the framework and mechanisms for implementing and realising the policy goals of the White Paper" and thereby provided "the strategic framework for re-engineering the higher education system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Department of Education 2001:1).

The NPHE incorporated a number of proposals and recommendations relevant to this study. Apart from declaring, as an over-riding principle, the intention of developing a higher education system that would "promote equity of access and fair chances of success to all ...

while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities” (Department of Education 2001:10), it included a proposal to increase the participation in higher education from 15% to 20%. Such a shift was to be brought about by “addressing the underlying factors that contribute to low graduation rates” (Department of Education 2001:5) among others. Of relevance is the fact that although the promotion of equity and social justice within the education and higher education system was born out of the political change that took place in South Africa during the early 1990s, a focus on similar values, or “popular notions of ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘equality’” (Archer 2005:21), has also emerged elsewhere in the world. In describing the current status of the widening participation agenda in the United Kingdom, Archer (2005:22) suggests the underlying rationale is one that seeks to promote social inclusion by means of inclusion in the educational system, and is thus similar to the South African directive. The success of these approaches, however, remains difficult to appraise, particularly when the context, the terminology and the understandings “are always under erasure and constantly changing” (Archer 2005:32) and, in South Africa, the country still faces many unresolved challenges (Essack & Quayle 2007). For this reason, ongoing research, such as the study described in this thesis, is important.

To support the South African government’s higher education objectives, commitment was made to fund academic development programmes, which has subsequently been realised, although not in the way initially envisaged in the Plan. Although the envisaged funding of academic development programmes as an “integral component of the new funding formula” (Department of Education 2001:5) did not happen, considerable ear-marked funding has been made available over the past four years.

In 2004, the Department of Education sent out a call to all higher education institutions requesting them to submit proposals for a portion of approximately R90 million that would be made available for academic development programmes over a three-year cycle. The criteria for this funding were not particularly restrictive, but did indicate that money would not be made available for ad hoc-type additional tutorial or mentor programmes, and that the focus would be on programmes that contributed towards a qualification. Other criteria included the fact that the money could not be used for large capital expenses or for providing bursaries or loans to students. In 2006, the funding criteria were tightened significantly. Over and above the criteria of the previous rounds, the DoE now determined that foundational provision

within extended degree programmes would comprise a specified HEMIS<sup>10</sup> credit value and thus form an integral part of the formal programme (as approved by the Minister). Foundational provision was defined as “the offering of modules, courses or other curricular elements that are intended to equip under-prepared students with academic foundations that will enable them to successfully complete a higher education qualification” (Department of Education 2006). It was clear from the document that the Department was committed to funding meaningful interventions, as it went to some length to define its understanding of the different components that might comprise an extended degree programme and provided examples of and recommendations for ways of designing such a programme.

The second three-year funding cycle (during which approximately R380 million will be allocated) commenced in April 2007 and has provided considerable impetus to the ongoing academic development practitioners on campuses across the country, and also at Stellenbosch University, where the funding has also facilitated an opportunity for review of curricula and classroom practice. In addition to the grants described above, designated funding has also been made available to support the higher education system in different ways, such as funding to support greater numbers of graduates in engineering and teaching. In addition, the government sponsored NSFAS<sup>11</sup> bursary scheme, which specifically targets students from previously disadvantaged communities, continues to make considerable funds available on an annual basis. In 2005 more than R1.2 billion was ploughed into the higher education system via this scheme.

While the financial support provided by the government is significant and indicative of its commitment to redress, it should be noted that the trend of supporting interventions aimed at widening participation in higher education is also prevalent in other countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, current government-sponsored programmes to encourage student enrolments include *Aim Higher*, focusing on young working class people, and *Aiming High*, which directs attention to minority ethnic groups (Archer 2005:21). Archer (2005:33) notes that facilitating wider participation in higher education is a costly exercise and, I would add, a complex one. In my experience, having served as my institution’s contact with the Department of Education for Foundation Programmes (including the Extended Degree Programmes) I have at times experienced a tension between meeting government-specified

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<sup>10</sup> HEMIS refers to the Higher Education Management Information System in South Africa.

<sup>11</sup> National Student Funding Association

criteria, ensuring faculty buy-in and providing the best teaching and learning experience for the students. Balancing the need for financial support against what could be perceived as a mechanical approach to meeting students' needs, is not always a welcome task. Nevertheless, as South Africa seeks to make progress in addressing issues of social inequality through the education and higher education sectors, the challenge of sustaining and increasing funding and ensuring their effective allocation, is paramount.

Higher education in South Africa has itself been given a particular mandate in terms of addressing the social inequities of the past and in providing the human resources needed to make South Africa an economically viable nation (Department of Education 2001). However, as Troskie-De Bruin (1999:158-159) points out, there are constraints. Firstly, there is the "traditional, elitist British model", the premise on which most South African universities function and within which notions of mass education for a diverse student body sit uncomfortably. And secondly, there is a prevailing trend at universities to rate research above teaching. This means that many academics are forced to prioritise publication above teaching innovation, which is usually time-consuming. Also significant are the goals that have been set for the higher education sector which focus on quality and quality assurance. Quality can become a complex concept, particularly in higher education, as the term is subjective and open to interpretation, even when standards are set, such as those provided for within the NQF. Dictionary definitions suggest notions of excellence that are linked to something that has a "quality of being better than most" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2003:539), but Troskie-De Bruin (1999:20) suggests "[i]n the higher education context quality would depend on the standard or criteria set by an institution". Thus the way in which an institution sees its purpose and values its teaching and learning will fundamentally influence the criteria it sets for quality. SAQA's (1994:4) vision of "enhancing the quality of education and training ... thereby contributing to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large" attests to these binary objectives. Similarly, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in their *Framework for programme accreditation document* (2004:6) state that the

... quality related goals facing the South African higher education sector included increased access and equity opportunities for previously marginalised groups ...; greater responsiveness to local, regional and national needs in and through teaching and research; improved institution efficiencies, leading to increased throughput, retention and graduation rates.

In this instance, quality is viewed through a transformational lens which at times may be at loggerheads with the notions of excellence that are found in the mission statements of many universities today. Within this quality context, universities have been tasked with expanding access and providing a more equitable offering to an increasingly diverse student body while facilitating student success as personified in improved throughput rates and retention figures at the same time. Yet, it is problematic to simply view quality in these quantitative terms, particularly when academic development has, as a basic premise, the development of the whole student. Indeed, in the profile of the Stellenbosch University graduate, reference is made to a developed and cultivated person “whose potential is unlocked in a balanced manner to the maximum profundity and depth” (Stellenbosch University 2001). Troskie-De Bruin (1999:27) suggests that “from a quality perspective within a developmental approach academic achievement is only one of a range of student outcomes which signifies success”. This is one of the reasons why, in this study, the data relating to retention and results of the EDP students is provided as context and it is the student and lecturer responses that are foregrounded.

In recent years the landscape of higher education in South Africa has been dramatically altered on a macro level, involving the merging of a number of institutions and the repositioning of technikons. These changes, which were first alluded to in the Education White Paper 3, were given shape in the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education 2001:71). They aimed at addressing issues of duplication and redundancy, and resulted in the establishment of three types of institutions, namely universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology. However, the changes on the ground, at the micro level, are more the focus of this study. In South Africa, the process of the massification of higher education has been further fuelled by the political transformation agendas that have sought to provide access for students from previously disadvantaged communities. Responding to these imperatives is the challenge that this sector now faces.

### **4.3 Under-preparedness**

Taken at face value, the term under-prepared is usually seen to imply that a student, for some reason or another, does not have what he or she would realistically need to be successful at university. Most often, such under-preparedness manifests itself during the first year of study, where students flounder and drop out simply because they do not appear to be equipped to

meet the demands of tertiary education. Such a definition presents a particular tension for academic development practitioners as it borders dangerously on the deficit model that has been so vociferously critiqued in the previous chapters. But, argue Woollacott and Henning (2004:3), often such under-preparedness serves to hide the student's real potential. If we accept that the schooling system in South Africa is still not yet in a position to provide equal opportunities and access to learning for all students, then we have to accept that there will be an inequity in terms of the students who enter higher education from this diverse offering (Troskie-De Bruin 1999:169). Higher education institutions cannot simply ignore their responsibility of educating the nation and there is an increased awareness of this responsibility in most institutions (Troskie-De Bruin 1999; Fraser & Killen 2005). Fraser and Killen (2005:26) suggest that such awareness is critical arguing that to "knowingly admit students who ... have no chance of academic success would be immoral. To admit students who have the potential to succeed and then treat them in ways that do not allow them to realise that potential would be equally immoral". Yet Boughey (2004:3) argues that in many universities in South Africa, little has been done to effect curriculum renewal or to adapt teaching practices that were based on the premise of a high-achieving, linguistically and culturally homogenous student group. My own experience is that while the awareness that Troskie-De Bruin wrote of eight years ago is still prevalent, I would concur with Boughey's observation, acknowledging (as mentioned in Chapter Three) the many real challenges that present themselves if such transformational intent is to be operationalised. Northedge (2003a:17) implies something similar when he questions whether it is possible "to meet the needs of non-traditional students, whilst preserving intellectual standard and stretching the capabilities of more traditional students".

At this point it is important to pre-empt two possible misconceptions: firstly, that under-preparedness is restricted to the South African context – which it is not (Fraser & Killen 2005) – and secondly, that it is only students who have had a poor schooling who struggle in the first-year. The impact of globalisation on higher education and the resultant "radical diversification of students" (Northedge 2003a:17) is attested to by researchers from the UK, the USA and Australia (Grimes 1997; Maloney 2003; Fitzgerald 2004) as well as by many of those whose work has been cited in Chapter Two and Chapter Three and was alluded to in the earlier section of this chapter. An equally large body of research highlights the work done world-wide to facilitate first-year integration, e.g. The First-year Experience (see University of South Carolina 2007) emphasising the role that such interventions play in providing for

early and appropriate adjustment to university life and, in so doing, avoid having large numbers of students struggling to adapt (Grayson 2003; Barnett 2006). In addition, the analysis of the results in Chapter Six will show that many of the students who are placed on the Extended Degree Programme, as a result of being deemed under-prepared, have attended schools that in the South African context would be regarded as ‘advantaged’.

In South Africa, the massification of higher education has been accompanied by a strong political agenda that provided for “a deliberate attempt to broaden participation in higher education as one means of reducing the highly stratified race and class structure of the country” (Fraser & Killen 2005:26). De Boer and Van Rensburg (1997:159), in discussing the status of enrolments and the profile of matriculated students in the late 1990s, suggested that “under-prepared students and African culture are interwoven with the apartheid era”. This has led to students entering higher education not only with differences in academic ability, but also demonstrating considerable social, economic and cultural differences as well (Troskie-De Bruin 1999; Fraser & Killen 2005). Any first-year student has to adapt to university life, both in and out of the classroom. An under-prepared student who arrives without the ability to adapt relatively easily is going to require some sort of support intervention if they are to reach their full potential (Scott 2006).

A particular group of students that has not yet received specific attention in the discussion thus far are those who represent the first generation in their families to attend university. For these students there is no familiarity with university life and demands; their parents cannot provide a perspective of what they are to encounter, and this distinguishes them in significant ways from their fellow first-year students (Penrose 2002). In summarising some of the body of research relating to the experiences of first-generation students, Penrose (2002) has noted that these students typically are less-prepared academically, have limited support from their respective communities, and are at high-risk for dropping out. A recent study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (2006) found this to be true within the Stellenbosch University context, where an analysis of students leaving the university without completing their studies successfully showed that this group has a higher proportion of first-generation students. Of interest, however, is that the results of the Penrose study among first-generation students highlights the importance of self-perception, which she suggests emphasises how important it is for students to be given the opportunity to develop their identities as “members of academic communities” (Penrose 2002:437).

It is clear from the discussion above that under-preparedness has to do with more than content knowledge and skills such as study methods, effective note taking, and reading and writing skills. In listing what this “more” might refer to, Troskie-De Bruin (1999:40) highlights aspects such as “an understanding of process underlying academic activities; students’ use of cognitive and metacognitive skills, their level of information literacy, and whether the student has an inquisitive, critical mind and a positive attitude towards learning”. This list echoes Kern’s discussion on literacy that was explored in Chapter Two (2.3.4). Rossouw and Brender (2004:A33) speak of universities in South Africa “being forced to enrol under-prepared students because the high number of high-school graduates who qualify for university admission has declined dramatically in the past decade”. This damning report continues by suggesting that universities are accepting these students so that they can meet the targets set by government and to generate subsidies. More recent revisions in the subsidy structures for higher education institutions, however, emphasise retention and successful throughput which necessitates revisiting any practice that sees students being accepted without any real consideration of their potential for success. Bitzer (2005:580) however reminds us that simply adhering to a philosophy whereby students who have the necessary “talents and skills to ‘survive’ would succeed and the others would consider other education possibilities ... is no longer appropriate”, and an approach that “accommodates increased student diversity and considers processes that contribute to holistic student development”, is necessary. Inevitably such diversity is seen in terms of the implicit knowledge currency with which the student enters university. The value that the university, often personified in the first-year lecturer, places on the knowledge with which the student enters university has much to do with the extent to which she or he is perceived to be prepared or not.

#### **4.3.1 Factors influencing student success**

To flesh out the different factors that may contribute to a student being perceived as under-prepared on entry to university, on the one hand, and that can impact on her success during the first-year, on the other hand, is complex. At what point is the student under-prepared? Fraser and Killen (2005:27) distinguish between what they refer to as pre- and post-enrolment factors that contribute to academic success, suggesting that a specific focus on the latter is of relevance to higher education. They summarise “interest in the course, motivation, self-discipline and effort” as being the most significant factors, which, as they point out, are characteristics that cannot be determined from matriculation results. While Fraser and Killen put forward a seemingly logical argument, it cannot be accepted uncontested. Across the

world, school-leaving results serve as benchmarks for access to higher education and in South Africa the Grade 12 National Senior Certificate results are used at most institutions for this purpose. In addition, ten years of tracking data at Stellenbosch University offer some insight into this matter as it serves to highlight the predictive value of this ‘pre-enrolment’ variable (<http://www.sun.ac.za/trackwell/retensie/analy1.htm>). Details of the first-year cohort at Stellenbosch University in this regard are provided later in this chapter (4.4.3).

Success itself is a moving target and there are many different perceptions and degrees of success that are determined by personal objectives and defined by the society around one (Troskie-De Bruin 1999:26). During 2006, a task team was appointed at Stellenbosch University to investigate ways in which first-year student success might be enhanced. The reasons for this initiative and the subsequent findings of the task team will be discussed later in this chapter, but the compilation of variables affecting student success that was included in their report and that was based on the research that they conducted and commissioned, contributes to this discussion.

The findings of the task team can be summarised as follows:

**Table 4.1: Variables that may impact on student success**

Variable	Factors
Academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The transition from school to a higher education institution</li> <li>▪ Inappropriate career choices as a result of inadequate information</li> <li>▪ Unequal preparation at school level</li> <li>▪ Poor class attendance, a poor work ethic</li> <li>▪ Under-estimation of what is to be expected at university</li> <li>▪ Lack of time management and study skills</li> <li>▪ Language of instruction</li> <li>▪ Examination and assessment expectations</li> <li>▪ Quality of teaching</li> <li>▪ Academic support systems</li> <li>▪ Computer support is also important.</li> </ul>
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adapting to the new environment</li> <li>▪ Failed personal relationships</li> <li>▪ Unable to cope appropriately with sudden freedom</li> <li>▪ Difficult home circumstances (finances, recent divorce, etc.)</li> <li>▪ Qualities such as self-discipline, a sense of responsibility, motivation, dedication and perseverance.</li> </ul>
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stress and depression</li> <li>▪ Other health factors.</li> </ul>
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Students who have to work to support their studies</li> <li>▪ Concerns about being unable to pay fees - can also motivate students to work harder in order to pass.</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Substance dependence</li> <li>▪ Too much socialising</li> <li>▪ Involvement in too many non-academic activities</li> <li>▪ A poor learning culture in residences</li> <li>▪ Students who feel alone and isolated, with no support network.</li> </ul>
Accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Commuter students travelling by train or in lift clubs can face academic disadvantages, particularly where tests and examinations are written in the evening</li> <li>▪ Optimal access to learning and other resources may not be available to commuter students</li> <li>▪ Residential students experience the support they receive in the residences positively, but social activities in residences can be a problem.</li> </ul>
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Minority groups may feel isolated and alienated.</li> </ul>

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2006b)

The order reflected in the list (from academic through to cultural) ranks the variables based largely on the findings of the task team, and should be seen as specific to the Stellenbosch University context where, for example, the majority of students reside in Stellenbosch (thus a smaller commuter group), and where (as shall be seen later in this chapter) there is a single

dominant group (white, Afrikaans-speaking) particularly at undergraduate level. The list was influenced by the work of Tinto (1997) and provides an alternative perspective to the one provided by Fraser and Killen given earlier. Thus there is a sense that even factors such as persistence and motivation need to be weighed up against the realities of possibly feeling ostracised because a student is from a minority group, or has financial problems, and so forth.

Others have also produced similar summaries of factors that may lead to students dropping out of university. Eiselen and Geyser (2003:119) for example, draw on a number of studies for the following list:

- Poor academic results prior to entering university
- Biographical variables (age, race and gender)
- Financial and family problems
- Not having clear goals
- Inefficient study skills
- Institutional variables, such as the behaviour of the lecturer, the number of students enrolled and student support services
- Poor social integration.

Eiselen and Geyser (2003) do not make any reference to ranking or order of importance in their summary, but they do suggest that most often institutional and local realities need to be taken into account (as was alluded to above when emphasising the Stellenbosch University context) when seeking to clearly discern the variables that would impact on student retention.

The report of the Stellenbosch University task team highlighted factors such as motivation and self-discipline that speak to student persistence, which is another determinant often cited when discussing student success (Tinto 1997; Troskie-De Bruin 1999). Such persistence, however, is often dependent on, and fuelled by, the extent to which goals set by the student are achieved. The discussion in Chapter Three on student agency has relevance here, and again flags the importance of the fundamental role in learning and knowledge creation played by a student's self-belief. In addition, the value of providing opportunities for developing a shared understanding of objectives is self-evident.

It is interesting that while many researchers have attested to the importance of academic literacy in academic success (1.1), this is absent in Table 4.1. In fairness, however, the broad context of the work of the task team should be noted, whereas for the purpose of this study,

the academic issues relating to academic success receive closer attention. In their attempt to discern the nature of under-preparedness, Woollacott and Henning (2004:3) describe three different aspects that are of relevance. These are a focus on academic literacy, “the lack of sophistication or deficiencies in a student’s cognitive functioning”, and a need to address issues relating to study skills, note-taking, preparing for lectures and tutorials, appropriate motivation and approaches to learning, which they group under ‘academic proficiency’. Although these researchers provide an over-arching term, namely ‘academic competency’, for the three approaches they describe, they do not appear to subscribe to the argument that was made in the previous chapters highlighting the complex relationship between learning, cognitive functioning and academic literacy. Nevertheless, Woollacott and Henning’s rationale appears to be supported by a quantitative study that was conducted by Eiselen and Geyser (2003) in which they compared achiever and at-risk students. They investigated four areas that are aligned to those of Woollacott and Henning, namely study methods, academic records, language proficiency and cognitive ability, finding in each case a significant difference between the two groups.

It is important to also consider how being under-prepared might manifest itself. Students may, for example, demonstrate inappropriate reading strategies, ignoring diagrams or sketches, and be unable to relate what they have read to the world around (Pretorius 2005). They may also lack general knowledge and background knowledge, and often do not make use of the extensive resources offered in, for example, the university library (Bock 1988). When looking specifically at academic writing, Starfield (2004:79) contends that “successful students seem to be those who can negotiate the complex intertextuality of academic texts and the pedagogic demands this makes on students”. Leibowitz (2004:46) found that students who had clear goals and strategies with regard to their academic writing had greater success than those who did not, but with the caveat that “these factors alone did not lead to students from a more disadvantaged background [to fare] better than those from more privileged contexts, since they were mitigated by other factors, such as mastery of English”. From my own experience of working with both L1 and L2 students, I am particularly aware of the subjective element present whenever marking academic writing. It is often much easier to mark work that is well-written and clearly formulated, but care must be taken not to be enticed by ‘good language’ when the content is either superficial or irrelevant.

Perhaps another approach to the discussion on under-preparedness might be to reflect on what lecturers' expectations are of 'prepared' students. In Niven's (2005:783) study, the lecturers she interviewed spoke of students who show "interest and enthusiasm ... who ask(s) questions of what the lecturer is saying ... and ask questions of a reading". Students should be enthusiastic, active, questioning, interested and become involved or immersed in the course. It was the understanding of the lecturers in the study that students would read widely in order to develop these attributes, and it is common knowledge for anyone in academe today that first-year students are, within a relatively short space of time, expected to use an academic library, conduct online searches for academic resources (discerning the difference between internet waffle and accredited works), assimilate large volumes of texts (in a variety of formats), interpret, analyse, critique, summarise such texts and make sense of complex academic language. Niven's findings are mirrored in the work of Fraser and Killen (2005:35) who highlight issues such as an "ability to reason logically", "insight into the field of study" and the "use of higher-order thinking skills". A more extensive list of lecturer expectations for university students is provided by the ICAS (2002:13) who include the following, in order of importance, as gleaned from a state-wide survey:

- Exhibit curiosity
- Experiment with new ideas
- See other points of view
- Challenge their own beliefs
- Engage in intellectual discussions
- Ask provocative questions
- Generate hypotheses
- Exhibit respect for other viewpoints
- Read with awareness of self and others.

It is interesting to note that these expectations of 'prepared' university students echo much of what was encapsulated in the many different descriptions given in Chapter Two and Chapter Three of what it means to be academically literate. Of concern, however, is that Fraser and Killen, on questioning students, found that a low priority was placed on understanding these lecturer's expectations – instead, students felt that these were "unrealistically high". This highlights an interesting dilemma within the study as one of the foci in the previous chapter was the importance of making the norms and values of the discipline explicit, and reminds one of the need to develop a shared understanding of these between student and teacher.

Niven (2005:777) quotes statistics that show ‘only four out of ten school-goers reach their final year of schooling’, and goes on to point out that the students who eventually enter higher education will “represent less than 2 per cent of their original school year group” (Niven 2005:778). This is particularly disconcerting when one realises that only just over half of these will eventually go on to graduate. Under-preparedness thus carries with it huge costs (Eiselen & Geysers 2003). Apart from the obvious financial implications for higher education institutions, national funding sources and study debt, there are the hidden social and personal costs that cannot be quantified. Scott (2006:3) differentiates between factors that are within or beyond an institution’s control, and he contends that the significance of these is “not always fully appreciated by the academic community”. Yorke and Thomas (2003:66), writing from a British perspective, appear to agree, suggesting that universities do not have full control over all the factors that could impact on student success. However, while factors such as the current schooling realities and socio-economic inequalities are beyond universities’ sphere of influence, the same cannot be said for the educational process and “affective factors – such as the extent to which a student can identify with the institution – that can have a fundamental influence on learning ...” (Scott 2006:3). Stellenbosch University, as is the case for all higher education institutions in South Africa, has been afforded the significant responsibility of working with one of the country’s most valuable resources – its youth – and care must be taken not to underestimate the extent of the human cost should it not address this challenge appropriately.

#### **4.3.2 The role of language**

A further contributing factor to under-preparedness within the South African context relates to the multilingual experience that characterises education for many both at school and at university level. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the impact that living in a multilingual country and being a student in a global, and thus multilingual, society has on student learning. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century “[u]niversity education may well imply acquiring competence to extract knowledge from sources in other languages or convey knowledge and skills to speakers of other language” (Wilkinson & Zegers 2005). Yet, one of the most often-touted reasons for students performing poorly at university in South Africa is that, for many, their language of learning, usually English, is not their mother tongue or L1 (Leibowitz 2005; Niven 2005; Pretorius 2005; Van der Walt & Brink 2005). With our multi-cultural heritage and our eleven official languages, the likelihood of a university classroom representing a single language group is rapidly diminishing, and quite improbable when universities have (large) first-year

classes that are likely to represent three or more different language groups at any given time (Hornberger 2002:30). This is, of course, true elsewhere in the world and is attested to by researchers from across the globe (Clark & Ivanič 1997; Kern 2000; Canagarajah 2002; Asmar 2005). Hornberger (2002:43), writing from an American perspective, suggests that “the challenge of negotiating across multiple languages, cultures, and identities is a very real one in classrooms all over the world, one not to be lightly dismissed”.

Van der Walt and Brink (2005) offer a useful and interesting overview of multilingual universities internationally that provides a point of reference for the status quo at Stellenbosch University, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Drawing on cases from Canada, Finland, Spain, Belgium and Switzerland, they describe and discuss four specific aspects of the multilingual university that they believe are relevant in the South African context. These include “cultural mandates”, which emanate “from the environment and historical context within which the university is situated”; “the perceived cost of multilingualism” which includes both direct and indirect costs; “the status of languages”, which is particularly complicated in South Africa given the lack of academic writings in many of the African languages; and the matter of “competing agendas”, which emphasise the tensions that are endemic in a multilingual context (Van der Walt & Brink 2005:844-848).

In most South African institutions, English is the default language of learning, with Afrikaans the only other ‘academic’ language that features to any extent. This is in spite of the fact that Zulu is the language claimed as mother tongue by 23.8% of the population, Afrikaans (13.35%) coming in third after isiXhosa, and English (8.20%) being only ranked joint fifth (Statistics SA 2007). This means that a significant number of students at university in this country are required to study in a language that is not their L1. The matter may be further complicated by the fact that the variety of language of learning and teaching (LOLT), typically English, that the student is familiar with, may differ somewhat from the standard South African English (Van Rensburg & Lamberti 2004:73; also Van der Walt 2000), and would depend on the extent to which their “cognitive academic language proficiency” (CALP) (Cummins 2000) had been acquired. This leads to the situation discussed above where students deemed to be lacking such proficiency are often classified as under-prepared.

The reality of the multilingual nature of education in South Africa, as it is played out in classrooms across the country in a variety of ways, cannot be addressed appropriately in this

study. However, students who have been exposed to a poor schooling experience and/or who have been forced to adapt to a new language of learning and teaching (LOLT), even when their foundation language is not yet sufficiently entrenched, face considerable challenges (Van Rensburg & Lamberti 2004:73; Leibowitz 2005). In a higher education context, assessment that is predominantly undertaken in a written format will favour “those with strong verbal or linguistic intelligence” (Van Rensburg & Lamberti 2004:76), and specifically when such intelligence is linked to the LOLT. Leibowitz (2005:664), in discussing the impact that writing in an additional language can have, cites a number of international researchers who attest to “greater stress”, “less efficient communication” and “less variation in style”.

Lecturers have been encouraged to consider the use of multimodal texts that might contribute to making the playing fields more equitable (Van Rensburg & Lamberti 2004). What then of extended student writing? If we accept academic writing to be “a complex activity that consolidates and advances thought and learning” (Van Rensburg & Lamberti 2004:70) (3.4.5) then by implication a reduced focus on academic writing will require something in its place that can similarly advance thought and learning. As was mentioned in Chapter Three, it will be in the practical application of the multi-literacies’ perspective that the proponents of the New Literacy Studies will find their biggest challenge, and nowhere will it be more directly felt than in addressing the needs of students in a multilingual context. Notwithstanding the work on multi-modality, I believe that higher education, particularly in traditional universities such as the one that is the site for this study, has some way to go in addressing this caveat. My sentiments concur with those of fellow “academic literacy researchers and practitioners” from a neighbouring institution who express the concern that “identities ... in the institutional culture of the University, continue to constrain [their] thinking and acting” (Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006:10).

### **4.3.3 Summary**

High dropout rates or, conversely, poor retention rates, particularly where these are perceived to be linked to issues of access, hold serious implications for higher education institutions, both internationally and for South Africa in particular. The caveat between improving throughput on the one hand, while desiring to maintain standards on the other, is one that is often articulated by academics and is very real. This places considerable pressure on particularly first-year lecturers, who already are burdened by the ever-increasing enrolments and the accompanying large classes. Poor throughput rates exacerbate this problem as each

year the first-year classes carry the additional burden (up to 30% in some instances) of repeaters in the classes (Stellenbosch University 2007a). Nevertheless, higher education has been challenged to recognise its responsibility in nation-building, and this will be linked to expanding access for non-traditional students, many of whom will be under-prepared or at-risk for higher education. If we take this as a given, then it makes sense that “investing in improving their performance will make the most substantial contribution to the success rate of the cohort as a whole” (Scott 2006:2).

The section that follows will look specifically at the Stellenbosch University context, and also highlight some of the interventions that have been put in place in recent years to address under-preparedness among first-year students.

#### **4.4 The Stellenbosch University context**

In the opening chapter of this thesis an argument as to the unique context that is provided at Stellenbosch University with respect to academic development was introduced. On further reflection, such a claim to uniqueness is probably open for debate and, given the diverse and multi-layered nature of South African society that has already been attested to, it is quite probable that other institutions may make a similar claim from a different perspective. Nevertheless, other researchers when writing of academic support and related interventions at Stellenbosch University, either implicitly or explicitly appear to support this view (Troskie-De Bruin 1999; McKinney & Van Pletzen 2004). In this last main section of the literature review, the site at which this study was undertaken will be described so as to provide the context within which the research is situated. A brief description of the institutional profile at undergraduate level will be followed by a summary of the institutional language policy. Thereafter a historical overview of academic development at Stellenbosch University will be sketched, after which the section will close with a description of the Extended Degree Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

##### **4.4.1 An institutional profile**

Stellenbosch University may be regarded as a research-led, comprehensive institution. It has approximately 22 000 students of which over 14 000 are undergraduate (Stellenbosch University 2006b). In 2007, the first-year enrolments reached 4000 for the first time, with 986 of these students registering in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (Stellenbosch

University 2007a). Its enrolment position within the national higher education system places it 13<sup>th</sup> among the 23 institutions, although it has the 5<sup>th</sup> highest number of Masters and Doctoral students (Department of Education 2006). The university has ten faculties and is situated on four different campuses, with the largest number of students on its main campus in Stellenbosch. The university has a strong residential focus with approximately 50% of its first-year students living in one of the many student residences. In total only about one-third of undergraduate students could be regarded as commuter students.

The University's Vision 2012 statement speaks to a university of excellence, committed to fulfilling an active role in the development of South African society, encouraging an inclusive campus culture that seeks to promote Afrikaans as language of teaching and science within a multilingual context. In addition, the Teaching and Learning Policy (Stellenbosch University 2006a) emphasises a focus towards a student-centred approach to teaching. The University is a historically Afrikaans institution and, given the earlier differentiation (4.2.2), would be regarded as having been 'previously advantaged'. It is well resourced, and attracts top academics, both nationally and internationally, with its research output placing it among the top three institutions in South Africa in 2006. The beautiful surroundings and the predominantly residential nature of the student life for which the University is renowned, makes it the institution of choice for many top students. Almost 40% of the 2007 first-year intake obtained above 80% in their Grade 12 examinations, with only 8.2% of the cohort scoring below 60%. This implies that approximately one-fifth of all students in the country who obtain a distinction come to Stellenbosch University (Department of Education 2006), which is situated in the Western Cape, the province of South Africa's nine provinces that also had the highest percentage of distinctions in the 2005 Grade 12 examinations.

Today, however, the university is often at loggerheads with its past which is intricately bound into the political history of the country and the language debate on campus. For some, Stellenbosch University was seen as the "home of apartheid" (Claassen 1998:4), and it has had particular symbolic significance as "the leading articulator of Afrikaans thought during the apartheid regime" (Leibowitz & Van Deventer 2007). While the language policy and its implications for teaching and learning on the campus will be discussed later (4.4.2), the language profile of the student population is relevant at this stage.

**Table 4.2: Language profile of students at Stellenbosch University (2002-2006)**

L1 <sup>12</sup>	2002		2003		2004		2005		2006	
	Total	%								
Afrikaans	12443	58.35	12923	59.07	12979	59.07	13331	60.37	13401	59.38
English	5457	25.59	5816	26.58	6245	28.42	7023	31.80	7392	32.75
Afri/Eng	356	1.67	360	1.65	354	1.61	360	1.63	352	1.56
isiXhosa	1277	5.99	1093	5.00	704	3.20	393	1.78	365	1.62
Other SA lang	1228	5.76	1024	4.68	750	3.41	404	1.83	487	2.16
Foreign lang	563	2.64	663	3.03	940	4.28	571	2.59	572	2.53
<b>Total</b>	<b>21324</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>21879</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>21972</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>22082</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>22569</b>	<b>100</b>

(Stellenbosch University 2006b)

This table reflects the dominance of Afrikaans at undergraduate level on the one hand (almost 60% of all students in 2006), but also the increase in English from almost 26% in 2002 to 33% in 2006. Of importance for the institution is the fact that over this same period, despite the increase in English, Afrikaans has remained fairly stable, while isiXhosa, the dominant African language in the Western Cape, shows a decrease from 6% in 2002 to less than 2% in 2006. The recent study by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) (2006) highlights one of the dilemmas facing Stellenbosch University in seeking to position itself as a ‘university of choice’ for Afrikaans-speaking students while addressing its diversity profile at the same time. In this instance one might assume that the coloured population would be an obvious target. The HSRC report (2006:10), however, emphasises two problems inherent in this assumption: firstly, the participation rate among this sector of the population is particularly low – “4.5% of the traditional age-cohort”- and secondly, an increasing trend among coloured urban youths is to attend English-speaking schools. A result of this, as suggested in the report, is that it is often the rural and more economically disadvantaged coloured student who then applies to Stellenbosch University.

Linked to the issue of language, as discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.2), is that of culture and the extent to which students feel part of the culture of the university. In an investigation conducted on the University campus in 2001, African and coloured respondents indicated that they did not feel they were treated the same as white students (61%), neither did they consider the University’s attempts to integrate them particularly successful (62%) (Mouton & Hunter 2001:vi). Of interest, however, are the results of the 2007 SRC elections which indicate that four out of the 10 elected candidates are either African or coloured students.

<sup>12</sup> These totals are based on student data provided during registration.

Although such integration is not the focus of this study, the students who participated made limited and oblique references to feeling ostracised, but with a few exceptions, this was not observed in any of the class visits (see Chapter Six).

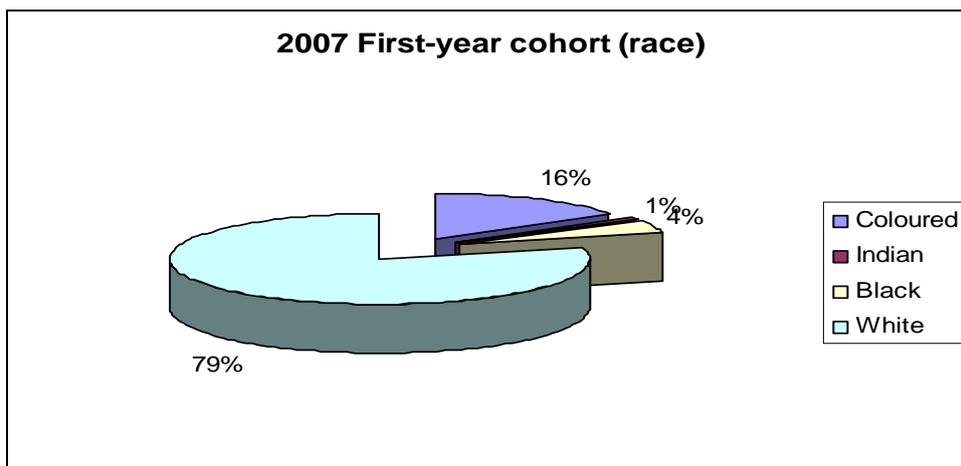
The language proportions given in Table 4.2 are also reflected in the racial profile of the University, which shows the following:

**Table 4.3: Racial profile of students at Stellenbosch University (2002-2006)**

Race / Undergraduate	2003		2004		2005		2006	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
White	10963	79.01	10909	81.13	11088	79.98	11167	78.79
Coloured	1806	13.02	1890	14.06	2036	14.69	2195	15.49
African	907	6.54	471	3.50	550	3.97	617	4.35
Indian	199	1.43	176	1.31	189	1.36	194	1.37
<b>Total</b>	<b>13875</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>13446</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>13863</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>14173</b>	<b>100</b>

(Stellenbosch University 2006b)

Table 4.3 depicts an ongoing dilemma for Stellenbosch University. Firstly, its enrolment of African undergraduate students (4.4% in 2006) is by far the lowest in the country, which has an average of 60.2% for all contact students in South Africa (Department of Education 2006). In addition, the 2007 first-year enrolment figures appear to mirror the stabilised levels of the past four years.

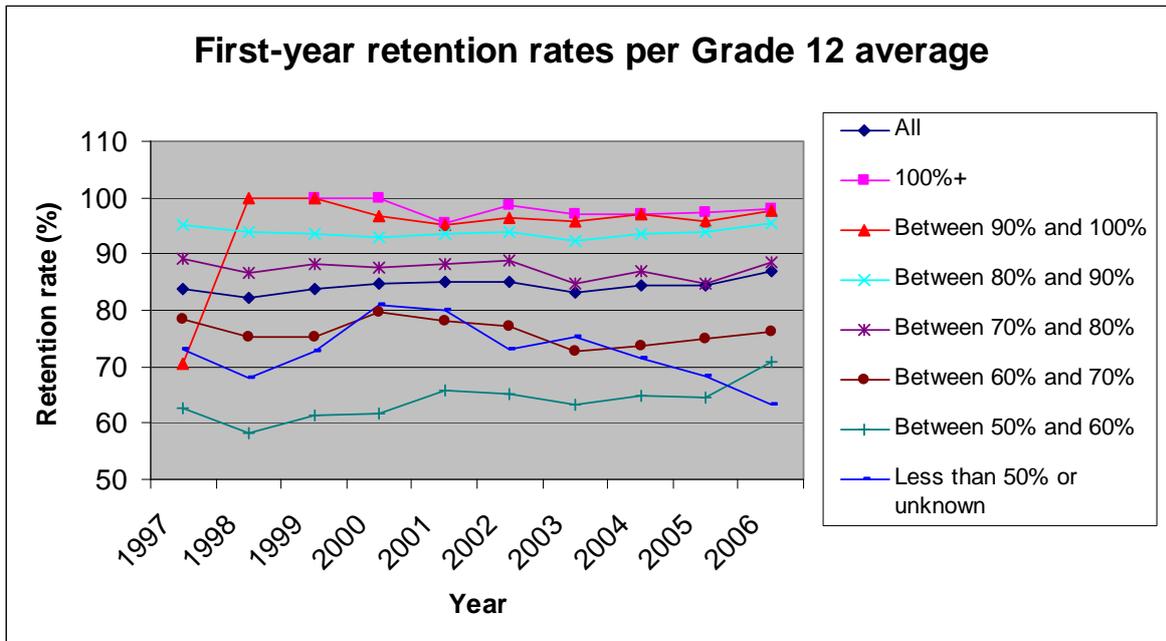


**Figure 4.1: 2007 First-year cohort (race)**

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

The 2006 enrolments of coloured students, however, reflect a steady increase over the past few years, which is also supported by the 2007 first-year intake total. This is to be expected, given the fact that the Western Cape has the highest percentage of coloured inhabitants and

that this group is predominantly Afrikaans-speaking. However, the 2005 intake of coloured students (2036) at Stellenbosch University represents only 4.4% of the national total for coloured undergraduate students. On the other hand, 20% of all white students who are currently at university in South Africa are, in fact, at Stellenbosch (Department of Education 2006).

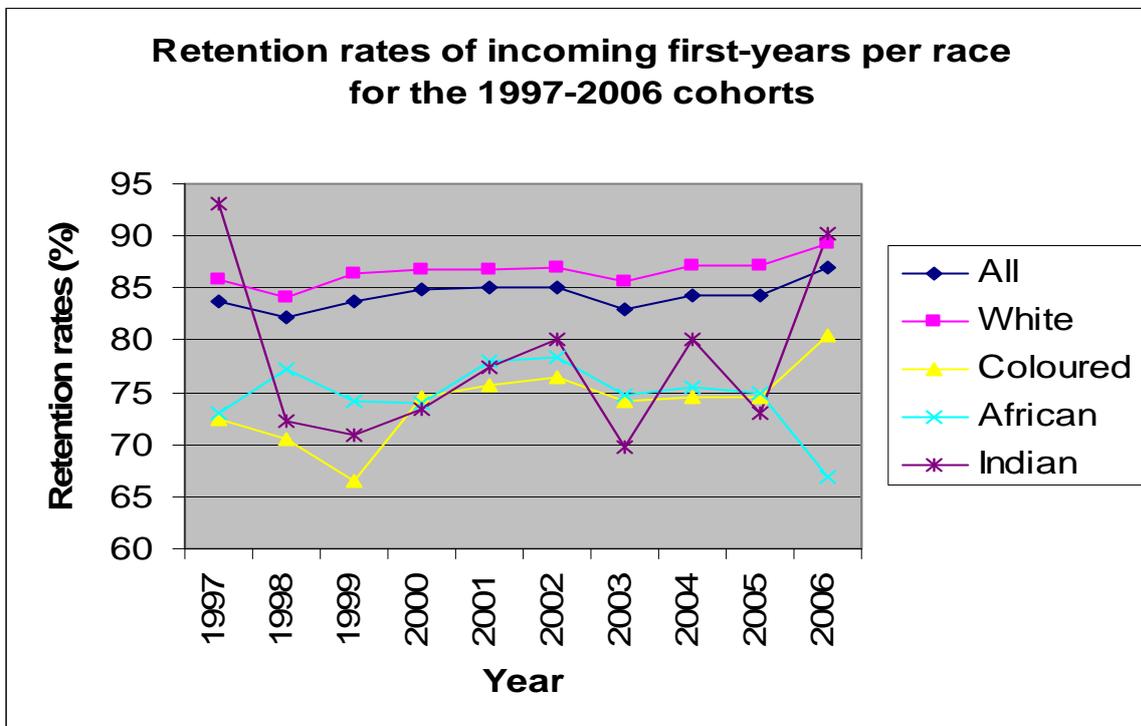


**Figure 4.2: First-year retention rates per Grade 12 average**  
(Source: <http://www.sun.ac.za/trackwell/retensie/analy1.htm>)

First-year retention rates at Stellenbosch University also tell an interesting story. As can be seen from Figure 4.2, the average retention rate for all students was approximately 87% in 2006, which is a slight increase over the previous years. The anomaly of the 1997 cohort (90% - 100% interval) is difficult to explain ten years on. However, it should be noted that in that year only 17 students registered at the university with a Grade 12 result of above 90% (no student obtained above 100%)<sup>13</sup> and the records indicate that for some reason, five of these did not reregister the following year. These figures need to be seen against the 2006 enrolments, which show 154 students who had obtained above 100%, with a further 510 obtaining between 90% - 100%. (These figures bear out the inflation of Grade 12 National Senior Certificate results in recent years that was alluded to earlier.)

<sup>13</sup> The National Senior Certificate system is structured in such a way that learners, who take all of their Grade 12 subjects on what is known as the 'higher grade' or who enrol for additional Grade 12 subjects (over and above the 6 requisite subjects), are able to obtain an aggregate of above 100%.

Unfortunately, the retention rates per race group indicate an overall decreasing trend for African students. This decrease needs to be put into context, particularly given the fact that approximately 40% of first-year African students at the University fall into the category that obtained less than 60% in Grade 12 (<http://admin.sun.ac.za/trackwell/retensie/usg124.htm>).



**Figure 4.3: First-year retention rates per race group (1997-2005)**  
 (Source: <http://www.sun.ac.za/trackwell/retensie/analy1.htm>)

These statistics are germane to this discussion for two reasons. Firstly, the rationale for placing students who achieve less than 60% or 55% in their Grade 12 examinations (depending on the faculty) on an Extended Degree Programme is based largely on such retention data. Secondly, the statistics emphasise the nature of the responsibility of academic support interventions such as the Extended Degree Programme, both in terms of improving the success rates of the group as a whole, but also particularly in addressing their poor equity.

In 2005, the University was audited by the HEQC. In their subsequent report, the panel highlighted some concerns that are confirmed by the data presented in this section.

Among the recommendations, they state the following:

The HEQC recommends that Stellenbosch University prepare a redress and equity plan to transform the demographic profile of its student enrolments which include

the development and operationalisation of faculty specific indicators for equity and access which could form part of the performance management system for faculty staff.

The HEQC recommends that Stellenbosch University conduct a rigorous review of its access model in order to identify the reasons for the slow transformation of the institution's student profile particularly at the undergraduate level and the major preconditions for the successful implementation of the access model. This review should include a critical assessment of the extent to which the current Language Policy supports quality teaching and learning at the undergraduate level and enables the institution to give effect to its commitment to serving a broader community and embracing diversity.

Both of these recommendations have significant implications for the University in the years ahead, including implications for academic development interventions such as the Extended Degree Programmes. Of concern, however, is that the second recommendation in focussing on the Language Policy (see 4.4.2), would seem to underplay the many other aspects that 'support quality teaching and learning' and would 'give effect to its commitment to serving a broader community and embracing diversity'. A multi-literacies perspective to acquiring the academic literacy that is underwritten in the curricula and practiced in the classroom might have equal relevance in addressing these objectives. In the University's Strategic Framework, *A Strategic Framework for the Turn of the Century and Beyond*, (Stellenbosch University 2000), its vision specifically for the teaching domain, is formulated as follows:

A university characterised by quality teaching, by the constant renewal of teaching and learning programmes, and by the creation of effective opportunities for learning / study.

It is this notion of curriculum renewal that provides the lever for change – curriculum renewal such as that described in Chapter Three where the process of reflecting and considering the curricula are made from an integrated perspective that views learning as a process that leads to knowledge making and the critique thereof; curriculum renewal that will foster meaningful change.

At Stellenbosch University there are fairly rigorous quality assurance processes that govern programme development and curricula. Any new programme or change to an existing programme is subjected to the assurance process that adheres to the guidelines and criteria as set out by the HEQC. This also may present one of the biggest constraints to curriculum renewal. Apart from the time and energy that such a process consumes – and already discussed in Chapter Three – the bureaucratic process that precedes implementation and the critique to which the academic representing the department or module hoping to implement the change is subjected, may serve to break the spirit of the innovator early on.

#### **4.4.2 The language policy and plan**

To date much of the research into the role of academic literacy in the South African context has generally focused on the dominance of English as language of instruction and the impact it has on those for whom it is a second language – more than 90% of the population. Such studies have investigated the impact on student learning (Angelil-Carter & Moore 1998; Johl 2002; Warren 2002; Van Dyk & Weideman 2004a). The scenario at Stellenbosch University is somewhat different with, as we have seen, over 60% of undergraduate students being Afrikaans-speaking with a small minority who speak no Afrikaans at all. Leibowitz and Van Deventer (2007:90) suggest that one of the reasons for the language debate at Stellenbosch University being “so interesting” is by virtue of the dominant role that Afrikaans plays at the University having been able to develop “a vast literature and a substantial academic lexicon” during the colonial and apartheid years. This is in contrast to the reality for the other official African languages in South Africa. In response to Vision 2012 and the Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Education 2002), a Language Policy (with a plan for its implementation) was passed by the Senate and then the Council of the University in 2002<sup>14</sup>. The Language Policy for Higher Education that preceded the University’s own Language Policy provided a framework “to promote multiculturalism and to enhance equity and access” (Van der Walt 2004:150) and it should be noted that one of pillars of this framework designated the “retention and strengthening of Afrikaans as a language of scholarship and science” – a directive that is taken up in the University’s own vision statement.

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<sup>14</sup> This policy was up for review during 2007. At the time of completing this dissertation, a draft of the revised policy was being circulated among the relevant stakeholders on campus and was due for finalisation by the end of that year.

In essence, the Stellenbosch University Language Policy dictates that:

- The University remains committed to the use and development of Afrikaans as [an] academic language in a multilingual context;
- Cognisance is taken of the status of English as international language of communication and of isiXhosa as [an] emerging academic language;
- The University distinguishes between the use of the three different language in the following way:
  - Afrikaans is the primary language of teaching and learning at undergraduate level, while English is used to a greater extent at post-graduate level
  - isiXhosa is recognised as an emerging academic language and to this end, opportunities are created for students and staff to acquire communication skills in isiXhosa;
- The institutional language of the University is primarily Afrikaans, with circumstances dictating the use of English for internal communication. All three languages should, as far as possible, be used for external communication (Stellenbosch University 2003).

The Language Plan then provides guidelines as to the different processes and procedures that govern the implementation of the policy. Of significance for this study are the three general guidelines that apply to language in the teaching and learning situation, namely that:

- Language modules are presented in the specific goal language (e.g. French in French, etc.) and assignments, tests and examinations are similarly compiled and answered;
- In all other modules, question papers are made available in both languages and students may choose whether they wish to answer in Afrikaans or English;
- Students are free to ask questions and expect answers in either Afrikaans or English, except in the case of language studies or language acquisition modules.

Finally, three different language specifications are defined and are summarised in Table 4.4 below.

**Table 4.4: Language specifications at Stellenbosch University**

	<b>Description</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<b>A-option:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Default option for all undergraduate modules.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teaching predominantly in Afrikaans</li> <li>▪ Study materials available in Afrikaans and/or English</li> <li>▪ Study guides available in Afrikaans and English.</li> </ul>
<b>T-option: (bilingual classes)</b>	<p>Used in classes where:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ the students' language skills require a greater use of English;</li> <li>▪ the module being offered is unique to Stellenbosch University;</li> <li>▪ multilingualism is important in the context of a specific profession;</li> <li>▪ the lecturer has not yet fully mastered Afrikaans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 50% of teaching must be conducted in Afrikaans</li> <li>▪ Textbooks and texts for reading are in Afrikaans and/or English</li> <li>▪ Lecture notes, transparencies and electronic teaching and learning materials are made available, in full, in Afrikaans and English or interchangeably in Afrikaans and English.</li> </ul>
<b>E-option:</b>	<p>Used in exceptional circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ where the programme is unique in SA;</li> <li>▪ where students on the programme do not have sufficient academic language proficiency;</li> <li>▪ for modules where the lecturer cannot speak Afrikaans;</li> <li>▪ where regional and strategic goals necessitate the use of English.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teaching is primarily in English.</li> <li>▪ Textbooks and texts for reading are in Afrikaans and/or English.</li> <li>▪ Notes are in English with core notes in Afrikaans.</li> <li>▪ Transparencies, electronic teaching and learning materials are in English.</li> </ul>
<b>A/E option: (parallel streams)</b>	<p>Used in exceptional circumstances when academically and financially plausible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ modules with high enrolments;</li> <li>▪ achieving regional and strategic objectives;</li> <li>▪ programmes offered using satellite or distance education technology.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ As for the A and E options described above.</li> </ul>

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007d)

In the intervening years, the policy has been the source of considerable debate both on campus and in the local press. In 2004 an impact study was conducted to assess the first year of implementation. This study highlighted the range of opinions that existed on the campus, among both students and lecturers. While, for example, there were many who indicated a preparedness to incorporate English so as to cater for diversity, others expressed concerns that this would lead to further marginalisation of Afrikaans. What also emerged from this research was the limited alignment, in some environments, between policy and implementation (Leibowitz & Van Deventer 2007).

A second study was conducted in 2006, which elicited responses from third-year students who would have, in most cases, experienced the effects of the Language Policy since their first-year on campus. This subsequent research again revealed the highly emotive nature of the topic and the desire on the part, particularly of students, “to contribute towards positive resolution of the problems” (Stellenbosch University 2007b:3). Nevertheless, the survey did point to the marginalisation of African, non-Afrikaans speaking students. In addition, while the report does note the “vast linguistic resource [which] resides in the fact that there is a high degree of bilingualism at the University” (Stellenbosch University 2007b:4), the following is of specific significance:

Despite the fact that there is greater proficiency in Afrikaans amongst students and staff, there is a small but noteworthy minority in both cases who possess little or no proficiency in this language. This leads to a fundamental dilemma: does one cater for the majority, which is to varying extents bilingual, or for the minority, which is to varying extents not proficient in Afrikaans at all, and in some cases, experiencing non-language related challenges arising out of, for example, prior schooling?

(Stellenbosch University 2007b:3)

This lengthy quote goes to the heart of what makes this study into the acquisition of academic literacy on an aspiring multilingual campus topical. It is inevitable that the dilemma described above contributes to the ongoing tension experienced by both academic and student, and exponentially contributes to the complexity of the debate.

The University management’s commitment to the implementation of the Language Policy can be observed in the way in which it is made explicit in University communiqués and

yearbooks. For example, each year eleven different yearbooks are published, one for each of the ten faculties and an eleventh containing general information about the University, the programmes and the different procedures for examination, registration and so forth. An abbreviated version of the language policy with all the relevant stipulations is placed right at the beginning of each of these books. In addition, every prospective student receives a summary of the language policy along with her or his provisional acceptance to the institution.

However, in conversations with colleagues over the past few years, the opinion is often voiced that there is a sense in which the Language Policy is its own worst enemy. By attempting to put down in writing every possible caveat, the policy document sets up its own contradictions. In spite of the clear explication that has been set out above, the Policy and Plan adds what is tantamount to a disclaimer, namely that students require academic language proficiency in both Afrikaans and English if they wish to be successful in their studies (Stellenbosch University 2003). Typically, a first-year class would be characterized by a fair amount of bilingualism as students may be listening to Afrikaans being spoken while viewing English PowerPoint slides, receiving Afrikaans class notes and working from an English textbook (Van der Walt 2006). The disclaimer included in the Year Book is thus a valid one, but is also potentially the single most inhibiting factor to meeting the government's equity directive. It should be noted that the implementation of the Language Policy and Plan also corresponds with a downward trend in the number of African undergraduate students on campus, although not in the numbers of coloured students, who increased from 13.02% in 2003 to 15.49% in 2006 (Table 4.3).

Nevertheless, given the overall retention rate of the University (80% in 2005), it can be assumed that many students do arrive at the University with sufficient 'academic language proficiency' in Afrikaans and English to adapt to the variety of language contexts in which their different modules are offered. Such students accept the bilingual or multilingual nature of the classroom and adapt to the specific code-switching (changing from one language to another) techniques employed to a greater or lesser extent by the lecturer (Van der Walt 2006). And the University is aware of its responsibility to provide support for students who may need it. To this end, the Language Centre was established in 2002, with enhancing academic literacy as one of its main functions, together with supporting language acquisition. As part of this work, the Language Placement Test (later to be renamed the Academic

Literacy tests) was piloted at the University in 2005. The test, based on the Weideman and Van Dyk construct of academic literacy discussed in Chapter Two (2.3.4), was then fully implemented in 2006 when all first-year students, including those on the Extended Degree Programme, were required to complete both the English and Afrikaans version. The academic literacy module that the Language Centre currently offers is based largely on this construct. Of late this Centre has become increasingly involved in offering adjunct academic literacy modules in both mainstream and extended degree programmes. It is my sense, however, that this provision by a non-faculty unit has not contributed to the integration of such acquisition. The case in this study, which is situated in the Faculty for Arts and Social Sciences, also includes a module that focuses on the acquisition of academic literacy, but is offered within the faculty and resorts under, albeit tenuously, a recognised department.

It needs to be said that the issue of language goes to the very heart of Stellenbosch University and its proud tradition, and the many tensions that exist around this issue are fundamental and significant. Foley (2004:70) has suggested that one of the reasons that the national Language Policy for higher education goes to such lengths to describe the preservation of Afrikaans is because its authors feared the opposite. Similarly at Stellenbosch University there are many who wish to preserve this special heritage. The reality, however, as described in the preceding section is somewhat more complicated.

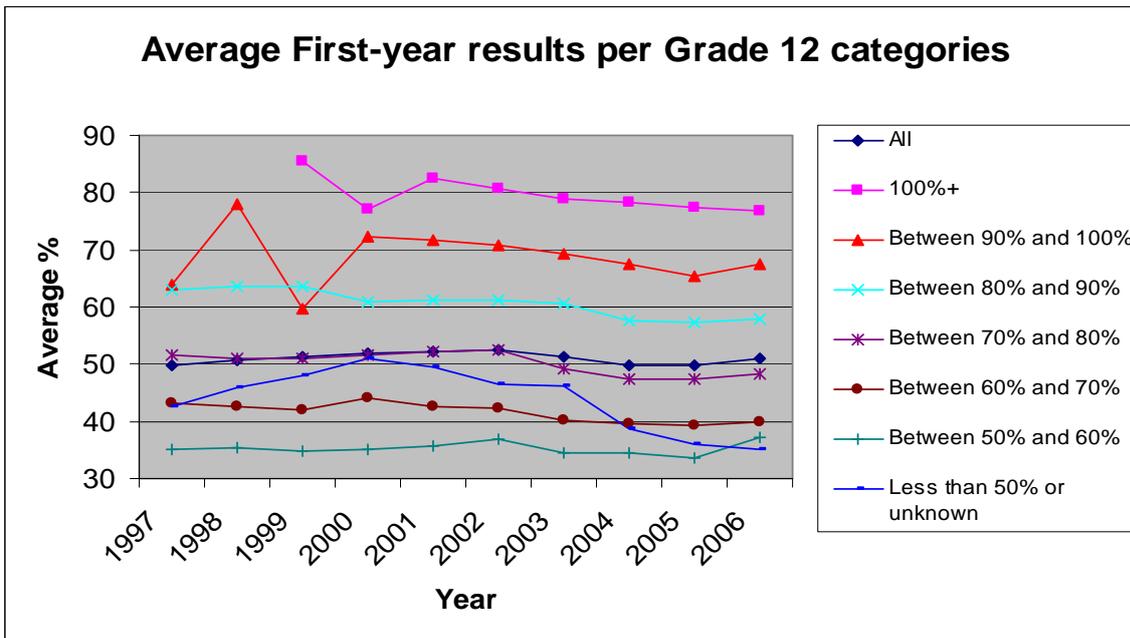
#### **4.4.3 Academic development at Stellenbosch University**

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the initial catalyst to this research had its seeds in the current focus at Stellenbosch University campus on first-year throughput rates and my own work in academic development (AD). While work in AD started on many campuses in South Africa in the 80s (Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006), the first formal programmes were implemented at Stellenbosch only by 1995. Called foundation programmes, they provided for extended curricula that meant that students would take one year longer to graduate than in the mainstream. At the time, a four-week bridging programme that was run prior to the start of the academic year, and was aimed at increasing student diversity, was also introduced. This programme was offered to students who had achieved the minimum entry criteria. In other words, they had obtained matriculation endorsement, but their results were such that they might be potentially 'at-risk'. The idea of the bridging programme was to help channel students into the right courses while giving them a taste of the academic challenges they could expect to face at university at the same time. It was also

during this period that the University established the Division for Academic Development (DAD), which was directly tasked with overseeing these and related interventions.

Over the years a number of academic support interventions have been put in place, largely to assist students who are deemed to be ‘at-risk’ as a result of their matriculation results and university access tests. During the early years of the DAD, the unit was required to generate its own funds and participation on the different programmes remained largely voluntary, with part-time staff being employed as lecturers. These academics had limited, if any, contact with the different faculties, even though by 2000 there were Extended Degree Programmes running in the Faculties of Science, AgriScience (then Agriculture and Forestry), Engineering, Health Sciences, Law and Arts. Later initiatives included the introduction of a campus-wide mentor programme, which started out in 2004 as an attempt to provide discipline-specific and psycho-social support in small peer-group sessions. It was also at this time that, as a result of restructuring, the DAD merged with Uni-Ed, a division that had been predominantly responsible for professional development of academic staff and quality assurance. While the latter was subsumed into the Unit for Academic Planning and Quality Assurance, a new centre, the Centre for Teaching and Learning was established. Within this centre, AD, in its broadest sense, was now housed.

It was also during this period that a focus on throughput rates and first-year success, in particular, began to emerge. While Grade 12 results seemed to be improving year after year, average first-year results did not reflect a similar pattern, such that by 2006, a first-year student could expect to drop by close to 20% from the mark they had obtained in Grade 12 (see Figure 4.4). This meant that, in reality, any student entering the University with an average of less than 70% was, potentially, ‘at-risk’ (<http://admin.sun.ac.za/trackwell/retensie/usg124.htm>).



**Figure 4.4: Average first-year results per Grade 12 categories (1997-2006)**  
(Source: <http://www.sun.ac.za/trackwell/retensic/analy1.htm>)

The seriousness with which the University Senate views the situation can be seen in the recent discussions on campus to establish a ‘First-year Academy’, which will focus on the first-year experience and student learning. As faculties have become involved in the process of reviewing their first-year offerings, so the debate surrounding the role of academic literacy in the learning of this specific group of students has come to the fore with many questions and much uncertainty among rank-and-file academics.

The profile of the students who are deemed to be ‘at-risk’ at SU differs from that found at most other higher education institutions in South Africa. As we have seen, typically ‘at-risk’ students have had an impoverished schooling experience, are often first-generation entrants into higher education, lack generic skills deemed necessary for academic success, are of a lower income group, are black African, and English is usually their second or third language, although this has often been their language of teaching and learning at high school. At Stellenbosch University, while there is a small contingent of African, presumably English L2, students on campus (Table 4.2) who may or may not fall into the ‘at-risk’ category, by far the greater number of students who currently fall into this group, based on their Grade12 school results and access tests, are coloured and white students who speak either English or Afrikaans, or a mixture of both.

#### 4.4.4 The EDP in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The Extended Degree Programme (EDP) was introduced in the then Faculty of Arts and the Humanities at the University in 1996. The initial programme followed a model that provided for the extension of the programme by one additional academic year, meaning the students completed their first-year studies over two years. No formal additional support was provided. The only prerequisite was that Afrikaans-speaking students registered for English 178 (a mainstream module) and were required to select the academic literacy elective within this year-long module, while English-speaking students were required to register for *Afrikaanse Taalverwerwing* 178, which is a language acquisition course recommended for all students for whom Afrikaans is not their L1. In some instances, where students presented with a limited mastery of both English and Afrikaans, they were encouraged to register for both language modules. As these modules were both credit-bearing towards most BA programmes, the students generally complied. Within this framework, the programme expanded and contracted over the years, reliant largely on the goodwill of the lecturers responsible for the two different language modules. In this way, a number of ad hoc and largely self-initiated interventions were attempted so as to make the language modules more relevant to the needs of the EDP students and these were implemented with relative success (De Klerk *et al.* 2006).

Of relevance to the broader discussion of the students' experiences in their first-year which will be presented in Chapter Six, is the specific identity of a humanities faculty in the current higher education context that places considerable emphasis on the Science, Engineering and Technology sectors. Wright (2005:539) suggests that this is resulting in what she terms "a crisis in credibility" for humanities faculties, while Viljoen (2005:42) refers to the "negative perceptions of the humanities". Apart from not being the most sought-after field of study amongst potential bursars, the BA degree programme, as is the case at Stellenbosch University, typically has the lowest entry requirements of all faculties on campus, resulting in students often following a degree programme in this faculty when other options have closed to them as a result of their school results. This can have an impact on the students' attitudes towards their studies and, therefore, their potential for success. In this study it will be seen that among the students on the Extended Degree Programme there were several who described their resistance to their current field of study.

#### 4.5 Academic literacy as a field of research

It ought to be clear from a reading of this overview of the literature that there are many different perspectives and disciplines from which a study of academic literacy might be undertaken. The research cited includes perspectives from educational sociologists (Bourdieu 1986; Street 2003), social and applied linguists (Gee 1990, 1998, 2001, 2003; Hewings 2004), linguists (Ravelli 2004), and educationalists (Jones 2004; Starfield 2004). It also highlights the work of academic (educational) development practitioners in higher education (Boughay 1998, 2002, 2004; Jacobs 2005; Leibowitz 2001, 2004; McKenna 2003a, 2004; Starfield 2004), many of whom might just as easily be placed within one of the disciplines listed above (particularly education and linguistics), but whose current role is primarily that of facilitating student success at university level (see 1.6). I align myself, and this research, with this latter group.

The work of recent researchers in the field of academic literacy highlights the development that has taken place and has had considerable influence on “research and pedagogy associated with writing at tertiary level” (Hewings 2004:133) particularly in the United Kingdom. Street (2003:87) suggests that “a major contribution [of this and similar research] has been the attempt ... to engage with ... educationalists interested in literacy acquisition”, thus emphasising the dual roles alluded to above. It is also interesting to note, however, the differing levels of sophistication in the discussions that are being conducted across the globe on academic literacy and academic discourse. These differences may also be seen in the point of departure of the different role-players, whether they be practitioners from academic support centres, teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or linguists with a research interest in how L2 learners or students are “inducted into the expectations of their academic community” (Hood 2004:24) and so forth. During the early stages of this project I sometimes found it difficult to penetrate the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and multiple paradigms that initially served as significant obstacles to a clear understanding and conceptualisation. As a researcher who had covered her ‘apprenticeship’ in educational research, the carefully crafted and theory-based work of, for example, the linguists, was both seductive and restrictive, and I spent much time reviewing the rules and conventions for research in this discipline.

From the outset, however, it was important to me that the approach to this research be grounded in, and indeed have as its departure, the field of teaching and learning in higher education as a scholarship. The pedagogic implications of the study for students, both under-prepared and mainstream, as well as for the lecturer and academic support practitioner, are of crucial importance in framing the relevance of the research. Thus even though it proved necessary, particularly during the review of the relevant literature, to foray with some considerable effort into other disciplines, including those of language teaching and applied linguistics, returning to base, as it were, was a great relief. This blurring across disciplines is noted by researchers ‘on the other side’. Applied linguist, Prof. Henk Kroes (2002:1), when referring to the ‘connotations in the description ‘applied,’ suggests that “insights gained from research ... should ideally contribute to practical implementation in a wide spectrum of human endeavour. This includes language teaching ... [and] academic support ...”. In Chapter Five, the many insights I gathered during my reading, particularly as these relate to how they eventually shaped the research design and methodology for this study, are explored.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

As I draw this discussion of the under-prepared student to a close, I remain torn between my dislike of classifying students as ‘under-prepared’ and the realisation that, if the prevailing reality of expanded access to higher education is going to mean that students arrive at university with different levels of readiness (Fraser & Killen 2005), there has to be some way of identifying those students who may need additional support. And such identification thus implies classification.

Another question that inevitably is raised when the issue of under-preparedness is foregrounded, has to do with the cost and the amount of effort directed for a minority of students. Many in academe question, sometimes even aggressively, the current policy of allowing entry to students who are clearly going to need considerable guidance and direction if they are to achieve any form of success. There are those who claim the moral high ground suggesting that we are doing ‘those students’ a disservice by setting them up for failure. Others point “to the ‘enormous’ amounts of money and resources into academic language support” (Van der Walt & Brink 2005:837). For those of us involved in academic student development there are no easy answers, and often the fruits of our endeavours are realised so long after the fact that we may not even be aware of the real impact that an opportunity given

years ago might have had. For a university such as Stellenbosch, the importance of enhancing its diversity and equity profile among its student corps and the importance of re-defining its identity through ongoing academic and social change cannot be underestimated (De Klerk *et al.* 2006).

This chapter brings to a close the review of the body of research that has relevance in this study, specifically as it is depicted in the literature. In Chapter Two academic literacy as a concept was explored, first by tracking its historical development and then by discussing the most salient and relevant approaches to the acquisition thereof, particularly with reference to the most recent development in the field. Chapter Two closed with a brief explication of the role of language proficiency in the acquisition of academic literacy, before the understanding of the concept as it would stand for this study was delineated. In Chapter Three the focus shifted to the outworking of academic literacy acquisition in the university classroom. Prefaced with a discussion on student learning, the chapter continues by reviewing aspects of the environment, the principles of engagement, curriculum design, assessment and so forth. Here the role of writing and reading at university are also foregrounded, while the chapter ends with a focus on student identity and reflection on the complex role of the academic development practitioner. Finally, in this chapter the current status of higher education both nationally and internationally as a result of the globalisation, internationalisation and massification was reviewed, followed by a description of the South African higher education context. Thereafter, under-preparedness as a concept and as a reality were explored in some depth, whereafter the Stellenbosch University context, the site for this research, was described. Finally, in closing, Chapter Four provided a brief discussion of academic literacy as a field of research.

Mouton (2001:87) suggests that the literature review, or ‘review of the existing scholarship’ is important for a number of reasons, including to avoid duplication of work already done, to ensure that one is abreast of the most relevant and current theory and the latest empirical findings within the field, and to clearly define key concepts drawn from the most accepted understandings described in literature. In these three chapters I have sought to fulfil each of these requirements so as to provide a strong base for the presentation of the empirical work that is to follow in Chapter Six. Of particular importance at this juncture, however, is a necessary revisiting of the research question postulated in Chapter One, and a reconsideration of its relevance in the light of the scholarship that has been presented thus far. The focus of

this study is to obtain an understanding of how students, specifically under-prepared students, acquire academic literacy at a multilingual university. In seeking to motivate the need for this study, I offer the following:

- The complex, multi-faceted and evolving nature of academic literacy as described in the literature, in and of itself attests to the need for ongoing investigation of the role it plays in student learning.
- The changing higher education landscape provides opportunity for a more diverse cohort of students to participate in potentially powerful discourses and, in so doing, impact society at large. In order to facilitate this, however, the environment within which such participation is enabled needs to be explored, particularly when dealing with students who are deemed under-prepared for university.
- Finally, Stellenbosch University, with its dominant Afrikaans-speaking undergraduate population provides a unique context and presents many challenges in terms of the impact of the language of learning and teaching at the university.

I contend therefore, that there is a gap in the existing body of research within this very specific context. After conducting a NEXUS search, I can confirm that while there are a number of studies on the acquisition of academic literacy (some of which have been alluded to in the previous chapters), few focus on the case of the under-prepared student specifically. I could find no record of any similar study that includes the language caveat as it is found at Stellenbosch University.

In Chapter Five I discuss both the design and methodology that guided this research, and also how these were determined, together with my own responses to the process, so that, in keeping with “recent research [that] has argued for greater attention to be paid to the significance of identity in academic writing and on the ways in which writers ... convey a representation of the self” (Starfield 2004:68), I may contribute to this body of scholarship.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Yet the purpose of all research is ultimately to teach.*

Brew 2002:112.

#### 5.1 Introduction

Educational research has for many years had a significant status and standing within the broader research community. According to Brew (2002:112), however, this may be less true for the research conducted by those involved in academic development work. She suggests that while there have been examples of significant work done by academic development practitioners, this is not necessarily the norm. Research conducted by those whose primary focus is teaching and learning in higher education, however, can help practitioners to see the value of research insights by making everyday practice the focus of their investigations. To this end Brew (2002:120) outlines reasons for promoting work of this nature that include:

- Enhancing the credibility of academic developers as “agents for change”;
- Producing research that is useful in their developmental work; and
- Becoming conscious of “the ways in which good teaching can inform the research process”.

Entwistle (1997:3) envisages similar objectives for educational research which, he suggests, should be to “describe more clearly how learning takes place in higher education, and to point out how teaching and assessment affect the quality of that learning”.

As explained in Chapter One, I have positioned myself as practitioner-researcher in this study, and I trust that in positioning myself as such, I have been able to give substance to the broader goals as set out in the paragraph above, recognising that my work should make a contribution to the field of academic research within the higher education context (Baynham 1995:250). In this chapter, I will describe in some detail the process that guided the empirical work conducted for this study. I will provide motivation for the research decisions made, profile the participants in the investigation and discuss the approach applied during the analysis of the data.

## 5.2 Purpose and aims of the investigation

The purpose of the research was both to explore and describe how first-year students placed on an Extended Degree Programme (EDP) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences acquire academic literacy, with the intention of understanding their context and providing explanation for what they experience. Such a multiple purpose is not unusual in research of this nature (Babbie & Mouton 2001:79). Thus, I intend this study to contribute to the current body of research on high dropout rates, especially among first-year cohorts, and in particular those with a specific sensitivity to the challenges faced by under-prepared students seeking to acquire a level of academic literacy that will enable them to participate in the academic community. As higher education institutions grapple with effective and appropriate measures to support and enhance student learning among this specific cohort, I trust that the findings of this research will provide additional insights for developing teaching strategies and curricula to address these challenges.

The aim of this study was to answer the key research question:

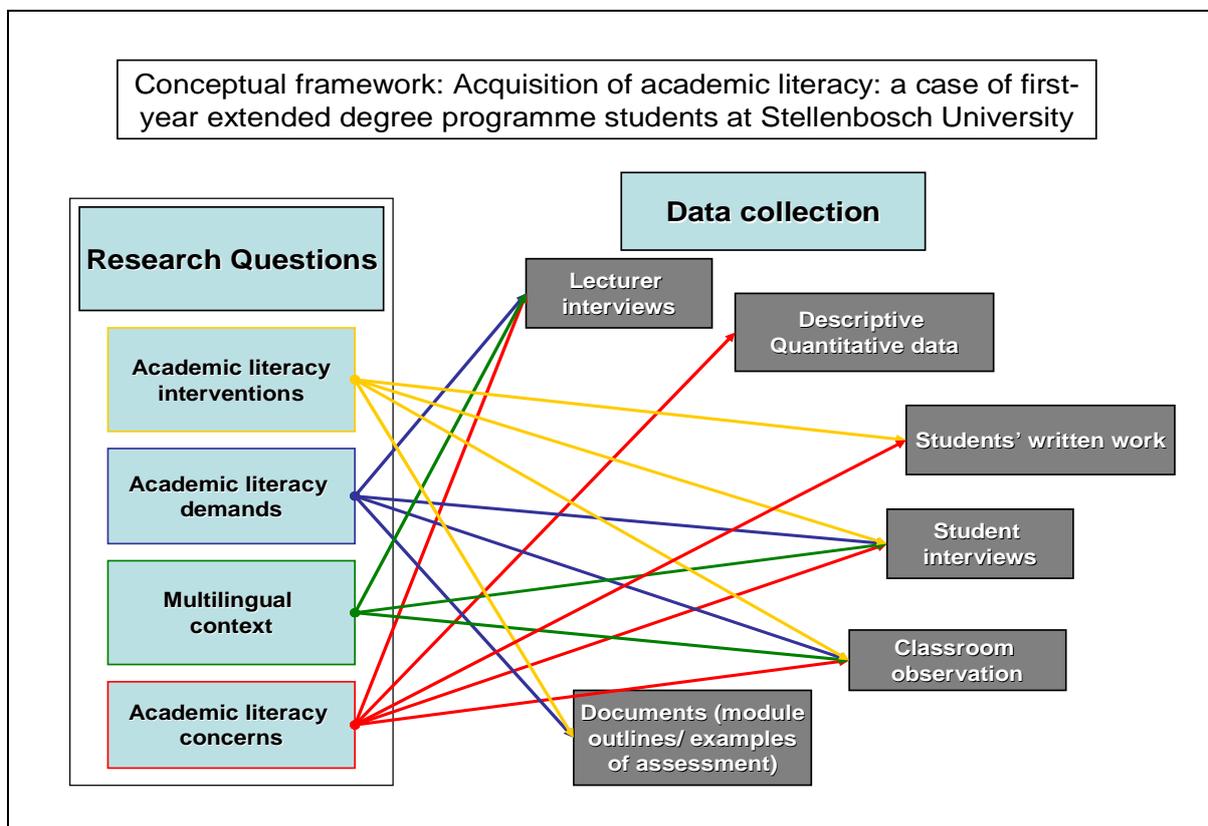
*How do students, specifically under-prepared students on an Extended Degree Programme, acquire academic literacy?*

A number of sub-questions, which have been ranked to indicate the move from a broader to a more specific focus of inquiry, guided the study:

1. How do under-prepared students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences experience existing interventions aimed at enhancing their academic literacy in the first year?
2. What are the academic literacy demands made on these first-year students in their different modules?
3. How does the bilingual, sometimes multilingual, context impact on the development of academic literacy among under-prepared students?
4. What are the problems relating to academic literacy that affect a specific group of under-prepared first-year students?

The reasoning behind the development of these research questions was discussed in Chapter One and has to some extent been revisited in the previous sections. However, to assist the systematic unravelling of the research questions, I generated a conceptual framework (Figure

5.1). According to Miles and Huberman (1994:20) a conceptual framework is “the current version of the researcher’s map of the territory being investigated” and assists in maintaining a clear focus during the data-collection period and in highlighting both explicit and implicit relationships that exist between the various strands of the study as a whole. Babbie and Mouton (2001:283) offer an alternative perspective when focussing on the case study in particular, arguing that a conceptual framework should describe the purpose and principles guiding the study, while “sharing the reasoning that led to the hypotheses or questions and carefully defining concepts”. I found this latter definition less suited to the structure I adopted for this thesis and in particular for this chapter, preferring to work with the notion of ‘the researcher’s map’ (Figure 5.1) which enabled me to graphically depict how the different data sources would address the different research questions. In the diagram, the different coloured lines link the different research questions to the relevant data sources.



**Figure 5.1: Conceptual framework**

### 5.3 Research approach

The body of scholarship dealing with social research is considerable and the social researcher can find herself confronted with an extensive range of alternatives requiring substantial decision-making after reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of each. According to

Denscombe (1998:3), “[t]he crucial thing for good research is that the choices are reasonable and that they are made explicit as part of any research report”. The responsibility that this places on the researcher is considerable, and often not easy to address given the variations in interpretation and approach that emerge from the many different texts, particularly with regards to qualitative research – a field which Denzin and Lincoln (2005:xi) describe as being primarily defined “by a series of essential tensions, contradictions, and hesitations”. Nevertheless, in this section and the next I will explicitly describe the research decisions that directed this study, motivating decisions made by drawing on the “rich literature on methodology” (Henning 2004:36) that is available on social and educational research.

Babbie and Mouton (2001:76) describe the first level of classification when reviewing the research process as that of distinguishing between empirical (using primary data) and non-empirical studies (using existing data). This study is clearly an empirical study; as can be seen from Table 5.1, primary data was gathered from a number of different sources including students, lecturers and students’ written work. In addition, the study is placed within the qualitative research paradigm and predominantly uses data-collection methods (see Table 5.1) that are associated with qualitative research (Babbie & Mouton 2001:270; Denzin & Lincoln 2005:3).

In order to address the ‘contradictions and hesitations’ referred to above, however, it is necessary to give some flesh to my understanding of qualitative research, particularly as it impacts on this study and as can be synthesized from the work of a number of researchers (e.g. Babbie & Mouton 2001; Rossman & Rallis 2003; Henning 2004; Belcher & Hirvela 2005; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Thus, qualitative research can be described as having the following characteristics:

- It is predominantly interpretive.
- It is naturalistic and not experimental.
- It seeks to study things within their natural settings.
- It is context-specific.
- It places the observer within the world being observed.
- It seeks to understand and describe rather than to explain, and such understanding and descriptions emerge from the data, as opposed to working towards a particular hypothesis.
- It typically uses a range of different methods.

- It produces, for the most part, data that are verbal and which provide in-depth ('thick'), rich descriptions of the situations, places, people or events being investigated.

In listing what might appear to be a neat set of attributes for qualitative research, one encounters many pitfalls as the concept is illusive and defies attempts to place it "in a box" (Denzin & Lincoln 2005:7). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, 'qualitative' is understood "as referring to a broad methodological approach to the study of social action" (Babbie & Mouton 2001) and, within this context, adheres to the characterisation given above.

Typically, the purpose of a qualitative study is to interpret so as to obtain an understanding of a particular phenomenon. The objective is to determine the *what*, *how* and *why* of a particular case or phenomenon and thus the focus is on the "qualities of the phenomenon rather than the quantities" (Henning 2004:3). The research questions that guide this study illustrate this purpose both explicitly with the use of *what* and *how* in the questions themselves, but also implicitly. The underlying intention is to also understand *why* the acquisition of academic literacy is experienced in the way the students described it, the way in which it was observed and the way in which it was gleaned from the different documents and written texts (see also Silverman 2001:297).

Qualitative research, specifically research seeking to interpret and understand behaviours and attitudes, ideally takes place within the natural setting where variables are largely uncontrolled. To this end, Babbie and Mouton (2001:271) suggest that the qualitative researcher should seek to disrupt the natural setting as little as possible and to "make a deliberate attempt to put themselves in the shoes of the people they are observing and studying" so as to understand their actions. This was one of the reasons for conducting classroom observations as a method for collecting data (see 5.6). In addition, considerable biographical and background data was gathered on the students who comprise the sample so that I, as researcher and interviewer, would have a greater chance of securing an insider perspective and an understanding of the students' own contexts in seeking to understand their actions.

The inductive approach used in this study is also typical of qualitative work. Rather than starting out with a specific hypothesis, I endeavoured to gather extensive data about the case to systematically build subsequent constructs that would frame the data and eventually a theory that would make sense of what had been interpreted and observed (Babbie & Mouton 2001:273). The process of analysis is described later in this chapter (5.9).

Thus, I positioned this work firmly within an interpretive paradigm, as I sought to interpret everyday occurrences so as “to extend human understanding thereof” (McKenna 2003b). Within this context, I was acutely aware of the fact that any interpretive form of research will, inevitably, be “influenced subjectively by the values and purposes of the researcher” (Nduna 2000:67). To this end, the need for triangulating the data is addressed both in the discussion of the research design (5.4) and the data collection methods (5.5) that follow in the next two sections of this chapter.

## **5.4 Research design**

Henning (2004:31) suggests that research designs could be called research genres, as she believes this latter term more suitably “captures the nature of the different types of qualitative research than ‘type’ and ‘format’”. Irrespective of the terminology however, it is necessary for the researcher to have an extensive knowledge of the different research methods available, to be familiar with the site of study and to have a solid grasp of the seminal theoretical work in the field of inquiry before making an informed decision as to a suitable research design.

Research designs within a qualitative paradigm are typically characterised by providing for in-depth engagement with the subject (or object) of the study. Usually a relatively small number of cases are investigated with data emerging from a number of different sources (Babbie & Mouton 2001:279). However, it is seldom seen that the initial plan is adhered to without adaptations throughout a particular study, and this flexibility is also a feature of qualitative research designs (Henning 2004:31). It should be noted that for a number of reasons (described in more detail below) the research design was adapted on two occasions during the empirical stage of the investigation to improve the overall design.

### **5.4.1 Case study**

Using a case study for educational research is one of the most commonly used applications of this approach (David 2006:xxx). Selecting a research design for a qualitative study is all

about finding the appropriate fit, based on the nature of the investigation and the purpose of the research (Denscombe 1998:3). Given that the participants in the investigation, the 2006 EDP students, were already a discrete group, a case study was appropriate. According to Henning (2004:40) the case study lends itself to placement within an interpretive paradigm and thus fits well with what was intended in this study. In addition, the goal of this study was exploratory and descriptive in nature, which again fits the case study requirements (David 2006:xxxvi).

In reviewing the history of the case study, Babbie and Mouton (2001:280) suggest that it has come some way from being regarded initially with much scepticism to where it is now widely used in social research (Denscombe 1998:30). It should be noted, however, that even in defining the case study there appear to be contradictions in the literature with regards to terminology and interpretation that were alluded to earlier. For example, while Babbie and Mouton (2001:279) list case studies as one of “three design types within the qualitative paradigm”, Stake (2005:443) suggests that case study research is not even “essentially qualitative” nor a “methodological choice”, while Yin (1994:1) and Denscombe (1998:30) describe it as a strategy. Stake describes the focus of the case study as being “a specific, unique, bounded system” (Stake 2005:445), while Yin (1994:13) emphasises the relationship between the phenomenon that is being investigated and the context within which it occurs suggesting that “the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. In this study the focus became the 2006 EDP cohort in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences comprising 61 students, thus a ‘bounded system’, recognising and acknowledging throughout, the very specific context within which it exists. The selection of this group was the result of a process that evolved during the early stages of the study. Three key issues emerged during the initial review of the literature that guided the selection of the participants for the study more directly. Firstly, there was the recurring theme of the link between the acquisition of academic literacy and issues of under-preparedness; secondly, the link between academic literacy and language proficiency, and finally, the nature of the support or intervention that is being provided for the students. These issues, coupled with my own work in academic development, ensured that the first level of selection, namely that of EDP students, was fairly straightforward. The Extended Degree Programme was offered in six faculties at Stellenbosch University in 2005 (Health Science; Science; AgriScience;

Engineering, Law and Arts and Social Sciences<sup>15</sup>), but of these, only the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences would be offering a fully-fledged academic literacy module as part of their EDP in 2006. In addition, at the end of 2005, this Faculty announced their intention to offer all undergraduate modules as “T options” (see discussion of the Stellenbosch University Language Policy, 4.4.2). Thus the final selection of the 2006 EDP Faculty of Arts and Social Science cohort could be described as having been made based on both the suitability of the faculty, and that the focus of the study could be seen as being atypical, even within the Stellenbosch University context (described in Chapter Four (4.4) as significantly unique within the South African context (Denscombe 1998:33)).

Case studies generally investigate a single unit, but do so intensively by taking an in-depth look at the many different variables that could have an influence on the case. (Babbie & Mouton 2001:281). In this way a case study can lead to “unique and universal understandings” (Simons 2006:219). In particular, Denscombe’s (1998:30-31) definition, namely that the case study is an intensive investigation of a single unit, involving the examination of multiple variables and using a variety of methods, resonates with this study. During the inquiry I engaged with the participants in a number of different ways and although only 13 students out of the 61 who comprised the EDP group took part in the interviews, additional data with regards to the entire group’s context, background and experience was gathered from a number of alternative sources so as to provide for the “thick description” (Babbie & Mouton 2001:271) required for qualitative studies of this nature. The focus on multiple methods, which was also highlighted when discussing qualitative research more generally, is crucial for this research genre so that it can provide opportunities to “take multiple perspectives into account” (Babbie & Mouton 2001:282-283). In addition, suggest Babbie and Mouton (2001:282), using different methods and sources provides opportunity for ‘replication’ as the occurrences of a particular phenomenon increase, so too can the researcher’s confidence in the reliability of a particular finding. Issues of reliability and having confidence in the data will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter (5.6)

Case studies also typically focus less on the outcome and more on the process, seeking to “unravel the complexities of a given situation” and in so doing to provide the researcher with an opportunity to view the case in its entirety rather than to hone in on a specific variable

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<sup>15</sup> In 2005, this faculty was still known as the Faculty of Arts and the Humanities

(Denscombe 1998:31). In this study I have found this description to be particularly useful when seeking to critically review the quality of my data, which generated a complicated matrix of information rather than all pointing to a single outcome. Being able to recognise this as typical of the case study process was reassuring.

Henning (2004:32) notes that it is not unusual for case studies to use both qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting data, suggesting that in some instances these can contribute to ensuring that a full picture of the case is presented. To this end, use has been made of selected quantitative data sets, both raw and descriptive to provide for the “descriptive quantification” (Leibowitz 2001:75) of the descriptive quantitative data, as referred to in the conceptual framework above (Figure 5.1).

While the case study provides an ideal vehicle for in-depth social research, there are limitations or disadvantages to this approach. Most significant of these relates to the question of generalizability of the findings that emerge from case study research. In order to address this limitation, the case study researcher needs to take care when making comparisons with other similar cases and to acknowledge that the generalizability of case study findings is rather shown by demonstrating the links between findings and previous knowledge, thus providing significant opportunity for developing theory (Babbie & Mouton 2001:283). Another disadvantage listed by Denscombe (1998:40) relates to the nature of the data that is typically generated within case study. It can be regarded as “soft” and “lacking the degree of rigour expected of social science research” which typically rests on quantitative data and statistics. Writing almost ten years after the publication of Denscombe’s research guide, I would venture that the descriptive and verbal nature of the data produced in research of this nature has become increasingly valued. Nevertheless, I heed his words of caution and have endeavoured to address them directly later in this chapter (5.6). Other commonly listed disadvantages of the case study - such as the effect of the researcher being both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, issues of obtaining access to the participants in the investigation and delineating the boundaries for the study (Denscombe 1998:40-41) - will be addressed as they were encountered and dealt with during the data collection process in the following sections. Yet, the value of case study research lies in its ability “to challenge orthodox thinking, ... to reveal in-depth understanding and, most importantly, to take a quantum leap in how we come to understand complex educational situations” (Simons 2006:226), and this was my intention.

### 5.4.2 Participants in the research

Given that the case in this study comprised the 2006 EDP cohort in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the participants in the study were drawn from this group (the students themselves) and from those directly involved with the group (some of their lecturers). The empirical investigation was conducted in three phases, a preliminary phase, a core phase and a follow-up phase. The preliminary phase was undertaken at the start of the study to help guide the design of what was to follow. The participants during this phase comprised lecturers responsible for the four first-year modules (excluding the language modules) with the highest enrolment figures in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. During the core phase and the follow-up phase, however, the participants comprised the 2006 EDP students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the phases, the time frames and the data-collection processes undertaken during each phase.

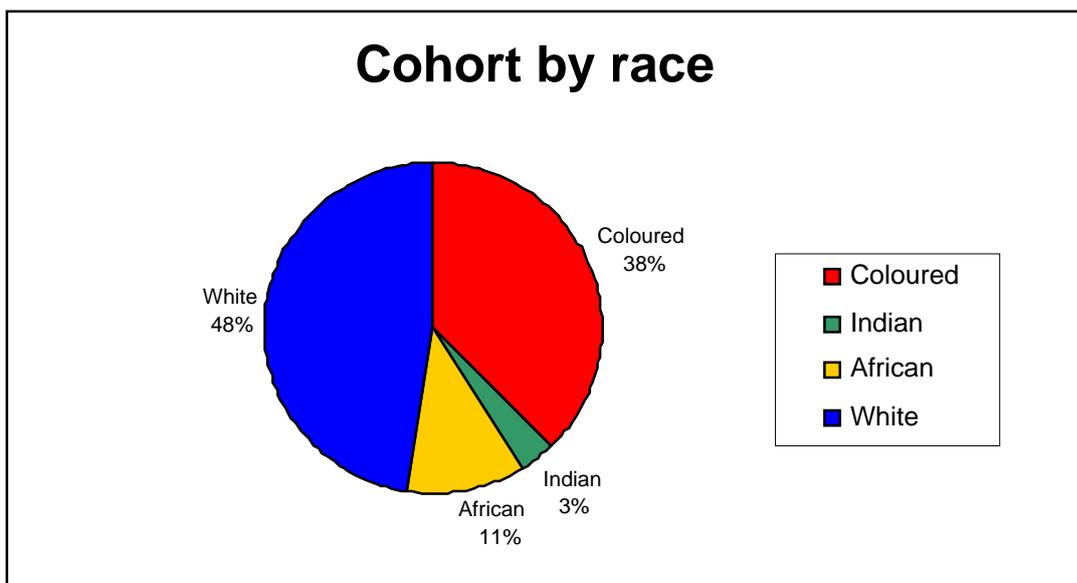
*Table 5.1: Summary of the research phases*

	<b>Preliminary phase</b>	<b>Core phase</b>	<b>Follow-up phase</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Lecturers from four large-enrolment first-year modules	2006 EDP cohort	2006 EDP cohort
<b>Data-collection methods</b>	4 semi-structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Descriptive quantitative data</li> <li>▪ 8 semi-structured interviews</li> <li>▪ 4 classroom visits (observation)</li> <li>▪ ABQ data</li> <li>▪ Regular meetings with the two lecturers responsible for the AL modules</li> <li>▪ Content analysis (students' written work)</li> <li>▪ Document analysis (module outlines; assessment tools; etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Student data (1<sup>st</sup> year results)</li> <li>▪ 2 focus group interviews</li> <li>▪ 2 semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>
<b>Time-frame</b>	2005	2006	2007

At the start of 2006, 63 students registered for the EDP, most of whom were required to do so by virtue of their Grade 12 National Senior Certificate results. In the Faculty of Arts and

Social Sciences all students who obtain less than 57% in this examination are expected to register for this programme. (To recap, the EDP extends the first academic year over two years and includes two additional semester modules, *Texts in the Humanities 113* and *143*, which focus on the acquisition of academic literacy and additional subject-specific tutorials in a number of their mainstream modules. The academic literacy modules are offered in separate parallel English and Afrikaans classes over two semesters and the two lecturers responsible for the modules work in tandem, so as to ensure that the content and assessment mirror each another across the two groups as far as possible.)

Typically, the EDP students register for at least one, although often two or more, of the four large enrolment modules that were represented during the preliminary phase. Two of the EDP students dropped out within the first few weeks of the year, but the remaining 61 comprised the cohort that participated in the study. Of these students, 15 had chosen to join the EDP even though their Grade 12 results did not require them to do so. Addendum A provides a complete list of the 61 students (anonymously numbered 1-61) giving a full breakdown of their Grade 12 results, their access test results and selected biographical data. The group comprised 35 male and 26 female students. The oldest student was 35 while youngest was 18. Figure 5.2 illustrates the racial distribution, which reflects a greater percentage of black students (52%) than is representative of black first-year students across the University (21%).



**Figure 5.2: 2006 EDP cohort by race: n=61**  
(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

Table 5.2 depicts the language distribution. It should be noted that four of the students had not had any Afrikaans at school and of these four, three had done English as a second language.

**Table 5.2: Language distribution: n= 61**

Language	No of students	% of group
Afrikaans	35	57
German	1	1.6
English	19	31
Pedi	1	1.6
South Sotho	1	1.6
Xhosa	3	5
Zulu	1	1.6

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

Table 5.3 sets out the students' Grade 12 results. These results are shown in irregular intervals to highlight a number of key issues. Firstly, typically students with below 50% in Grade 12 are not admitted to the University unless under specific circumstances and with permission from the Dean of the Faculty. Four of the five students who obtained below 50% in Grade 12 were older students<sup>16</sup>, which is most probably the reason for their acceptance. The reason for the fifth student obtaining entry is unknown. The interval from 55% to 57% has been included given the 57% cut-off applied by the Faculty.

**Table 5.3: Grade 12 results: n=61**

Interval	No of students	% of group
Less than 50%	5	8.2
50 > 55%	33	54
55 > 57%	8	13
57 > 60%	5	8.2
60% +	10	16.4

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

<sup>16</sup> In South Africa, students over 23 years of age can be accepted for a degree programme even if they have not obtained a matriculation exemption in Grade 12.

Of the group of 61 students, 28 had attended urban, previously ‘white’ schools, while 17 came from historically disadvantaged schools. One student was blind and had attended a special needs school, while the balance of the students came from rural or unknown schools<sup>17</sup>. Finally, of interest is the fact that of the 32 black students, 20 had received some form of financial support, either from the University or from the National Bursary Scheme. Only two of the white students had been supported in this way.

This information provides a context for the discussion of the findings in Chapter Six and also acts as a measure for viewing the extent to which the students who participated in the interviews were representative of the larger cohort. In addition, the group can be viewed against the university-specific data that was set out in Chapter Four (4.4).

## **5.5 Data collection methods**

Prior to commencement of the empirical work for this investigation, I was required to obtain ethical clearance from the University’s Ethics Committee. According to this process, I had to supply details on the envisaged study including the approved research proposal, as well as a letter of motivation from my supervisor and letters granting permission for the research from the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the four different heads of department. In addition, a sample Information Sheet and Consent Form had to be submitted. Each participant in the study was subsequently given a copy of the Information Sheet and required to sign the Consent Form prior to the study. An example of the Information Sheet and Consent form are included as Addendum B. Obtaining consent from the Ethics Committee was a lengthy process and a considerable period of time elapsed between submission of the request and receiving a response, when I could commence the empirical work.

In keeping with the multi-method approach that most often characterises qualitative research, and in particular the case study, data was collected from different sources and on different aspects. According to Stake (2005:447), the qualitative researcher who is working with a case study would ideally gather data on:

- The case itself, how it operates;
- The history of the case;

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<sup>17</sup> Term used on the Student Information System (SIS) usually refers to students who did not fall within the South African school system.

- The site, thus where the case is physically located;
- Related or similar cases which give recognition to the specific case; and
- Informants who can provide detail on the case.

For this reason, the history, background and functioning of the EDPs were described at some length in this chapter and in Chapter Four (4.4.4), while the Stellenbosch University context as site for the study has been similarly highlighted (see 4.4.1; 4.4.2; 4.4.3). In addition, comparative data drawn from the full 2006 first-year Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences cohort is used where relevant to serve as a benchmark against which some of the data can be interpreted. Apart from the student and lecturer interviews, classroom observation was undertaken, module outlines and example of assessment were reviewed and the students' perceptions, by way of a reflective exercise, were gathered in writing. Thus, following on from Stake's list, all of the activities focused on gathering more data on the case.

Table 5.1 gives a summary of these different methods and data sources. The discussion that follows is segmented according to the divisions indicated in the table, namely preliminary phase, core phase and follow-up phase, thus providing a chronological perspective of the data collection process. In each instance, the activities undertaken as well as the motivation for selecting the different data sources and the different participants will be described.

### **5.5.1 Preliminary phase**

Research that seeks to obtain an understanding of how university teachers think about teaching and learning into order to enhance such teaching and learning, has been the focus of much academic development literature through the years (Elen, Lindblom-Ylänne & Clement 2007:124). During the preliminary phase, therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four lecturers representing the four largest first-year enrolment modules from the first semester. It should be noted that each of these modules represents a specific subject and department in the faculty. Table 5.4 lists these first-year modules from the Faculty of Arts and Social Science indicating the enrolments in June 2006 and highlighting the number of EDP students in each of these modules.

**Table 5.4: Enrolments per selected modules (2006)**

<b>Module</b>	<b>No of enrolments</b>	<b>No of EDP students<sup>18</sup></b>
Module A	505	13
Module B	344	22
Module C	908	63
Module D	695	40

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

In selecting the respondents for these interviews, purposive sampling was undertaken as the respondents were selected because they fitted the criteria of “*desirable participants* [as] they represent a theoretical ‘population’ in that they are spokespersons for the topic of inquiry” (Henning 2004:71, see also Silverman 2001:250). Thus their contribution was not to be taken as generalizable to a larger group, but rather to provide a basis for an initial understanding of the issues of teaching and learning in general, and to the acquisition of academic literacy specifically, as experienced by a particular group of lecturers of first-year students.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted during October 2005, thus in the year prior to the arrival of the 2006 EDP students that comprise the case in this study. After the lengthy process of obtaining ethical clearance as described above, I contacted the four heads of department for the relevant modules in writing, and requested that they nominate or recommend one of their lecturers involved in the modules (thus a ‘desirable participant’) to participate in the study. In all cases, the lecturers involved made themselves available within a relatively short space of time to participate in the approximately one-hour interviews. One of the respondents was a professor of more than twenty years’ experience and was also head of department at the time. The second respondent was a senior lecturer with a PhD, with considerable experience and who was due to retire within two years. The other two lecturers were both younger each with less than ten years’ experience, one with a PhD, the other working towards obtaining this qualification. All four of the respondents were white and Afrikaans speaking, although also fluent in English.

Three of the interviews were conducted in the lecturers’ offices, while the fourth took place in a departmental meeting room. The interviews followed an interview schedule (Addendum C) that was developed based largely on my own experience in academic development and in

<sup>18</sup> In some instances these numbers could include EDP students from the 2005 cohort.

teaching first-year classes. At that stage I had also commenced with an in-depth review of the relevant literature on academic literacy, subsequent to having conducted an initial overview of the body of scholarship for the initial submission of the proposal for this study. These insights also fed into the design of the interview schedule, which was made up of three sections, namely:

- Background data on the module e.g. class size, number of classes, number of assessment opportunities, etc.;
- Their perception of the profile of their students both in terms of background and with respect to their abilities and potential for success; and
- Their understanding of academic literacy and aspects relating to academic literacy that might have an impact on their first-year classes, particularly with regard to their expectations of their students.

All four of the lecturers were keen to substantiate their comments and, to this end, I was invited to observe a first-year class conducted by one of the respondents, while another gave me access to a set of assignments that had just been assessed. This information and the experience of attending the class would all feed into the later construction of the interview schedule for the meetings with the students. In all cases, the lecturers undertook to provide me with module outlines and examples of assessment instruments during 2006 (see 5.7.2 for further details). Three of the four interviews were audio-taped, while the fourth, the first one to be conducted, was scribed while I conducted the interview. Thereafter, I transcribed the three audio-taped interviews as part of the analysis process described below (5.9).

The use of semi-structured interviews in qualitative research generally and in the case study design specifically will be explored in detail in the next section. However, this phase of the study could be seen in the final analysis as having been exploratory in nature. Babbie and Mouton (2001:80) describe exploratory studies as useful in a number of different ways, many of which fit with my objectives in conducting these interviews. Thus, not only did they assist in “breaking new ground”, but they also generated new ideas and perspectives that were to guide the empirical work that was to follow. As indicated earlier, the purpose of this preliminary series of interviews was to lay a foundation for the study by obtaining a sense of how lecturers situated in the faculty and working with first-years viewed their students, specifically with regards to their academic literacy acquisition. The value of conducting these interviews, however, exceeded the initial purpose set. Following on from Babbie and Mouton

(2001:80), not only did they serve to provide further insight into the site of the study, but more importantly, as will be seen in Chapter Six, the data generated underlined the need for a study of this nature.

### 5.5.2 Core phase

The acquisition of academic literacy has been described in Chapter Two and Three as a process that occurs over time. For this reason it was important to be able to collect data from and on the 61 EDP students over a period of time and from a number of different sources. Lucas and Meyer (2004:1) suggest "... there is value in knowing more about the dimensionality of variation within cohorts of students and the impact that this variation has upon their learning". Table 5.5 provides a schematic representation of the chronology of events through which I was able to establish a hierarchy of data sources, using primary and secondary data to build a network of integrated information (Tuettemann 2003:13). In support of these different data sources, I also met with the two lecturers responsible for the *Text in the Humanities* modules on a regular basis throughout 2006.

**Table 5.5: Data collection process during core phase in chronological order**

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">January 2006</div> <div style="font-size: 4em; margin: 20px 0;">↓</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;">December 2006</div>	Data collection process in chronological order
	Descriptive quantitative data
	Alpha-baseline Questionnaire (ABQ) data
	Students' reflective writing exercises
	Regular formal and informal meetings with the <i>Texts in the Humanities</i> lecturers
	Module outlines: analysis
	Classroom observation
	Student interviews
	Assessment tools: analysis

In the section that follows I will discuss each method individually, highlighting first the reason for selecting the particular method, the crafting of the instrument (where appropriate), the selection of the data sources or participants, and the process that ensued.

### 5.5.2.1 Descriptive quantitative data

Descriptive quantitative data was gathered on the EDP students from two different sources, namely the University's Student Information System (SIS) and the online summary of the Alpha Baseline Questionnaire (ABQ)<sup>19</sup> data. The SIS provided the biographical data that has already been described under *Participants in the investigation* (5.4) together with their year-end results, and was used to provide both background information and supporting data on the students. Similarly, the results of the ABQ were harvested for this specific group to offer another layer of information on the case. Bitzer (2005:581) has argued "one way of judging transformation is by determining students' own views and perceptions of their own development at various stages of their studies and comparing levels of perceptual change to actual academic performance". Although his context here is quantitative, I would still argue that while the ABQ responses, the reflective writing exercises (see 5.5.2.5), and the student interviews gave insight as to the students' perceptions, their school and academic results served as bookends on either side of the academic year. Jointly this data provided layers of in-depth information on the case being studied.

### 5.5.2.2 Interviews

The importance of self, identity and agency in the acquisition of academic literacy has been attested to in the previous chapters. In addition, the influence of society, culture and the learning environment has also been explored. Leibowitz (2005:666) argues that in the light of this, "[t]he exploration of academic discourse is ... enhanced by participants' accounts of their acquisition of academic discourse". Providing opportunity for students to share their stories in an interview situation was selected as one of the prime methods for collecting data for this study. Eliciting student responses in this way is one of the preferred methods that researchers worldwide use for investigating issues relating to students learning in general (Beatty, *et al.* 1997; Entwistle 1997; Lucas & Meyer 2004; McCune 2004; McKinney & Van Pletzen 2004; Essack & Quayle 2007) and to the acquisition of academic literacy and the development of student writing (Bock 1988; Prosser & Webb 1994; Richardson 2004; Starfield 2004; Leibowitz 2005) in particular. Some of these researchers (see Richardson

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<sup>19</sup> The Alpha-Baseline Questionnaire (ABQ) is a survey that is conducted among all first-year students at Stellenbosch University during the first few weeks of the academic year. The development of the ABQ was based on six major studies on student change including Astin's Input-Environment-Outcomes (IEO) approach, Kuhn's model of student engagement, Tinto's model of student departure, Pascarella and Terenzini's research on student change, the Freshman Integration and Tracking System (FIT) as introduced by Dietsche and the South African Wellness model (Bitzer 2005). The survey has been implemented at Stellenbosch University since 2002.

2004) have, as is the case in this study, used interviews alongside numerous other data collecting methods to generate the multi-layered data that is often characteristic of a case study design. More specifically, however, using interviews as a method for gathering data in this study was pertinent because it would provide the in-depth insights from a small number of respondents that would fit the research design (Denscombe 1998:110).

An interview is much more than “a neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers” (Fontana & Frey 2005:696); rather it is an active engagement process between two (or more) people. Fontana and Frey (2005:696) argue that much depends on the personalities, the position and the purpose of the participants and the way in which these impact on one another to result in “a contextually bound and mutually created story”. Their perspective, however, could be misleading. Although the focus of the interview is to create an opportunity for the subject in the study to voice her opinion and understanding of certain issues without too much restriction, the researcher still needs to have an overall plan, even though the process is characterised by its flexibility (Babbie & Mouton 2001:289). Care must be taken to ensure that while both role-players are contributing to the discourse, the respondent does most of the talking. Henning (2004:69) argues that irrespective of the effort that the researcher makes to provide a supportive and conducive environment, however, “the discussion still remains contrived because the researcher holds the research knowledge and the scholarship position and the respondent is the object of the inquiry”.

In spite of the importance of maintaining flexibility during the interview process as described above, an interview schedule (Addendum D) was crafted to guide the process. The schedule comprised seventeen open-ended questions, some of which had sub-questions, and was structured as follows:

**Table 5.6: Structure of interview schedule**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of questions</b>
How the students experience the move from school to university	6
How the students perceive and approach writing at university	5
How the students perceive their own academic abilities	1
How the students describe their approaches to their studies	2
How the students perceive and dealt with tests, examinations and assignments	3

At the start of each interview, the reason for the study and the interview was explained to the students and they were given the full Information Sheet to read. The students were also all required to complete the Consent Form prior to the commencement of the interview. In addition, to put the students at ease, I generally asked them where they came from and which high school they had attended, even though this data was available to me on the University student records system. It should also be noted that the students were asked to bring examples of their written work from one of their mainstream modules (thus not the *Texts in the Humanities* modules) to refer to in the discussion. In most cases, these were discussed when the questions about their writing experiences were addressed. No specific questions relating to these pieces of writing were scripted in advance. The first iteration of the schedule was piloted at the end of 2005 with an EDP student from that year's cohort. The schedule was then revised based on the responses received during the pilot. The interview conducted with this student was not included in the study.

I had decided to conduct the student interviews during the second semester of their first-year. This decision was made in the light of already having their initial perceptions and expectations via their Alpha-Baseline Questionnaire (ABQ) responses and their reflective essays. Conducting the interviews after the students had been on campus for six months meant that they would be able to reflect on a full semester cycle for a number of their first-year modules<sup>20</sup>. Selecting participants for the interviews proved to be a particularly difficult and frustrating process. During the first round of selection, invitations were sent to twenty students who were purposively selected from the *Texts in the Humanities 113* and *133* class lists, as all 61 EDP students were required to register for this module. This form of selection was undertaken as I wished to ensure that the selected group would provide a voice for the diversity that characterised the larger group (see 5.4). The invitations briefly outlined the study and the purpose of the interviews. Students were informed that snacks would be available prior to the interview. As mentioned, the invitation also requested that they bring examples of their written work with them.

By using purposive sampling and working sequentially from the English and Afrikaans groups lists, I aimed to draw an equal representation from both language groups. As a result of this first round of invitations, only three students came forward – two from the English

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<sup>20</sup> Not all undergraduate modules at Stellenbosch University have been semesterized although year-long modules are in the minority.

group and one from the Afrikaans. I then solicited help from the two lecturers responsible for the *Texts in the Humanities 113* and *133* modules. They advertised the research in their classes and as a result of this, a further three students came forward (two of whom had been part of the original sample group of twenty). I subsequently visited the classes personally to attempt to encourage further participation, and although another four students indicated their willingness to participate, only two arrived for the interviews on the agreed date. Thus eight interviews were conducted instead of the ten that had been initially envisaged. Although the interview process was started in late July, the difficulties experienced in getting students to participate resulted in the last interview being conducted when the classes for the year had already come to an end<sup>21</sup> and students were preparing for their final examinations, which meant that attempting a further round of selection would have been fruitless. I was initially concerned that having conducted relatively few interviews would prove to be a limitation of the study. However, when later confronted with my version of what Miles and Huberman (1994:56) describe as “alpine collection of information” and during the ensuing analysis of the data, I was satisfied that the interviews that were conducted generated the rich data that I had been hoping for. Nevertheless, the experience with the interviews, and as a result of the initial analysis thereof (which was conducted immediately after the last interview was completed), the initial data collection strategy was revised to include a series of follow-up interviews with representatives from the same cohort during their second year (see 5.5.3). The background data on the eight students is summarised in Table 5.7.

**Table 5.7: Background data on interviewees (2006)**

	Names <sup>22</sup>	Age <sup>23</sup>	Race	Gender	Language <sup>24</sup>	M-Year	Gr 12 %	Access tests
1	Wena	35	White	Female	Afrikaans	1989	45	50.91
2	Thabu	24	African	Male	S. Sotho	2003	51.5	24.81
3	Attie	20	White	Male	Afrikaans	2004	51.8	46.24
4	Lincoln	20	African	Male	Xhosa	2005	53	26.67
5	Paulina	18	African	Female	Pedi	2004	54.5	14.95
6	Sophie	21	White	Female	Afrikaans	2004	55.9	31.51
7	Sandy	21	White	Female	English	2004	57.2	38.56
8	Anna	19	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	58.1	35.97

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

<sup>21</sup> In South Africa, the calendar year determines that academic year. Summer holidays occur in December/January. Undergraduate classes at Stellenbosch University typically end mid to end October.

<sup>22</sup> Pseudonyms have been used

<sup>23</sup> Age in 2006 when interviews were conducted

<sup>24</sup> As this information is taken from the SIS, this refers to the response given by the student wrt ‘home language’

Despite all of the problems encountered in getting the students to participate, the group that did respond provided an interesting mix of students. The racial split of 50/50 between white and black represents the EDP cohort as a whole, although too few coloured students participated. The ages of the students also offered a diverse mix, while the language distribution provided a useful spread of Afrikaans, English and African languages, which was relevant to the study.

All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed (see Addendum E for example) immediately afterwards and while initial analysis inevitably occurs even as data collection is underway, a more detailed analysis across the eight interviews was undertaken quite soon after the interview series had been completed. Among the disadvantages of using transcriptions of interviews as the raw data for analysis is the difficulty the transcriber can sometimes experience in hearing all that is said, as well as the fact that “the data are stripped of some of their meaning” (Denscombe 1998:131-132). Both of these potential pitfalls were addressed in this instance, however, as I was not only able to assist the transcriber on the few occasions when she was unable to make out what was being said, but was also able to carry across my own handwritten notes from the interviews onto the transcribed sheets while the experiences were still fresh in my mind.

As researcher, I conducted all of the interviews myself – a situation that had both positive and negative implications for the study. On the one hand it meant that I was able to pick up on interesting and perhaps unexpected answers on the part of the respondents. The flexible nature of case study research also allowed me to adapt the interview schedule depending on the nature of the responses, while still remaining within the boundaries that I had set for the study. Henning (2004:72), for example, states that she “designs questions only as possible guides”, revising them as she moves through the interviews. However, she cautions that others might critique this approach, particularly if they are concerned about reliability. As mentioned earlier, reliability and validity - and particularly the trustworthiness of the data - will be discussed later in the chapter (5.6).

The fact that I conducted the interviews myself also meant that I was readily able to grasp the trend of each discussion during later analysis. As I am fluent in both English and Afrikaans, I could encourage the respondents to speak in whichever language they felt most comfortable and this greatly contributed to establishing the rapport that is “essential if respondents are to

be encouraged to reflect critically on their experiences” (Vidovich 2003:87). On the other hand, however, I am unable to speak an African language, which meant that the three African students who participated in the interviews were required to speak in a language that was not their L1. Most importantly, however, I was known to the students as someone who worked at the Centre for Teaching and Learning and who had a link with the programme for which they were registered. Henning (2004:54) cautions that one should be mindful of the power relations that exist in the interview situation and, for this reason, even though the students all generally seemed fairly at ease during the interview process, their responses need to be viewed through this specific relational lens.

### **5.5.2.3 Formal and informal meetings**

Regular formal and informal meetings were held with the two lecturers responsible for the academic literacy modules (*Texts in the Humanities 113* and *123*). As I was jointly responsible for setting up the curriculum and framework for the modules, I used the meetings to obtain information as to how the lecturers were interpreting the curriculum and to gather data on how they perceived the students responses to it. Field notes were made during most of these meetings, although for the more formal meetings minutes were also generated. Although the notes are not cited in this dissertation, they provided a useful additional point of reference during the analysis process, particularly during the initial coding phase.

### **5.5.2.4 Observation**

Four classroom visits, two in each language group and two per semester, were conducted during the core phase of data collection. As a non-participant observer (Babbie & Mouton 2001:293) I used each of these fifty-minute long sessions to gather data on two issues. Firstly, to see how the lecturers were implementing the curriculum (as opposed to receiving their accounts of the process) and secondly, to observe the way in which the students engaged with the content, with one another and with the lecturer, during the class. The class visits were pre-arranged with the lecturers although the students were not informed in advance. I did not follow a specific observation schedule, but prior to attending the classes made a list of the observable data that would be available to me, such as body language (including eye contact, facial expression), extent of student participation, fluency of the lecturer and the students (also tone and register), coherence and structure of the class, and physical attributes and dress (Babbie & Mouton 2001:293). (See Addendum F for example of field notes.)

As part of my work in academic development, I am regularly called upon to conduct class visits and to provide detailed feedback to the lecturer both orally and in writing. Because of this, I felt comfortable in observing these classes and in writing up my observations in detail, seeking to not only observe, but also interpret what was happening (Henning 2004:81). Thus, through these observations I hoped “to understand or to interpret social reality as it exists, ...” (Henning 2004:97). I was, however, familiar to most of the students, having played a role in their orientation programme at the start of the year. The possible impact of my presence on the usual classroom interaction, while difficult to determine, needs to be noted.

#### **5.5.2.5 Student writing**

As was alluded to earlier in this chapter, collecting students’ own written work as a data source in qualitative research has become common practice. At the start of the academic year, the students were given a writing task during one of their earliest *Texts in the Humanities 113* classes, which required them to write a reflective paragraph of 300-350 words on the topic: *Texts in the Humanities: my expectations and some early observations*. The students were each given the assignment in writing, including the requirements, instructions and some prompts to assist them in interpreting the title (Addendum G). The students were also informed that the task would form a small part of their assessment mark for the module and were given a rubric that indicated the mark allocation. Prior to finalising the task, I submitted a draft to the two lecturers soliciting their feedback. It was at their request that the assignment formed part of the students’ class mark for the module. The students were advised in advance that they would be given a writing assignment on that particular day and the assignment was completed during class. Permission to use the essays in the study was requested after the students had completed the task. All of the 21 Afrikaans-speaking and 16 English-speaking students who were in the class on the particular day agreed to the use of their work in this manner.

As part of preparing these essays for qualitative content analysis, I marked all of the student’s work according to the mark allocation given in the assignment handout. As I did not wish to influence the lecturers in their own marking (should they wish to do so), I made very few annotations on the students’ texts, but compiled a separate mark sheet with comments for each essay. In addition, I prepared a detailed report for the two lecturers summarising my impressions of the work. The lecturers then both moderated my work, after which the mark sheets with the essays were photocopied and the originals were returned to the students. The

feedback I had given was discussed with the students during a subsequent class. These reflective writing exercises were later subjected to content analysis to contribute to the body of data that was being collected as part of the inquiry (see Addendum H for sample of students' work).

#### **5.5.2.6 Document review**

Henning (2004:99) points out that the collection of documents and other artefacts is often neglected in qualitative research. In this study, however, I believed that two of the research sub-questions could, at least in part, be addressed by reviewing relevant documents. To this end the module outlines and examples of assessment tools for the different first-year modules that were drawn into the investigation were scrutinised to determine the nature of the academic literacy challenges that would confront the EDP students on the one hand, and to obtain more information on the nature of the academic literacy support interventions on the other. As was noted earlier, all of these documents were supplied by the lecturers who had participated in the preliminary phase interviews, and these were later added to by the two lecturers involved in the academic literacy modules.

#### **5.5.3 Follow-up phase**

The decision to conduct a follow-up phase for the study was made towards the end of the 2006 cohorts' first-year. Only after the registration information for 2007 had been finalised on the SIS, was I able to determine how many of the 61 EDP students had returned to the university and how many of the original group of 8 interviewees would still be available for follow-up sessions. Of the 61 students, 46 reregistered in 2007. Only one student from the original interview group did not return to the University in 2007, and another two were unable to participate for personal reasons. In the end, therefore, a further group of twenty students was invited to attend three focus groups interviews. Based on the feedback I had received the previous year, it appeared that the students were more willing to participate in this popular form of interviewing. Typically, a focus group consists of between six to nine participants (Denscombe 1998:115). Its value chiefly lies in the group face-to-face interaction with one participant often providing a response that acts as a trigger for the next respondent (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2005:899). The group of twenty was selected purposively to include all the respondents from the previous year who had returned to the university, as well as those students who had completed the ABQ in 2006 (33 students out of the original 61). Fifteen students agreed to participate.

In order to encourage the students to attend the focus groups, the sessions were planned over the lunch hour when there are no classes, and food was organised for the attendees. Students were reminded by email and via text messaging of the agreed time and date for the session on the day before, and again via text messaging on the day. In addition, the students were informed via email that they would each receive two free movie tickets if they attended the session. I was not comfortable with having to coerce the students in this fashion, and believe this to be a possible limitation as far as the ethical appropriateness of the study is concerned. In spite of these tactics, however, only ten of the fifteen students who had agreed to attend arrived for the different sessions. In one instance only one of the five students arrived, resulting in an individual interview being conducted. A second student, originally from this same group, rescheduled at the last minute, which resulted in a second individual interview being conducted. The second and third sessions eventually comprised three and five students respectively. This meant that none of the sessions fulfilled the requirements for a focus group. Nevertheless, the student input was of sufficient value to warrant it being included in the study.

**Table 5.8: Background data on interviewees (2007)**

	Names <sup>25</sup>	Age <sup>26</sup>	Race	Gender	Language <sup>27</sup>	M-Year	Gr 12 %	Access tests
1	Wena	35	White	Female	Afrikaans	1989	45	50.91
2	Thabu	24	African	Male	S. Sotho	2003	51.5	24.81
3	Lincoln	20	African	Male	Xhosa	2005	53	26.67
4	Sandy	21	White	Female	English	2004	57.2	38.56
5	Anna	19	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	58.1	35.97
6	Johan	19	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	56.4	50.54
7	Mauritz	19	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	52.3	48.69
8	Aneesa	19	Indian	Female	English	2005	54.1	45.49
9	Gerald	20	Coloured	Male	English	2004	53.7	32.38
10	Mohammed	18	Indian	Male	English	2005	49.7	23.72

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

Table 5.8 shows that students numbered 1-5 were the same students who had participated in the previous years' round of interviews (see highlighted group in Table 5.8, nos 1-5). In the 2007 group there was a stronger representation of black students, which was useful in the

<sup>25</sup> Pseudonyms have been used

<sup>26</sup> Age in 2006 when interviews were conducted

<sup>27</sup> As this information is taken from the SIS, this refers to the response given by the student wrt 'home language'

context of the study. This time the language distribution was more even, with equal numbers of English- and Afrikaans-speaking students.

An interview schedule comprising 12 questions was compiled (Addendum I). My initial intention was to select questions from the schedule during the focus group interviews, depending on the direction that the discussion took and to prompt the group when the discussion started lagging or moving off the topic. In the end, however, having the interview schedule proved most useful, particularly in guiding the two individual interviews. This time the schedule was devised with two objectives in mind: firstly, to encourage the students to reflect on their first-year experience and specifically on their written assignments, and secondly, to address some of the gaps that were highlighted in an initial review of the 2006 interviews. In this way, the follow-up phase fulfilled a vital role in ensuring that I stayed “in the field until data saturation” began to occur (Babbie & Mouton 2001:276).

## **5.6 Quality of the data**

Ensuring the integrity and quality of the data is paramount in any qualitative study and already in this chapter a number of references have been made to the different steps that were taken to address these imperatives. I would venture that there is possibly greater sensitivity to this issue among qualitative than quantitative researchers precisely because of the ‘fuzziness’ inherent in the genre (Belcher & Hirvela 2005:187). For many, numbers and statistics provide a tangibility that is regarded as absent in the realms of text typically generated in qualitative work. Notions of reliability, validity and generalizability, regarded as ‘the holy trinity’ (Babbie & Mouton 2001; Henning 2004), have traditionally been the key features that need to be carefully considered when crafting a research design and collecting data. To this end, qualitative researchers put forward the use of multiple methods that leads to triangulation, where corresponding points of view emerge from the different data sources to “locate a true position” (Denscombe 1998:85; see also Wildy 2003:120). In this context, triangulation becomes “one of the best ways to enhance validity and reliability in qualitative research” (Babbie & Mouton 2001:275). Such triangulation, as it follows on from the use of multiple methods and approaches, typifies this investigation and care has been taken not to simply provide such multiplicity in a haphazard fashion, but to rather rely on what Atkinson and Delamont (2005:832) describe as “a principled array of methodological strategies ...”.

Issues of objectivity are also relevant when discussing the quality of data specifically and a qualitative investigation as a whole. It is necessary for the researcher to take a neutral stand towards the data generated and reproduce it as it presents itself, untainted, as far as possible, by the researcher's own bias (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight 1996). This has been an issue of particular importance in this study, given the direct control that I have exercised in most aspects of the study. For this reason I have taken considerable care to explicitly detail my involvement throughout and to reflect in writing on the extent to which it might impact on the research. I have endeavoured to describe, and will continue to do so as the situation arises, the checks and balances that have been put into place, using as benchmark the consideration of whether or not another researcher would have obtained at least similar results.

One example of the checks and balances that could be applied is that of the peer review. Over the years that this study has been undertaken there have been numerous points at which the completion of a particular cycle of the research process was sufficient to subject it to such review. In this way, sections of this study have been subjected to public scrutiny, both nationally and internationally during conference presentations and through publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The feedback received on all of these occasions has helped me to sharpen my focus and revisit errors in reasoning that were highlighted.

However, Babbie and Mouton (2001:276-278) argue that good qualitative research is research that is trustworthy, which they define as being credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable. These criteria were to prove more relevant also in this study, and, therefore, as I reflect on this research within this paradigm, I contend that the following contributed to such trustworthiness:

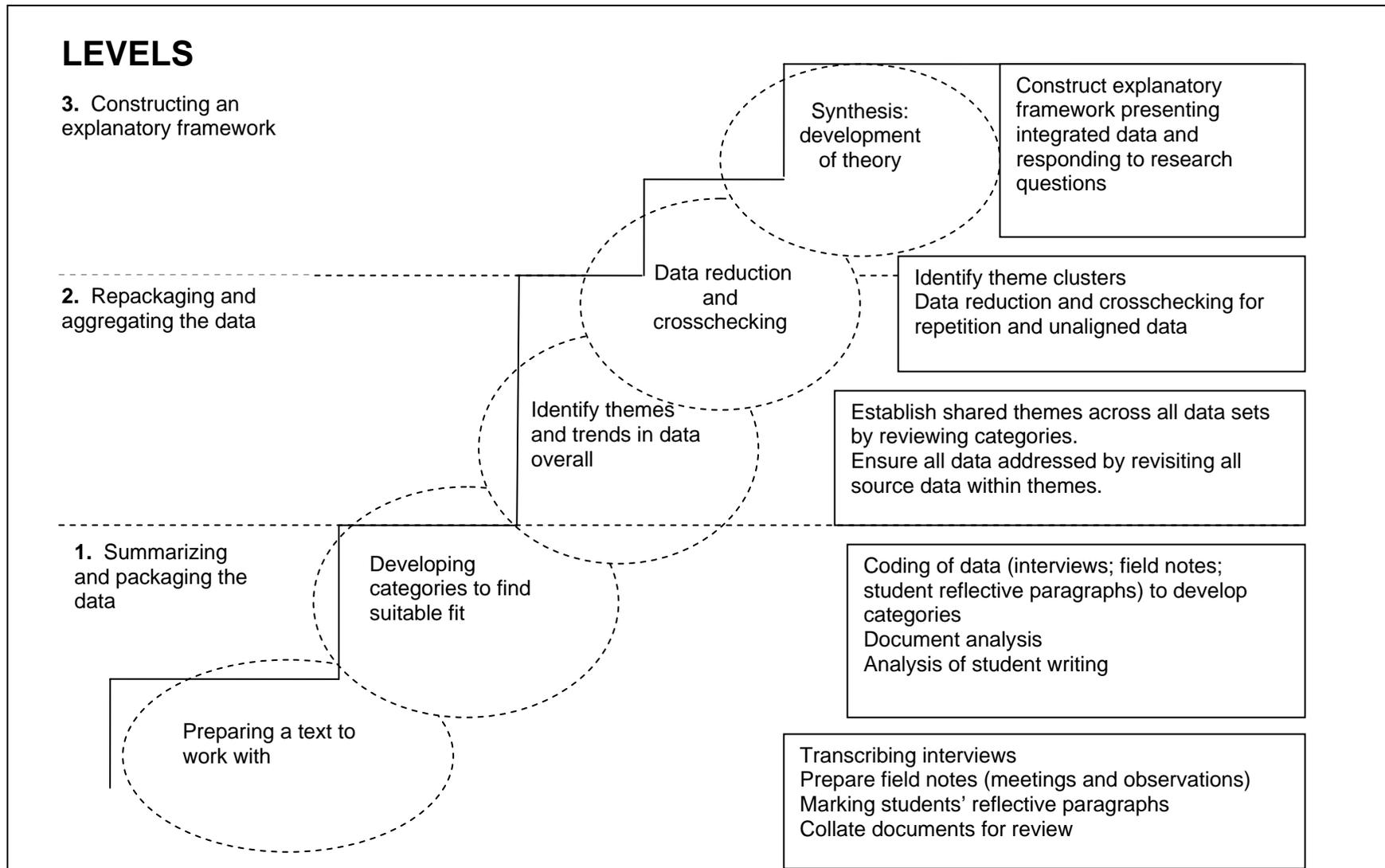
- The research period was characterised by persistence, pursuing all possible relevant avenues.
- Triangulation and peer review were addressed, as discussed above.
- Member checks of the core phase interviews were conducted with the five students who participated in the follow-up phase. This, however, was unsatisfactory as it did not cover all the participants from all three phases and should thus be viewed as a limitation of this study.
- Although an audit inquiry was not formally conducted, this chapter and the next, together with the different addenda, provide an audit trail that will enable the reader to trace the eventual conclusions and interpretations back to the original sources.

In the section that follows, an overview of the data analysis process is given, which will provide further insight into some of the issues relating to quality and integrity of the data that have been addressed here.

## **5.7 Analysis of the data**

Miles and Huberman (1994:309) suggest that “[d]oing qualitative analysis means living for as long as possible with the complexity and ambiguity, coming to terms with it, and passing on your conclusions to the reader in a form that clarifies and deepens understanding”. In this section I will provide a brief overview of this complex and ambiguous process as it unfolded during this study. The findings and discussion will be described to the reader in Chapter Six.

Miles and Huberman (1994:92) offer the work of Carney as a model for what they term “analytic progression”. They depict Carney’s “ladder of abstraction” as a progression from an initial level where the “summarising and packaging” of the data takes place, through a second level that sees data being repackaged and aggregated, through to the third and final level where the development and testing of propositions so as to “construct an explanatory framework” occurs. A three-tiered approach may be seen in the work of others (Singleton, Straits & Straits 1993) and the ladder (Figure 5.3) provided a useful framework within which to work, particularly in light of the multiple methods that were employed in this study. However, I have experienced qualitative research as an iterative process in this study as one seems to move forwards and backwards through the processes of data collection and analysis, each time seeing the data from a different perspective (see also Stewart & O’Neill 2003:107; Henning 2004:108). Almost unconsciously, analysis commences even as the first data is being received. In her dissertation, Troskie-De Bruin (1999:195) attests to a similar understanding, suggesting that for this reason “it is difficult to break the qualitative research process down into various stages”. This was also my experience. Thus, even though I describe the analysis process in this section according to the analytical ladder (Figure 5.3), and indeed, used the three-tiered approach to guide the analysis in this study, the moving backwards and forwards through the data that I mention above, and the way in which the different levels tended to overlap with one another, should be borne in mind.



**Figure 5.3: An analytical ladder**  
(adapted from Miles & Huberman 1994).

### 5.7.1 Level One: Summarising and packaging the data

The data that was analysed in this study comprised mainly oral and written texts. Thus a process of qualitative content analysis was followed that facilitated reducing, condensing and grouping data through a coding process (Henning 2004:104). In the analysis process depicted in Figure 5.3, the first level of analysis comprises two steps that encapsulate both the creation of the written text from the oral (by transcribing the interviews) and the subsequent coding of the data.

An open coding (level 1) process was initially followed, thus selecting codes based on what the data represented or meant to the researcher, and in order to facilitate the categorisation of these codes (Henning 2004:104). At this point it is necessary to note that I spent some time weighing up the option of making use of computer software (such as *ATLAS ti*) to assist in the coding and later categorisation of the data – even to the extent of doing some trial runs with the software. However, due to my own lack of experience with a programme of this nature and my desire to work in a more hands-on fashion, I decided not to utilise this tool. It is possible that the software might have enforced a level of objectivity that would be more difficult to maintain in light of my direct involvement with the data throughout the research. If this is the case, then the decision made could be regarded as a limitation in this study. Nevertheless, Henning (2004:104) contends that “... some software analysis programs ... look for meaning in a single typed line”, while both Henning and I prefer to work with phrases and sentences.

Thus, during this first step of the analysis process, the data collected from the interviews, the students’ reflective writing exercises, and the class observations were individually coded and then categorised. The module outlines were summarised according to a set of criteria drawn from the outlines themselves, while the examples of assessment instruments were reviewed according to Bloom’s taxonomy (Krathwohl 2002; see 3.4.4). The relevant data from the ABQ was summarised, and presented according to a number of different categories, while the information on the students’ end-of-year results was shared using text, tables and graphs. Thus, by the end of this first level of analysis, each individual data set had been subjected to individual analysis.

### **5.7.2 Level Two: Repackaging and aggregating the data**

This phase of the analysis involved identifying the themes that would incorporate the categories of meaning that had been established during the previous phase. Thus, following on the coding process described in the previous section, it was necessary to identify themes across the categories, initially within each data set and then followed by a review of all themes across all data sets. This resulted in 43 themes across the eight data sets which, after a process of crosschecking for repetition and correlation, were ultimately summarized into six clusters, incorporating 20 representative themes. The original data sources were revisited and organized within each cluster, under the different themes so as to highlight the relationships across the data overall and to provide a comprehensive exposition of the findings. In order to provide for an audit trail, the themes were coded throughout the successive analytical phases.

### **5.7.3 Level Three: Constructing an explanatory framework**

The final phase of analysis was characterised by the discussion of the findings within an explanatory framework that sought to respond to the research questions and offer a final synthesis comprehensively integrating the data. The process of constructing this framework required numerous iterations of testing propositions that could be discerned from the abundance of data that had been set out during the previous phase of the analysis process. The explanatory framework that was eventually constructed, however, provided an extremely useful template for presenting the synthesis in a meaningful manner.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

Henning (2004:101) suggests, “[t]he true test of a competent researcher comes in the analysis of the data, a process that requires analytical craftsmanship and the ability to capture understanding of the data in writing”. In this chapter I have described the rationale that led to this study and the purpose and aims that guided it. Considerable background information on the participants in the investigation and the reason for selecting this case was also shared. Thereafter, the entire research process including design, data collection and analysis was set out in detail.

Before closing this chapter, however, I would like to offer some personal reflection on the experience of having conducted this research and writing this dissertation, in keeping with the

notion of being a practitioner-researcher and given the theme of this study - exploring the acquisition of academic literacy. I would echo the sentiments of Meloy (1994:2):

Writing the dissertation was an experience in itself; adding qualitative research on top of that made for an especially interesting time of learning, reflection, and practice. I often felt like I was playing a game of pickup sticks while balancing on a high wire over an empty river in the middle of a moonless night.

Yet, it was in the uncertainty, contradictions and hesitations mentioned at the start of this chapter that my own learning occurred - learning that Hodkinson (2004:12) suggests is one of the key outcomes of research. Writing specifically from an educational research perspective, he argues that our research should bring about *learning* that will enable us to “tell better stories ... that provide better understanding of aspects of education ...” (Hodkinson 2004:24). On the other hand, this chapter started out with a quote from Angela Brew that places the focus of research on enabling better *teaching*. Thus, *teaching* and *learning*. As academic development practitioner I now have a sense of also belonging to this community of practice, the community of researchers. In Chapter Six the results of the inquiry that facilitated my participation in this community and that has been detailed in this chapter, are shared.

## CHAPTER SIX

### FINDINGS

*The search for ... essential themes or essential relationships ... involves the exploration of phenomena by using the process of free imagination, intuition and reflection.*

Ehrich 2003:46

#### 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the research process was described, setting out the decisions made with regards to the design of the research, the reasons for these decisions and how the decisions were brought to fruition. Towards the end of the chapter, an overview of the analysis process was provided. Chapter Six now records the analysis of the data in more detail, setting out the findings that were generated during this process. The three-tiered analytical ladder that was illustrated towards the close of Chapter Five (5.3) will be used to provide a structure for Chapter Six, which will then ultimately lead to the synthesis of all of the findings in Chapter Seven. However, I must emphasise that by reporting on the findings in this structured manner I do not wish to suggest that the entire process of analysis was as clear-cut or as linear as might be implied. On the contrary, I found that, as noted by Miles and Huberman (1994:23), the activities tended to merge into one another and across levels, with the entire process from collection of data through to interpretation and the drawing of conclusions happening interactively. Stake (2005:450) agrees, referring specifically to case study research where data is "... continuously interpreted, on first encounter and again and again." In addition the use of the word 'levels' in the analytical ladder could imply an abstraction in the process that was not actually present. Therefore, while I continue to describe the analysis process according to the different levels as depicted in Figure 5.3, the reader is encouraged to interpret this term as aligned with 'steps' or 'phases' in the process that overlapped with one another. This overlap of activities is also illustrated in Figure 5.3.

Before discussing each level in detail, however, it should be noted that, in order to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data, I drew on the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) finding their notion of crafting visual displays of the data particularly appealing. Throughout this chapter, and following on the trend established in Chapter Five, I have included a number of matrices, graphs, figures and tables in which the data is shared in visual format to support the descriptive text.

## 6.2 Level One: Summarising and packaging the data

Figure 5.3 indicates two sub-levels at the initial stage of the analysis process. The first of these two steps is characterised by work that is preparatory to the analysis process and that was discussed in some detail in Chapter Five. Babbie and Mouton (2001:283) describe the organisation of the data that characterises the work undertaken at Level One as an important challenge for the researcher, one that is only completed “after developing clear conceptual categories for the empirical data which provides a focus for the findings”. In this section I share the process that evolved during this first level, across both the preparatory (Level One (a)) and the open coding stage (Level One (b)) during which the conceptual categories were developed. My main objective during this first phase of analysis therefore was to review each of the different sets of data individually so as to obtain a clear picture of what had emerged specifically from each different source. At this stage, no attempt was made to search for relationships across the sets of data, as this would occur during Level Two, although the inevitable result of such in-depth analysis is that preliminary interpretation of data does occur. As the collection of data was conducted in three phases, the discussion of Level One follows the three-phase process accordingly.

### 6.2.1 Preliminary phase

The data generated during this phase came from the four interviews conducted with lecturers representing the four different large enrolment first-year module groupings, as described in Chapter Five (5.7.1). However, it should be noted that each of the participants was responsible for a specific semester module offered during the first year and their focus was therefore specific to that particular module.

As the intention of these interviews, along with the literature review, was to guide the design of the core phase of the study, they were transcribed and subjected to a preliminary analysis shortly after completion. After several close readings of the transcribed texts, the open coding process was conducted. The lecturers’ responses in the transcripts were highlighted according to the different “units of meaning” (Henning 2004:104) that could be discerned and then grouped together in categories. Thus the categories represented “units of meaning” that were similar and spoke to the same issue. Although some units of meaning could have been placed within more than one category, I endeavoured to link them within the category that most suited the context of the particular discussion. Some of these categories inevitably reflected

the structure of the interview schedule. However, others, such as the impact that a lack of lecturing resources and large numbers have on the planning and implementation of the modules, emerged from the analysis. Before finalising this preliminary phase, the interviews were all read again to ensure that the final product of this Level One stage was a true reflection of the lecturers' responses. Table 6.1 provides a summary of the eight different categories that emerged during this process, with a summary of the responses drawn from the transcribed texts listed alongside in support of each category. To facilitate later cross-referencing and to provide a means of conducting an audit of the analysis process, each category has been coded where LI1 refers to *Lecturer interviews Category 1* and so forth.

**Table 6.1: Broad categorisation of the lecturers' responses**

Categories	Summary of responses
Student profile (LI1)	Diverse, with one dominant group Many students with potential Technologically driven Under-prepared students Student attitudes [both positive and negative] Absence of academic culture
Lecturer's expectations (LI2)	Students should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Show interest in the subject</li> <li>▪ Have a broader world view</li> <li>▪ Reading and writing skills as would be expected at university level</li> <li>▪ Be able to apply abstract concepts</li> <li>▪ Demonstrate critical thinking skills</li> </ul>
Contributors to success (LI3)	Intelligence, critical stance Being able to handle large volumes of work Class attendance Good language proficiency Work systematically and at pace Interest in the subject Parental support and background
Barriers to success (LI4)	Poor class attendance Non-engagement during classes and with the study material Lack of interest Poor schooling Overload of information Students' negative attitudes Disciplinary discourse Poor reading and writing skills Inappropriate learning styles Personal problems Different racial/language backgrounds

Categories	Summary of responses
Institutional factors that impact on their teaching (LI5)	Limited venues Limited interaction between lecturer and student Limited human resources Prioritising of senior (postgraduate) students Barriers to effecting change within the department/faculty Campus culture that is not academic
Language issues (LI6)	Afrikaans-speaking students electing to write in English English texts Repetition of content in English and Afrikaans is time consuming.
Understanding of academic literacy (LI7)	Students should be able to: Demonstrate writing and thinking skills; unlock texts and make them their own Build an argument Work independently Implement competencies systematically as part of their academic activities Understanding academic texts (quickly) Formal form of expression in writing
Opportunities to enhance academic literacy (LI8)	Tutorial sessions which encourage student participation Essay assignments Focus on an outcomes based learning approach Focus on the students, their needs, social problems

The lecturers were all particularly forthcoming during the interviews and appeared eager to share, for example, their frustrations, with regards to the large number of students they had to work with, the perceived quality of these students and the impact that these issues were having in the classroom. The interviews all took place towards the end of the academic year and my sense was that much of the frustration that was expressed was linked to the peak in workload that is characteristic of this time of the year. There was a fair amount of consensus among the lecturers across the different categories, although one of the four was less vehement with regards to his concern about the abilities of the students and also pointed to the many students with potential. All four lecturers were slightly hesitant before sharing their understanding of academic literacy, as if the term was not entirely familiar to them, although their responses indicated an understanding of the nature of academic literacy in action and what it would mean for their students.

Although Table 6.1 reflects a wide range of issues, it should not be regarded as a detailed account of what was said. It was, however, significant during this preliminary phase to note

that the categorisation of responses echoed much of what was found in the literature. For example, the list of factors that contribute to student success mirror, to a large extent, the discussion on this issue in Chapter Four (4.3.1). This is also true for the list of barriers to success. It should be noted that during these interviews with the lecturers, issues such as the number of lectures and tutorial per week, as well as the assessment programme (e.g. number of class tests, semester tests, etc.) were discussed. This more administrative information has not, however, been reflected in the summary above. As the interviews with the lecturers took place in 2005, they would not necessarily reflect the experience of the EDP cohort that is the focus on this study. This specific information was drawn from the module outlines and examples of assessment that were collected during the core phase (see 6.2.2.2; 6.2.2.6). In Section 6.3, the lecturers' responses are taken up within the different themes that emerged across all of the different sets of data.

## **6.2.2 Core phase**

Data was collected from six different sources during the core phase and the way in which this data was generated and subsequently prepared for initial analysis (Level One(a) analysis) was discussed in Chapter Five (5.7.2). In this section, the second step in Level One analysis, namely the initial coding and categorisation of the core phase data, where appropriate, will be discussed following the chronological order in which the data-collection process was undertaken. A particular feature of the analysis conducted during this phase has to do with the many different ways that were used to 'work the data'. I used transcribed text; student produced texts; descriptive quantitative data; numerical data; and existing documents. Henning (2004:65) suggests that using multiple approaches while developing "the interpretive text" will, as is the case when using a variety of methods and sources to generate data, contribute to the trustworthiness of the inquiry as a whole.

### **6.2.2.1 Alpha-baseline questionnaire (ABQ) data**

Only 33 of the 61 EDP students, thus only 54%, completed the ABQ. This percentage is much lower than the almost 82% participation among all of the 2006 first-years. From my own experience, however, I expected this lower rate given that many EDP students typically register late, often having not expected to obtain university entrance. In addition, students are often resistant to being placed on this extended programme and delay registration while following up on other alternatives. The result of all of this is that they miss many of the orientation sessions that occur during the first week of the academic year, particularly those

that introduce them to the different computer user areas and during which the ABQ is usually completed. It is also true that a smaller, yet significant, number arrive at the University with limited, or even no, computer skills. Amidst the masses of first-year students entering the computer user areas during this first week, the EDP students, already under-prepared for university studies, are particularly vulnerable and are often unable to access the questionnaire bank. The responses below, therefore, offer insight into the students' perceptions and expectations before they attended their first classes and should be interpreted against this backdrop.

The data that was retrieved from the online system via the Student Tracking Services Unit was packaged to allow for easy access, and comparison, where relevant, with the results generated for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences first-year students as a whole. The ABQ comprises 160 responses. Only those questions that were relevant to this study are included in the summary below. Biographical information taken from the SRIS and already described in Chapter Five is not included here. To facilitate the reading of this information, I have grouped the data under a series of headings and, as with the lecturer interviews, have allocated a code for each heading or category.

**1. Student background (ABQ1):**

- 11 of the 33 respondents indicated that they were first-generation students, while another 4 did not answer the question. If these four students are discounted, then this group of first-generation students comprised almost 38% of the total.
- Not one of the respondents stated that they had any financial dependents, and only nine indicated that they were responsible for their own educational expenses.

**2. Schooling (ABQ2):**

- When reflecting on their schooling, very few students indicated that they had never studied with other students in a group context (6 students); had never used ideas or concepts from different subjects when completing their assignments (3 students) or had never evaluated the relevance of information gathered from various sources (1 student). These percentages are all lower than those for the entire first-year cohort in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.
- Of concern is the fact that almost 29% of the respondents stated that during their final year at school they had not read a single book that was not prescribed, that is for their

personal enjoyment. This is considerably higher than the 7.7% of students in the entire first-year cohort in the Faculty.

- 78% of the students indicated that they had never missed classes at school compared with the 74% indicated by the entire 2006 first-year cohort in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.
- All of the students indicated that they had, either occasionally or frequently, memorised facts and methods at school so that they could repeat them in much the same form.

### **3. Perceptions of their own abilities (ABQ 3):**

#### **Personality traits**

- All of the students felt that their levels of persistence or endurance were average or above average, the latter comprising 69% of the group.
- Similarly, 79% of the group described their intellectual self-confidence as average or above average, with a further 2 students stating that they felt they were in the highest 10% in this category. Both of these categories were fairly aligned with the results for the entire 2006 Faculty cohort.

#### **Academic skills**

- 89% of the group stated that their written communication was either average or above average, and another student rated her or himself as being in the highest 10% of all first-year students at the University. This result was 7% higher than the result generated by the entire first-year cohort in the Faculty.
- Similar trends were perceived in responses to questions on traits such as
  - Seeing the “big picture”, or recognising that solutions to problems do not exist in isolation (89% for the EDP students; 80% for the entire cohort), and
  - Critically evaluating information (89% for the EDP students; 86% for the entire cohort).

#### **Computer skills:**

- 30% of the students stated that they had never made use of the Internet for either research or homework during their school careers. This was a much higher number than the response for the entire first-year cohort in the Faculty (17.1%).
- 6 (18%) of the respondents indicated that completing the ABQ was the first opportunity they had ever had to use a computer, while 59% described themselves as beginners, compared with the 36% in the entire first-year group.

#### **Academic needs:**

- When asked whether they felt they would benefit from additional help and information on aspects such as expressing ideas in writing, improving reading, developing better thinking skills, improving skills to write tests and exams, and so forth, on average about 80% of the students felt that this would be of benefit or of great benefit.

#### **4. Expectations for their studies (ABQ4):**

- 72% of the students indicated that they intended achieving a postgraduate qualification, that is Honours or beyond.
- 91% of the respondents indicated that they were either certain or very certain about successfully completing their studies, with 94% describing their academic ability as average or above average and 85% stating that they believed they could obtain an average of 60% or better for each of their first-year subjects. These averages are comparable to those for the entire 2006 cohort in the Faculty, namely 82%, 93% and 90% respectively.

This data provided an important source of descriptive quantitative information that could serve as additional context for supporting the later interpretation of the data collected during the interviews. Of significance were the students' perceptions of their academic skills and their expectations that they had of their university studies. In both of these areas the students' responses were unrealistic, given their school records, and also when compared with the responses of the entire first-year cohort at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, which in most cases were lower. In seemingly contradictory fashion, however, the students appeared to recognise their need for academic support, and this even before starting their classes, which suggests that they were aware of the challenges that university studies could present.

#### **6.2.2.2 Analysis of module outlines**

Table 6.2 provides a comparative analysis of the module outlines. At Stellenbosch University, students are normally given a document that provides an outline of the particular module at the start of the module. Four module outlines were used in this analysis, one each from the four different high enrolment first-year subjects. The criteria used for analysis were thus those from the documents themselves (headings and sub-headings), while aspects such as:

- the level of formality (including register and tone);
- the use of the passive voice ([more formal]);

- how the students were addressed, (e.g. directly [less formal], etc.);
  - the way in which the outlines were structured (i.e. what sort of information was included);
  - whether there was an overview welcoming the student to the module, etc.;
  - and the format used (i.e. the type font used, the way in which the pages were laid out [texts, no tables or bullets – traditional; less texts, tables and bullet point – more modern])
- were considered relevant to their readability and accessibility.

**Table 6.2: Comparative analysis of the module outlines.**

<b>Criteria/categories</b>	<b>Module A (6 credits)</b>	<b>Module B (6 credits)</b>	<b>Module C (12 credits)</b>	<b>Module D (6 credits)</b>
<b>Format and structure</b>	2 pages with a third page for tutorial programme Traditional format with some errors Introduces student to the content in short paragraph No use of tables	7 pages More modern format Addresses content and nature of the subject in short paragraph Use of bullet points and tables	16 pages, large font Contents page Describes objectives for the module outline and for the department 2 blank 'notes' pages	15 pages All information repeated in English and Afrikaans Describes objectives A lot of text Uses tables
<b>Language/ Discourse</b>	Formal language used English-speaking group referred to as "non-Afrikaans students"	Less formal, still correct academic language. Questions posed – directed at students	Formal language Detailed	Less formal Reference to 'learners'
<b>Outcomes</b>	Broad outcomes listed No reference to critical outcomes <sup>28</sup>	Specific outcomes listed Critical outcomes also built into list	Outcomes listed No overt reference to critical outcomes	Broad outcomes written in prose format Content specific outcomes provided in detail
<b>Texts</b>	Indicated only in the tutorial programme. Additional texts available in class, via the Library reserve system or WebCT	Prescribed textbook Also reference to Library and electronic sources	Prescribed textbook written by lecturers (in English and Afrikaans) Extensive additional sources list	Prescribed textbook Additional sources of SA material available via WebCT and in class
<b>Student contact</b>	Full contact details of lecturer and assistant are provided. No indication of consultation hours.	Full contact details and consultation hours with lecturer are provided.	Lecturer contact details not supplied Students to contact assistant/coordinator	Full contact details of lecturer and assistant provided with consulting hours.

<sup>28</sup> According to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) all programmes should incorporate a set of *Critical Outcomes* into their curriculum design (SAQA 1997:4)

Criteria/categories	Module A (6 credits)	Module B (6 credits)	Module C (12 credits)	Module D (6 credits)
<b>Teaching and learning activities</b>	2 lectures and one tutorial per week for the term Tutorial takes place with full complement of students 100+ Objective of tutorial to encourage debate Separate language groups	3 lectures per week and 3 tutorials across the term. Tutorial in smaller groups Focus of tutorial to encourage development of academic development <sup>29</sup> No reference to language of teaching and learning	3 lectures per week for full semester No tutorials <sup>30</sup> Indicate that “T-option” is followed	One lecture per week for full semester Tutorials offered on an ad hoc basis by an assistant Indicate that “T-option” is followed
<b>Use of WebCT</b>	Information regarding assessment	Important information, announcements and discussions	Integrated into the assessment All important information and announcements No PPT documents	PPT presentations available
<b>Assessment information</b>	Reference to ‘evaluation’ in the Tutorial programme Class mark = reading tests 50% and class test 50%	Reference to how final mark is calculated Class mark = tutorial mark 50% and semester test 50%	Details as to the different tests, including content Class mark = Test 1 75% and Test 2 25%	Online self-assessment tests Class mark = Online test 15% + Assignment 20% + Class test 25% + semester test 40%
<b>Other</b>	Classes (both lectures and tutorials) are described as “ <i>ontmoetingsgeleentede</i> ” <sup>31</sup> in Afrikaans.	Additional information provided: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Important dates</li> <li>▪ Expectations</li> <li>▪ Detail of lectures</li> <li>▪ Words of motivation</li> </ul>	Three different lecturers responsible for the semester long module	Includes guidelines for self-study

<sup>29</sup> My assessment of the listed objectives.

<sup>30</sup> In 2007, this department introduced weekly small group tutorials for their entire first-year group.

<sup>31</sup> Opportunities for meeting.

The above matrix provides an overview of the different approaches and expectations that the EDP students, and indeed all first-year students in the Faculty, could encounter in the different modules. Of particular interest when analysing these documents was the variety and nature of the different words (or phrases) that the different modules, and thus the different disciplines, used to introduce the envisaged outcomes for the modules.

**Table 6.3: Summary of instructive words used for outcomes**

Module A	Module B	Module C	Module D
Discuss Explain and assess Explain and argue (for your own understanding)	Describe Discuss Understand Demonstrate Explain Use Write	Understand Have knowledge of Be informed about Be aware of Be able to	Describe Distinguish Appreciate Identify Grasp Assess Understand Explain

As a final step in preparing this data for the next level of data analysis, it was necessary in some instances to either rephrase the criteria as categories or introduce new categories so as to incorporate data highlighted in the comments section (Table 6.2). This set of coding categories is included in the comparative summary of categories across the different data sources in Addendum J.

### 6.2.2.3 Students' reflective writing exercise

The content analysis of the 38 students' reflective writing exercises presented a number of differing and complex responses of their expectations and impressions of the *Texts in the Humanities* modules. The process of determining a set of coding categories for summarising the data proved cumbersome. I was particularly aware of the danger of drawing specific units of meaning from the text into a specific category, when such units were actually in contradiction to the overall sense of the students' short essay. This resulted largely because many students appeared uncertain of their expectations and impressions and tended to contradict themselves in their writing. With this in mind, I decided to address the written work holistically, seeking to determine the dominant attitudes that characterised the expectations on the one hand, and the impressions on the other. All 38 pieces of writing were reviewed in this manner. In some instances more than one dominant attitude (e.g. positive and unrealistic) was prevalent, while, conversely, several students did not respond appropriately

to the instruction and either did not describe their expectations and/or their impressions. The summaries of their responses are reflected in Table 6.4 and Table 6.5 below.

**Table 6.4: Categories of students' initial expectations for the Texts in the Humanities module**

Categories	Summary of responses
<b>Positive expectations (SE1)</b> <sup>32</sup>	The students felt that the module would: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Be an extra subject to provide support</li> <li>▪ Help to improve reading and writing skills</li> <li>▪ Help with the analysis of academic texts</li> <li>▪ Address problems with [their] quality of reading and writing</li> <li>▪ Help with 'academic abilities'</li> <li>▪ Let the students gain confidence for their studies</li> <li>▪ Help them learn how to prioritise their work</li> <li>▪ Allow them to gain additional insight</li> <li>▪ Develop an academic style of writing</li> <li>▪ Encourage better concentration</li> <li>▪ Provide individual attention</li> <li>▪ Provide additional explication of the work done in other classes</li> <li>▪ Improve writing skills</li> <li>▪ Improve research skills</li> <li>▪ Offer a chance to work at a slower pace</li> </ul>
<b>Negative expectations (SE2)</b>	The negative responses of the students pointed to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Being unaware of having to do the EDP – disappointed</li> <li>▪ Describing the module as a complete waste of time</li> <li>▪ The module being unnecessary because they already had good language skills</li> <li>▪ Module being compulsory thus giving them no choice</li> <li>▪ Module for 'dumb' students who are shy or who have self-image problems</li> <li>▪ Their being sceptical</li> </ul>
<b>Uncertain as to what to expect (SE3)</b>	The students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Had no idea what to expect</li> <li>▪ Did not understand what <i>Texts in the Humanities</i> meant</li> <li>▪ Did not know what it would entail</li> </ul>
<b>Incorrect expectations (SE4)</b>	The module will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide help with study and personal problems</li> <li>▪ Focus on psychology and science "geesteswetenskappe"<sup>33</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>32</sup> SE1 = Student expectations category 1, and so forth.

<sup>33</sup> The word for Humanities in Afrikaans (*geesteswetenskappe*) has here been interpreted as *geestes* = of the psyche and *wetenskap* = science.

**Table 6.5: Categories of students' impressions after four weeks of the Texts in the Humanities module**

Categories	Summary of responses
<b>Positive impressions (SP1)</b> <sup>34</sup>	<p>The students' positive impressions are seen in the following phrases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Look forward to the rest of the year</li> <li>▪ Already been able to apply content in other subjects' classes</li> <li>▪ Already seeing an improvement</li> <li>▪ Confident that class will improve writing</li> <li>▪ Module will provide ongoing support</li> <li>▪ Input will be of value over the long term</li> <li>▪ Necessary for all students</li> <li>▪ Feel good about completing the first few weeks</li> <li>▪ Feel lucky/happy</li> <li>▪ The module is for your own benefit – helps you to help yourself</li> <li>▪ Gain a lot from the classes without realising it</li> <li>▪ Give you a head start on the other (non-EDP) students</li> <li>▪ No longer shy to participate in class</li> <li>▪ Everything has been useful</li> <li>▪ Growing in confidence</li> <li>▪ Positive addition to the EDP</li> <li>▪ Like the workshop approach</li> </ul>
<b>Negative impressions (SP2)</b>	<p>The students' negative impressions are seen in the following phrases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The module takes up time</li> <li>▪ Adds to existing workload</li> <li>▪ Had hoped to learn more</li> <li>▪ Pace too slow</li> <li>▪ Not done what was expected</li> </ul>
<b>Mixed impressions (SP3)</b>	<p>The students expressed some mixed feelings about the module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Not sure whether it will help in the long term ... foresee a 'lucrative year'</li> <li>▪ Not enthusiastic, sometimes useful, others not</li> <li>▪ Not necessary for module to be part of EDP ... but will make a difference to studies</li> <li>▪ Do not know what will happen in the future</li> </ul>
<b>Shift from initial expectations (SP4)</b>	<p>The students described a shift from their initial expectations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Realise that writing skills are not as good as was initially thought</li> <li>▪ Realise that getting help with respect to writing, study skills, etc. will be necessary</li> <li>▪ Thought it would be like any other module, but it gives opportunity to discuss problems with assignments</li> <li>▪ Initially thought it would be a waste of time</li> <li>▪ Know now that what was being done before was 'wrong'</li> <li>▪ Classes boring at first ... glad to have stayed with the module</li> <li>▪ Now know that much will be learned</li> <li>▪ Initially did not attend classes ... now far more positive, realise it is very necessary</li> <li>▪ More difficult than was initially expected</li> </ul>

<sup>34</sup> SP1 = Students' impressions category 1, and so forth.

The students' comments in their reflective writing exercises highlight the diversity with respect to their initial expectations, but also how many of these expectations changed even during the first four weeks of classes. In spite of the fact that some students still expressed negative or mixed feelings towards the module and the Extended Degree Programme in general, it would appear that within a very short space of time the students had become aware of the challenges and demands that comprise university studies. The value of these responses in providing further detail towards the findings will be highlighted later in this chapter (6.3).

#### **6.2.2.4 Student interviews**

The challenge that presents itself when seeking to analyse the transcribed texts from interviews is one of recognising that it is necessary to see beyond the content alone. The way people say things, how they construct their responses and the order in which they present them all contribute to the meaning, and what is not said is often as important as what is said (Henning 2004:55). Thus the skilled researcher notes elements of the discourse that lie beneath the surface, interpreting responses while all along keeping the interviewee, her identity, culture and sense of self, foregrounded. Although only a limited number of interviews were conducted with students, the extensive background knowledge of the students that I acquired in the months preceding these conversations meant that I was ideally positioned to conduct a suitably in-depth analysis of the data. The relaxed and open way in which the students participated in the interviews and focus groups is attested to by the informal tone and register, also seen in the code-switching that was prevalent in many of the Afrikaans conversations.

The process of coding the data from the interviews took place over a considerable period of time during which the initial coding categories were revised on numerous occasions. Table 6.6 illustrates the categories that were finalised prior to moving onto the Level Two analysis when the identification of overall trends and themes was undertaken.

**Table 6.6: Categories used for summary of student interview data (2006)**

Category	Summary of responses
Student identity (SI1) <sup>35</sup>	Students described themselves according to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Where they come from (biographical information)</li> <li>▪ Their schooling</li> <li>▪ Home circumstances</li> <li>▪ Academic background</li> <li>▪ Perception of their abilities</li> <li>▪ Financial realities</li> </ul>
Student attitudes (SI2)	<p>Towards their studies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Negative</li> <li>▪ Positive</li> <li>▪ Uncommitted</li> <li>▪ Committed</li> </ul> <p>Towards their lecturers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive</li> <li>▪ Negative</li> </ul> <p>Towards the EDP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive</li> <li>▪ Negative</li> </ul> <p>Towards <i>Texts in the Humanities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive</li> <li>▪ Negative</li> <li>▪ Changed</li> </ul>
School versus university (SI3)	<p>What is different?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Nature of the work</li> <li>▪ Expectations</li> <li>▪ Academic writing</li> <li>▪ Volume of work</li> <li>▪ Pace</li> <li>▪ Need to employ self-discipline and responsibility</li> </ul> <p>Change in strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Seeking to adapt</li> <li>▪ Appropriate responses</li> <li>▪ Inappropriate responses</li> </ul>
Academic activities (SI4)	<p>Opportunities for engagement in the classroom, with other students, with the lecturer</p> <p>Academic challenges</p> <p>Barriers to success</p> <p>Successes experienced</p> <p>Lesson learned</p>

<sup>35</sup> SI1 = student interview category 1, and so forth.

Category	Summary of responses
Student learning (SI5)	Assessment issues Study methods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Changing and adapting</li> </ul> Role of technology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ WebCT</li> </ul> Language of teaching and learning
Academic writing (SI6)	Different from school Lecturers' expectations Rules, norms, conventions of academic writing Academic discourse
The students' expectations (SI7)	Better results More feedback More guidance

While the interviews were characterised by a relaxed atmosphere, as mentioned above, many of the students still struggled to express themselves with ease, sometimes searching for the right word or phrase. The students' descriptions of themselves (their identities) and their attitudes towards their studies demonstrate diversity across the group, while there is considerable coherence of their perceptions about the change from school to university, their experience of academic writing and their expectations, particularly in their desire for feedback and guidance. These proved to be strong themes in the study and are addressed in detail in section 6.3.

#### **6.2.2.5 Classroom observation**

During the formal and informal meetings held with the two lecturers responsible for the *Texts in the Humanities* modules (both the English and the Afrikaans group), their interpretation of the curriculum and their experiences in the classroom were discussed on a regular basis. In addition, students' responses to the different teaching and learning strategies and tasks were often shared, and the lecturers' practice was adapted at times as a result of these reviews. A key feature of these meetings was specifically linked to the students' levels of engagement and how they approached the different tasks they were given as part of the continuous assessment process utilised for the module. This anecdotal information provided a backdrop for the observation conducted during the core data-collection phase.

**Table 6.7: Summary of field notes from classroom observation**

Category	English group	Afrikaans groups
Student engagement (CO1)	Good level of participation, including asking questions (all students drawn into conversation). Nature of the text was important for encouraging participation. Relaxed atmosphere.	Nature of the topic and text was important (students appeared to disengage when a theoretical issue was raised). Freedom to question. Fairly relaxed atmosphere.
Language proficiency (CO2)	Most students appeared to find it easy to express themselves, although language use was conversational. Not all students were easy to understand. Considerable variance in oral proficiency.	Considerable use of code-switching (informal language use generally). Considerable variance in oral proficiency.
Perceived attitudes (CO3)	Levels of commitment appeared high (although a number of students were absent on both occasions). Students appeared confident when asked to contribute.	Class characterised by a good level of enthusiasm among the students.
Students academic contribution (CO4)	Content of their contributions was limited, often naïve. Class displayed considerable diversity in presentation skills and not all were well prepared.	Student contributions lacked coherence or logic in a number of instances. Limited attempts to apply the theory being discussed. Students displayed different approaches to learning (e.g. some taking notes, others not).
Role of lecturer (CO5)	Portrayed a 'mother' figure. Encouraging, supportive. Practical orientation.	Confidante for the female students. Motivating, supportive. Strong theory focus. Business-like.

Table 6.7 gives a summary of the coded field notes from the different class visits. Because the overall impression that I gained from the visits differed between the different language groups, I have represented the summary accordingly. While both lecturers endeavoured to facilitate student participation and engagement, they did so in quite different ways. The lecturer for the English group, for example, demonstrated a more supportive, almost 'mother-like' approach to engaging the students, while the younger lecturer of the Afrikaans group

adopted a far more theoretical and business-like, although still supportive, approach. Both classes were characterised by an informal atmosphere, the English class slightly more than the Afrikaans class, as would be expected given the lecturers' own styles as described above.

#### **6.2.2.6 Analysis of assessment tools**

Examples of assessment tools, including assignments, class tests, semester tests and examinations were collected from the four different lecturers who participated in the study during the preliminary phase. My main objective was to review the documents to determine the extent to which the assessment might pose academic literacy-related challenges to the students, specifically with regards to reading and writing within the disciplines so as to facilitate the interpretation and creation of meaning. However, even with the superficial interpretation that inevitably occurs during the initial phase of review, it became clear that these documents pointed to an important aspect that I had not initially anticipated. During the lecturer interviews, and even in some of the module outlines, specific expectations of the level at which the students were to engage with the different texts and the disciplinary content had been made apparent. However, these expectations did not appear to have been pulled through to the assessment in all cases, nor did the nature of the assessment necessarily appear to encourage the type of higher-order thinking skills that were expected. For this reason, the assessment tools were analysed not only in terms of their method and format (Table 6.8), but also with regards to the nature of the questions that were posed (Table 6.9). To facilitate the latter, use was made of Bloom's Taxonomy that was discussed in Chapter Three (3.4.4).

**Table 6.8: Summary of assessment methods and format**

<b>Module A</b>	<b>Module B</b>	<b>Module C</b>	<b>Module D</b>
<b>Tutorial test:</b> Reading test MCQ <sup>36</sup> s Total: 10 marks	<b>Semester test:</b> Section A: 8 definitions. Five marks each, select 5 Section B: 25-mark essay. Select 1 from 3 options. Total: 50 marks	<b>Semester test 1:</b> Section A: 20 marks MCQs Section B+C: Short questions (2-6 marks) and one word answers: 20 + 25 marks. Total 75 marks <sup>37</sup>	<b>Class test:</b> MCQs Total: 40 marks
<b>Semester test:</b> 7 paragraph-style questions (4–10 marks; no choice) Total: 50 marks	<b>Examination:</b> Essay questions; 5 options, select 2. 50 marks per question Total: 100 marks	<b>Semester test 2:</b> Short questions and one word answers (1- 4 marks) Total: 25 marks	<b>Semester test:</b> MCQs: 30 marks 2 x 10 mark paragraph questions (5 options select 1) x2 Total: 50
		<b>Examination:</b> Section A: Short questions and one word answers (1-5 marks): 50 marks Section B: MCQs: 50 marks: Total: 100 marks	<b>Examination:</b> Section A: 36 MCQs Section B: 7 mark paragraph questions (4 options, select 2) Section C: 25 mark essay question (2 options, select 1) Total: 75

I used the above examples to analyse the different assessment instruments according to Bloom's Taxonomy and a question construction wheel based on this taxonomy (University of North Carolina 2007). The multiple-choice questions were not included in this analysis. In instances where a single question required the students to respond at two different levels, the higher-order expectation has been included. Table 6.9 clearly demonstrates the variety of expectations of students during their assessments, as well as a reliance on lower-order expectations (rote-learning) in three of the four modules.

<sup>36</sup> MCQ = multiple choice questions

<sup>37</sup> Mark total on test paper incorrect

**Table 6.9: Analysis of question verbs used in assessment instruments**

	<b>Module A</b> <b>n = 7<sup>38</sup></b>	<b>Module B</b> <b>n = 8</b>	<b>Module C</b> <b>n = 18</b>	<b>Module D</b> <b>n = 14</b>
<b>Knowledge</b>	2	1	18	1
<b>Comprehension</b>	5	1		10
<b>Application</b>		2		
<b>Analysis</b>		2		3
<b>Synthesis</b>				
<b>Evaluation</b>		2		

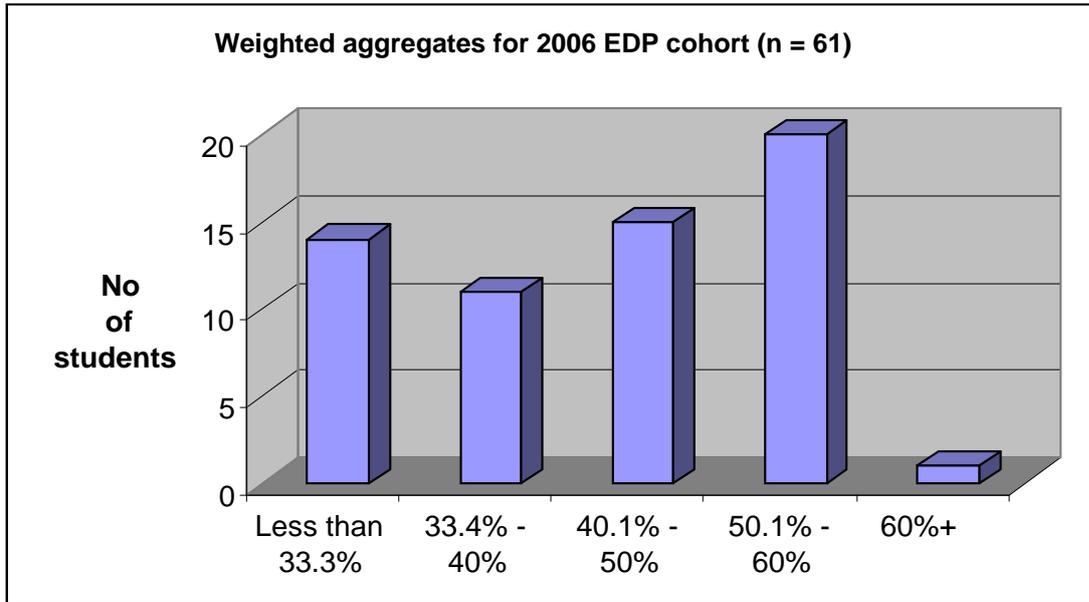
### 6.2.3 Follow-up phase

During the follow-up phase, data on the students' first-year results was collected from the Student Information System (SIS) and a follow-up set of individual and focus group interviews were conducted.

#### 6.2.3.1 First-year results

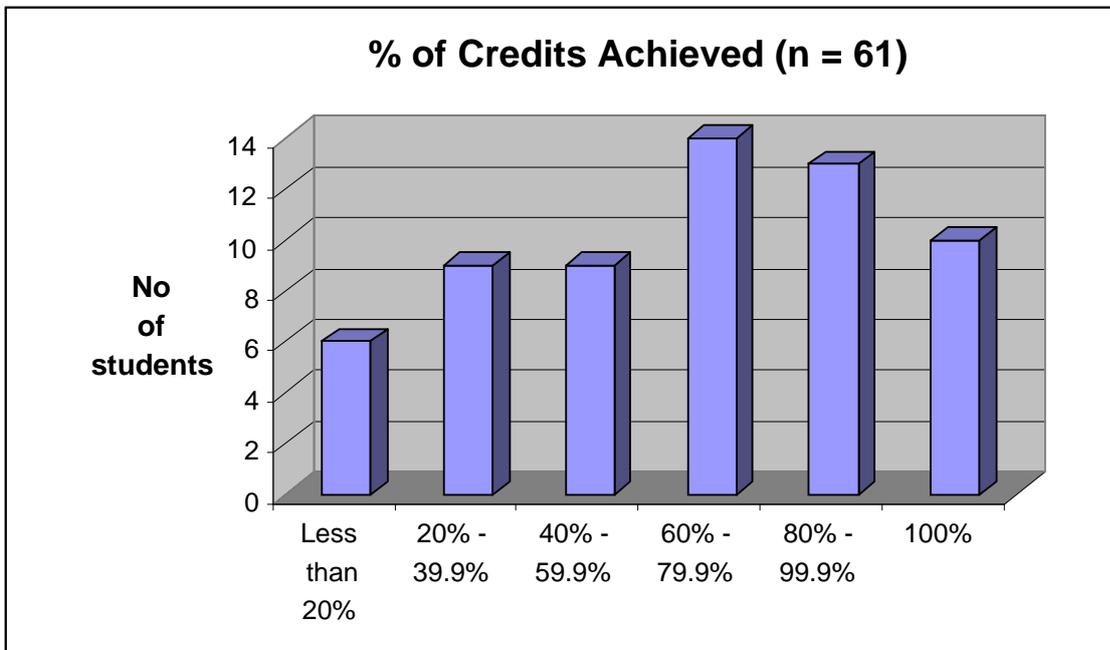
Of the 61 students who registered for the EDP at the start of 2006, one student dropped out during the year, while another four students had withdrawn from the programme by the time the second semester classes drew to a close. Care, however, needs to be taken when analysing the results that these students achieved at the end of their first year. Typically, results on the Student Information System are given per module and students do not receive a single aggregated result on their results advice sheets. However, a weighted average is calculated for each undergraduate student that takes into account the results achieved per module, the number of credits and prescribed credit requirements for the particular programme. These weighted aggregates are used to determine whether a student may apply to be readmitted in a following year, for bursary and residence placement purposes and so forth. In the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences the required aggregate for readmission is 33.3%. The 2006 EDP cohort weighted aggregates are reflected in Figure 6.1.

<sup>38</sup> Number of questions drawn into the analysis – to provide a context for interpretation



**Figure 6.1: Weighted aggregates for 2006 EDP cohort**  
 (Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

The results, however, do not offer a fair reflection of the achievements of the group as the structure of the EDP, which extends the first year of study across two years, limits the students in terms of the number of credits that they can register for. It is therefore, useful to also look at the number of credits achieved as a percentage of the number of credits for which a student initially enrolled. An analysis of this nature is reflected in Figure 6.2.



**Figure 6.2: Percentage of credits achieved by 2006 EDP cohort**  
 (Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

Again, caution must be applied in interpreting these results, as EDP students typically carry a smaller credit load than their mainstream counterparts. What is relevant, however, is that 75% of the 2006 cohort returned to the university in 2007. This contrasts with the 53% and 64% of the students from the 2005 and 2004 cohorts respectively who returned – these students having followed the previous version of the EDP that did not allow for the subject-specific tutorial support nor the academic literacy module in the programme.

### 6.2.3.2 Follow-up interviews

The two semi-structured and two focus group interviews conducted during the first semester in 2007 not only provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their first-year academic activities, but also generated responses that could be compared and contrasted with the responses that were received the previous year. Table 6.10 sets out the coding categories that emerged during this final data collection activity. In some instances, categories similar to those that emerged during the 2006 interviews (see Table 6.6) were once again prevalent.

**Table 6.10: Categories used for the summary of student interview responses (2007)**

Categories	Summary of responses
Student attitudes (FI1) <sup>39</sup>	Towards lecturers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive</li> <li>▪ Negative</li> </ul> Towards their studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive</li> <li>▪ Negative</li> <li>▪ Still adapting even in 2<sup>nd</sup> year</li> </ul> Towards the other students
Differences between 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> year (FI2)	Did not anticipate changes Increased volume and pace Level of independence Less support Increased expectations from lecturers
Success factors (FI3)	Value of attending classes Tutorial discussions A ‘good’ lecturer What was learnt in <i>Texts for the Humanities</i> (academic writing) Confidence - knowing what to do Acquisition of new ways of doing: thinking critically and analysing critically Reading Work hard through the year

<sup>39</sup> FI1 = Follow-up interviews category 1, and so forth.

Categories	Summary of responses
Barriers to success (FI4)	Lecturer not opening up the texts Difficulties with academic writing Lack of engagement Not going to classes Too little time Poor time-management
Academic activities (FI5)	The role of the lecturer Tutorials versus large classes Classroom practice of lecturers and tutors Use of WebCT Assessment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ strategic learners</li> <li>▪ disappointment with marks</li> <li>▪ lack of feedback</li> </ul>
Extent of development (FI6)	Understanding of what academic writing is Increased level of maturity, but not in all Emerging identities Use and understanding of academic / disciplinary discourse Level of understanding / insight into the academe, lecturers, texts Level of focus Levels of confidence

The responses gleaned for this group of interviews highlighted many correlations with those that had been undertaken in the previous year. The students' attitudes towards their studies still displayed considerable diversity across the group, while all were, as before, in agreement as to the complexity of and challenge in academic writing. From their perspective of having completed a full year at university, the students were able to take a more retrospective look at how they had experienced their classes during their first-year. Their responses provided useful data, particularly with respect to the lessons they felt they had learnt and those aspects of their studies that they perceived to be barriers to their potential for success. Of note is how the students spoke of their disappointment with their end-of-year results.

A less tangible change from the previous year was the increased level of maturity that was demonstrated by most of the students. This was evident in the way they behaved during the interviews, how they responded and in the insight portrayed in some of their responses. In Section 6.3 this development will be seen to emerge as another key theme in the study.

### **6.2.4 Summary**

Going through the process of analysing and summarising the data in a categorised format was particularly useful as it provided a comprehensive overview of all the data that had been collected over the three-year period. It reflected the relationships that exist among the data within each different set. This ensured that I applied a measure of discipline in seeing each set of data within its own context, before moving on to the next stage of the analysis process. In addition, an important outcome of the Level One process was that it provided a point of reference to which I could refer later in the analysis to ensure that no data was left unaddressed.

### **6.3 Level Two: Repackaging and aggregating the data**

During this second phase of analysis, the data was repackaged holistically by identifying emerging themes and trends across all of the data. First I reviewed the different coding categories that had been developed during the first level of analysis to determine the themes that emerged from different sources. For easy reference, Addendum J provides a summary of the categories per data source. The matrix assisted in determining the dominant themes that issued from the data that was collected, as the original 43 categories across eight different data sets were drawn together in 20 key themes. These were then further clustered into six groups to facilitate the presentation of the data in an organised manner and also to show how each of the themes had been drawn from the initial process of analysis (see Addendum K). Henning (2004:105) notes that “knowledge of the theory that has framed the inquiry will seep into the process at this stage”, as was the case in this study where this knowledge and the data itself guided the process of naming the different themes and clusters. These clusters comprised a focus on the first-year EDP students, their academic experience, the academic activities they encountered, their academic development, their academic literacy and the institution (Stellenbosch University). Table 6.11 shows how the clusters embraced the different themes. Following this process, the original data was revisited and ‘repackaged’ under the key themes that had now been identified, highlighting the relationships across the different set of data. Thus a process of data reduction and cross-checking for repetition occurred, enabling the presentation of the in-depth nature of the data. The Level Two analysis can, therefore, be likened to a second wave in the process. In order to ensure that, as the analysis continued, I would be able to revisit raw data or original sources to verify conclusions if necessary, and to ensure the necessary checks and balances were retained in the

process, each of the coding categories was given a source reference as indicated in Table 6.11 thus providing an audit trail. In this section each of the clusters are introduced and explained, followed by sub-sections that address the three or four themes that were collated within the cluster. Each sub-section introduces the individual themes and follows with a series of citations and comments from the different data sources as they are relevant to particular theme. These sub-sections are interspersed with my own comments, thus laying a foundation for the synthesis that follows in Chapter Seven.

**Table 6.11: Clusters and themes for the Level Two presentation of the data**

	<b>Clusters</b>	<b>Themes</b>
1.	The students	A: Identities B: Attitudes to university C: Perceptions and expectations D: Lecturers' impressions
2.	The academic experience	A: Different from school B: Academic challenges C: Study methods
3.	Academic activities	A: The role of the lecturer B: Opportunities for engagement C: The role of technology D: Assessment
4.	Student academic development	A: Academic support B: Success factors C: Barriers to success
5.	Academic literacy	A: Understanding of academic literacy B: Academic discourse C: Academic writing
6.	The institution	A: Institutional culture B: Impact on teaching and learning C: Language of teaching and learning

As was noted in Chapter Five, a number of the interviews – students and lecturers – were conducted in Afrikaans. In order to facilitate the reading of this dissertation, I have translated all quotations into English, but I also asked an Afrikaans colleague with a linguistic background to review my translations to ensure that the intended meaning is retained as far as possible. (All translated quotations are identified as such. Wherever possible I have sought to address this in the explanatory text preceding the particular quotation.) Nevertheless, it is inevitable that something is lost in translation and spelling errors in the original language (in the case of the students' written work) could not be replicated in the translated version. In fairness to the English students, therefore, I have also, when citing their written work,

generally corrected the spelling errors. In a few instances I have quoted the Afrikaans verbatim, to emphasise a point. In these cases, an English translation is provided as a footnote.

Otherwise, all quotations are verbatim, including the language errors as transcribed. As some of the respondents used a language that was not their L1, errors of concord, and other language errors are numerous. The reader should accept 'sic' in all instances where grammatical errors are encountered. Finally, all citations are cross-referenced. The lecturer quotations are linked according to the subject or discipline which housed their respective modules, and the students who participated in the interviews are identified according to their pseudonyms, as given in Chapter Five (see Table 5.7 & 5.8), also indicating the set of interviews, either 2006 or 2007. Finally, the students' reflective writing paragraphs also simply note whether the citation comes from a male or female student.

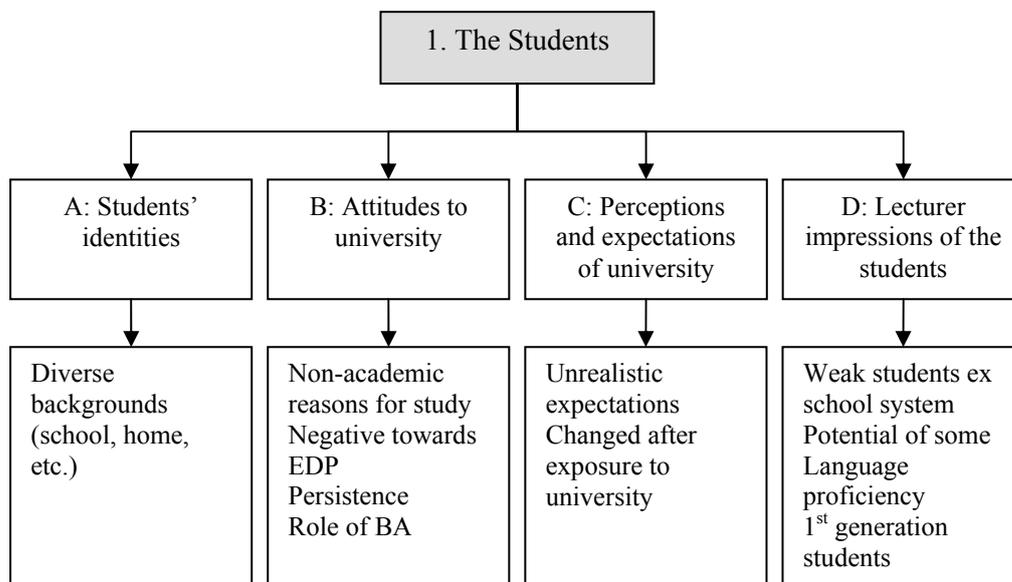
### **6.3.1 Themes relating to the students**

The biographical details on the students who participated in the 2006 and 2007 interviews provide a one-dimensional description of these students (see Table 5.7 & 5.8). Each individual student was, in reality, a case on their own and the responses cited in this section offer an additional dimension to the characterisation of the students as they share something of themselves, either knowingly or unknowingly through their words. It is inevitable, however, that these phrases mask a multi-dimensional perspective that would have added flavour to such reporting. The words will not describe the way in which Thabu rubbed his hands over his head as he searched for the right words in English to respond to the questions that the 'mam' was posing. Nor will they paint the picture of the intensity that the 35 year-old Wena projected as she described her experiences; Mauritz' uncertain arrogance as he described enjoying "Neelsie<sup>40</sup> 178", or the quiet thoughtfulness which preceded Lincoln's every response. Or of Paulina, earnest, yet so lost; the soft-spoken persistence of Attie, a disabled athlete; Anna's rampant effusiveness; Aneesa's matter-of-fact approach, Mohammed's unsettled nervousness, and so on. Yet, it is precisely these characteristics that define the students' identities. This is the 'who they are and what they bring to the different discourses that they encounter at university' (see 2.3.3). In reporting on what the students, and the lecturers, had to say, therefore, I have endeavoured, to also paint these pictures.

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<sup>40</sup> The 'Neelsie' is the main student recreation and retail centre on campus.

Under this cluster, four different themes are discussed namely, the students' identities, their attitudes to university studies, their perceptions and expectations of university and the lecturers' general impressions of their students. The diagram below (Figure 6.3) provides a schematic overview of this theme, showing the cluster name at the top, the different themes on the second level, and some of the main issues discussed in the bottom row.



**Figure 6.3: Diagrammatic representation of themes relating to the students**

### 6.3.1.1 A: Students' identities

A sub-theme of the literature review was student identities, described as both potentially an enabler and a hindrance to student success, with the acquisition of academic literacy dependent on students' perceptions of their identities and that of broader culture of those around them. This theme draws on data generated during the interviews with the lecturers and the students, but is also supported via data from the ABQ. The summary of background information provided on the entire EDP cohort emphasises the diversity of the group in terms of language, and race, with the Afrikaans-speaking white group being the largest, although not most dominant as is the case for the entire university (see 4.4.1). One common denominator for the group, however, is the fact that their Grade 12 results placed them in the lowest percentile of students at the university. This is relevant given their responses in the ABQ, which highlighted that the majority of the students were positive about their potential for academic success (see also 6.3.1.3).

The students described themselves in a number of different ways, at times providing obscure hints of their own identities when describing themselves in terms of their age, previous academic achievements, home town, physical attributes and the extent of their life experience. The students appeared to be split into three groups. The first were those who came from disadvantaged schools, but who had performed well relative to their peers, had been offered bursaries and had served as student leaders. A second group were those who came from rural areas, small towns and possibly, also, less well-resourced schools. For both of these groups, transition to university held significant social challenges, over and above the academic challenges that were common to all and will be discussed later. The final group comprised students who had attended well-resourced schools and came from urban middle-class backgrounds, but who for some reason had not been achievers in the school system. Despite these differences, the ABQ responses clearly spoke to the aspirations and expectations of the students and how they were going to be successful in their university studies despite having performed within the lowest percentile in terms of Grade 12 university-entrance results. The following citations, predominantly drawn from the students' interviews highlight some of the issues relating to student identity.

- “ ... I am thirty-five, and I have never studied, but I always wanted to study and last year when I ... I got divorced last year ...<sup>41</sup>” [Wena 2006]
- “I was one of the best students in the school and I was even a member of the SRC ... I was performing well up until Grade 12 and I produced a good mark in Grade 12.” [Thabu 2006]
- “I do come from the place that is a little bit less developed, but I had to tell myself that I will get used to the place.” [Thabu 2006]
- “I did athletics [in my gap year] ... but I am slightly affected with cerebral palsy on my right side ...” [Attie 2006]
- “The school which I attended to was the most at the rural area ... I was one of the best students because at the time we were selected to go to the workshops ... so that they gave all of us the bursaries ...” [Paulina 2006]
- “ ... I come from a farm ... *Ek het skool gegaan, ek weet nie of Tannie weet waar is XX nie<sup>42</sup>?*” [Sophie 2006]

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<sup>41</sup> Note that the use of the ellipsis has generally been applied to indicate that something has been omitted most often at the start of a quotation or when a sentence is still incomplete. In some cases, particularly when used mid-sentence, it reflects hesitation on the part of the respondent.

<sup>42</sup> “I went to school in, I don't know if [you] know where XX is?”; *Tannie* = Aunty, although in Afrikaans it is used as a form of respect for one's elders.

- "... I am staying with my father, but in my own room." [Paulina 2006]
- "We were originally from Jo'burg ... I had fun there. I enjoyed it ... It is actually quite a shock to ... coming from Jo'burg ... it's very Afrikaans [Stellenbosch]. I got to go to the UK for the year, went to Spain and Amsterdam ..." [Sandy 2006]
- "I am originally from the Northern Cape. I was born in a small place near Upington ..." [Anna 2006, translated]
- "... like the Afrikaans issue that for them it's an issue but for me it's, it was never and issue because I grew up in, and went to a school where there were both Afrikaans and English and black and white, for me it wasn't a mission to adjust to Stellenbosch, ja I could get on with things" [Lincoln 2007].

Apart from the obvious diversity across race, language, schooling, family background, it was in the reading beneath the surface that I was struck by the divergence in the frames of reference between, for example, Sandy who had spent a year travelling through Europe, Paulina who had arrived from a rural province in South Africa to now live in Stellenbosch with her father, but in her own room; Anna who came from a small town and Thabu who came from a place 'a little less developed...'. Knowing who these students are and where they come from both literally and figuratively is of relevance if they are to be drawn into the academic community.

#### **6.3.1.2 B: Attitudes to university studies**

The students' explanations, both in the reflective writing paragraphs as well as in the interviews, as to why they were attending Stellenbosch University, or how they had come to attend the University provided some insight into their attitudes towards Stellenbosch University specifically and university studies in general. As reported in Chapter Four, financial concerns are often a barrier to student success, especially during the first-year. The responses below and the fact that the ABQ responses indicated that only nine out of the 61 EDP students were responsible for their own educational expenses suggest that this was not a significant issue for this group.

- "... I initially wanted to study BA Sport Science, but they [parents] then said to me B Sc (Agric) ... I hate Maths and Science and Chemistry ... and so I dropped out ... [now I am studying] BA Sport Science ... I am very happy" [Sophie 2006, translated]

- “So I have been sponsored by a US<sup>43</sup> bursary that says that the only way to study is to come to Stellenbosch and I made up my mind that I was going to study ...” [Thabu 2006]
- “... they gave me a bursary so it made things a lot easier.” [Lincoln 2006].

A few of the students’ responses attested to a lack of focus, uncertainty or a negative attitude towards university studies in general. For some this persisted into the second year.

- “I really didn’t know ... six months later I know exactly what I want to become ...” [Wena 2006, translated]
- “So last year was like ... I finished the whole year doing nothing ... In the first place I applied for BCom. So it’s like my Mathematics was low, actually I wanted to upgrade my Maths this year ...” [Paulina 2006]
- “... [coming to Stellenbosch had] nothing to do with academics ... I just like the whole scene and the whole university town and ... I haven’t got a very good concentration span” [Sandy 2006]
- “I didn’t really think what subjects I wanted to take I just thought sort of, to be honest, like most impressive sounding subjects ...” [Sandy 2007]
- “I’m just *cruising* along.” [Mauritz 2007, translated]
- “... in the first year, I just opened my text books when I had a test ... {laughing}” [Mohammed 2007].

Some students described how they had not specifically selected their current study programme, or had not wanted to be on the EDP, or even do a BA (see also 6.3.4.1).

- “I was also very disappointed that I had to be on the EDP and had to waste my time like that ...” [Male student, translated]
- “The modules I have was not ones that I have selected. The course I am doing requires that I do them.” [Female student]
- “To be honest I didn’t really feel like attending it [the EDP] ...” [Male student, translated]
- “I don’t need to do it [the EDP]” [Anna 2006, translated]
- “Ok its BA. Ok fine go ahead ... but if you say ‘engineer’, ok! Here we go!” [Anna, 2007, translated].

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<sup>43</sup> University of Stellenbosch

This apparent lack of commitment to their studies or the fact that they felt they were doing something they did not want to was also reflected in how these students described, for example, not collecting assessed work, not following up on work missed and (in the one focus group) two of the students acknowledging that they had to spend the afternoon working on a term assignment which they had not yet started and that was due that evening. In this same focus group there was a student who, on a number of occasions, offered a seemingly flippant or inappropriate response (see Mauritz above).

Nevertheless, in keeping with the positive expectations noted in the ABQ, a number of the students displayed persistence, enthusiasm and a desire to be successful both in the interviews and in their reflective writing exercises.

- “So, now I’m still a little bit struggling to get used to the modern things like computers and other stuff that is more technological, but I mean I’m coming right so far.” [Thabu 2006] (see also 6.3.2.2)
- I just put my mind to it and decide this stuff I am going to get into my head.” [Attie 2006, translated] (see also 6.3.2.3)
- “I am looking forward to this year and I am so motivated ...” [Female student, translated]
- “I have committed myself to do EDP ...” [Female student]
- “I am now really looking forward to the year ahead and I see my studies and everything that I must tackle so that nothing will be too big for me ... and that I will never give up, just keep on trying.” [Male student, translated].

These contrasting attitudes were also perceived during the class observation. For example, my visits in the second semester coincided with the students’ end-of-year presentations. My dominant observation during these sessions was of their confidence and level of commitment in the English group, and of overall enthusiasm in the Afrikaans group. What was notable, however, was the behaviour of two students that could not be observed because they did not arrive on each of the two days to do their presentations as scheduled. In both classes the lecturers confirmed that no communication had been received from these students, which meant that they now would forfeit this mark, one that would have made a significant contribution to their final mark.

The lecturers also noted the diversity of attitudes among the student towards their studies. One described it as follows:

- “You hand out work, say for example a new article or something like that. Then there are a few who look at the article to see how thick it is, and then it goes straight into the case. Then you get those who immediately take the article and literally before I have even finished handing it out, these students have already scanned it, seen what the main points are and have even started reading here and there ...” [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated].

Interestingly, this lecturer felt that the behaviour he described not only spoke of students’ interest in the subject, but also of their application of effective time-management. To him, the student who was determined to be successful in her or his studies realised that, in order to do so, effective time-management had to be applied. The issue of time and time management emerged in many of the students’ responses as well (see 6.3.1.5).

### **6.3.1.3 C: Perceptions of and expectations for university**

The students’ perceptions of their abilities and their expectations for university are closely linked. The summary of the ABQ gives an indication of how the students in the EDP group perceived of their own abilities across a number of different academic and related issues, including their general academic ability, their persistence and confidence in their ability to study and their computer skills. As the year progressed, it became clear that many of these perceptions and their expectations in terms of what they could achieve were unrealistic. For example, at the end of the first year not one of the students obtained above 60% for any of their first-year subjects, in contrast to the 85% in the EDP cohort that had expressed this expectation (6.2.2.1; 6.2.2.7). The contrast between expectations and the reality can also be observed in 6.3.2.4 where the students describe how the marks that they expected in their different assessments were not realised.

In several instances, these positive expectations were also reflected in the students’ reflective writing paragraphs, written some four weeks into the academic year:

- “I do not know what is going to happen to me in the future, but I have a great feeling I’m going to be successful.” [Male student]
- “I am optimistic about what lies ahead ...” [Male student]

- “I am confident. I am looking forward for my writing skills and so far I am doing alright.” [Male student]
- “... looking forward to the weeks to come and an improvement I hope to achieve. I am very confident ...” [Male student].

These expectations and perceptions of their abilities appear in some instances to have been tempered over the course of the year – even during the first few weeks. This is attested to in the students’ reflective writing exercises where they spoke of realising that, for example, their writing skills were not as good as they had initially thought and how the module could be of value (see also 6.3.4.1)

- “I always thought that *Texts in the Humanities* is a complete waste of time. I thought I thought I didn’t need to attend the supposedly boring class ... I can really gain a lot from the ... class ... [it] will really help me in my studies.” [Male student]
- “When I started university I was very confident in my writing skills. This was something I did not have a problem with in high school, but unfortunately, I have discovered it is not the same here at the university ...” [Female student]
- “I am a person who likes to read the paper and who likes to keep abreast of things ... but I did not feel academic enough... I have a lot of life experience, but I am not academically schooled ...” [Wena 2006, translated]
- “I am just trying ... to survive. I wanted to do Psychology, my Honours and then an M in Psychology. But now this is not even an issue for me, I am just here.” [Anna 2007, translated].

#### **6.3.1.4 D: Lecturer impressions of the students**

Although all of the lecturers described their students as a diverse group, they felt that the students were predominantly middleclass, Afrikaans speaking, white and female, who came from what one respondent called “good local white schools” (Male lecturer, Subject C, translated) and who were technologically skilled. The background data provided on the EDP group and the Stellenbosch University first-years as a whole, would appear to substantiate these perceptions. Despite this notion of them coming from good schools, the lecturers expressed considerable concern about the students’ abilities, who all indicated that they believed that some of the students in their classes should not have been granted access to university. One lecturer explained that they were required to run additional tutorials to teach the students how to reference, how to develop an argument and how to read an article – skills

she described as things that students should have learnt at school. Another described the students in a rather despairing manner:

- “so opvallend swakker as wat mens sou verwag<sup>44</sup>” [Male lecturer, Subject C].

The issue of how the schools were not giving the students the foundation they needed for successful university studies was a golden thread running throughout these interviews and, along with more general negative comments, can be seen below.

- “ ... a very limited vocabulary and an inability to formulate things ... *they just do not know ... about the issues that are around them. They live in a very closed world ...*” [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated]<sup>45</sup>
- “I really don’t think they are good students and I think it has a lot to do with their high school training ... they simply can’t write well ... they don’t know how to approach their required reading. They don’t know what to do with it...” [Female lecture, Subject B, translated]
- “Somebody who does not necessarily read as much as I would like them to read ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D]<sup>46</sup>
- “ ... I have realised you cannot expect too much from them ...” [Female lecture, Subject B, translated]
- “But I am expecting too much and it is our responsibility to actually call the ones that we see are doing badly ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- “too much of an ego ... does not pay attention, sits and talks ...” [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated]
- “... Subject D is a kind of philosophy, so they hate it. They do not understand why they should do it ... [they do] not necessarily want to be there, want to get through this painful experience as fast as possible ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D].

There was, however, some recognition of the potential of many of the students, comments stating that those who did attend classes were there because they wanted to be and because they were interested. It was clear that these students offered a lifeline to the lecturers.

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<sup>44</sup> So markedly weaker than one would expect

<sup>45</sup> The second half of this quotation was stated in English. The first half has therefore been translated while the second half, as shown in italics, is given verbatim.

<sup>46</sup> This respondent tended to code-switch throughout the interview, hence the fact that some of her statements are shown as having been translated and others not.

- “There are of course exceptions and they are fantastic ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated]
- “... who are not yet completely clear and certain about what they want to do with their lives, but ... when I bring in critical questions about the university and about school, and what their fathers and mothers have to say, then their eyes shine ...” [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated].

This same lecturer was concerned that because he was older the students might stereotype him, and suggested that the younger lecturers might establish a rapport with the students more easily. The issue of the age of their lecturers, however, was never raised by the students when they described their classroom experiences (6.3.1.1).

Many issues were raised as the lecturers described the students’ limited language proficiency, inability to conceptualise, organise themselves and their work, write exams and so forth (see also 6.3.6.3). In some instances specific race groups were targeted as being more at-risk:

- “... especially the coloured students, they don’t have a clue as to what is expected. Many struggle to adapt even after a few weeks” [Male lecturer, Subject C, translated]
- “... the isiXhosa students have a problem [with their writing skills] ...” [Male lecturer, Subject C, translated]
- “... the coloured student who speaks English is the better student. Among the coloured Afrikaans speaking students ... I don’t know, to me they don’t fall into that group of those who are interested, who ask questions, and so forth ...” [Female lecturer, Subject B, translated]
- “No full sentences, no coherence ... It’s a coloured student ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D].

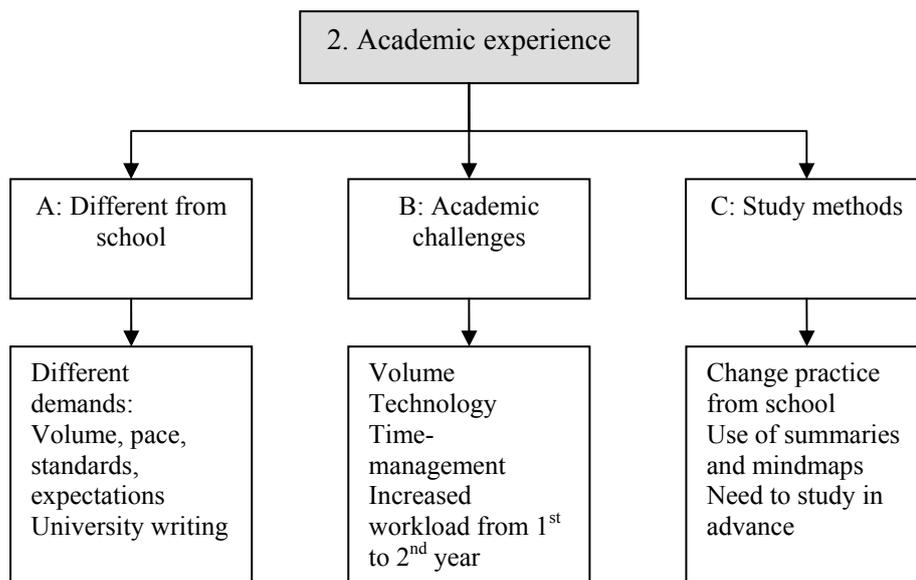
The importance of family, the issue of being a first-generation student and the sort of discussions that would have taken place in the student’s home was raised by two of the lecturers as significant.

- “... so if my parents were involved in Subject B or were interested in it. I think that contributes to it [being successful]... the fact that at home you maybe spoke about these issues. [Female lecturer, Subject B, translated]
- “... *it is definitely environmental* ... the better students were ... at a private school ... somewhere there must have been *exposure* to why things are the way they are ... it is the interest [in the subject]” [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated].

Given that 38% of the students indicated in the ABQ that they were first generation students, these comments of the lecturers are important, particularly with regards to the students' actual university experience, which would be foreign to the parents of the first-generation students. All of the lecturers were sensitive to the socio-economic realities that some of the students had to deal with, recognising that personal and emotional problems could significantly affect the students' work. Nevertheless, the lecturers' generally negative perceptions of the abilities of the students contrast rather sharply with the positive, albeit possibly unrealistic, perceptions of the students themselves.

### 6.3.2 Themes relating to the academic experience

In this cluster the different themes relating to the students' academic experiences were explored. The difference between school and university, the way that they had experienced school and the extent to which their schooling had prepared them for university learning was the dominant theme in this cluster and is also a context for the other issues raised in this section, namely the study methods adopted and the academic challenges experienced.



**Figure 6.4: Diagrammatic representation of themes relating to the academic experience**

#### 6.3.2.1 A: Different from school

All of the students spoke about how university differed from school in a number of fundamental ways, describing how it was necessary to adapt to meet the demands levelled at them in their new environment. The issues raised included the increased amount of work and a faster pace, the interaction between student and teacher that was not replicated between them and their lecturers, the level of responsibility that they were now required to

demonstrate, issues of self-discipline, the way in which at school they were told exactly what to do, and so forth.

- “Here you work, you work much faster and with large quantities of work in a short period of time. You are responsible for what you do...you have to put in a lot more effort” [Lincoln 2006]
- “... the amount of work is more, bigger and they also go through the work quickly and no one tells you that you have to hand in. If you don’t hand in then it is your *loss*. [Attie 2006, translated]
- “Ja, there’s a big difference. I mean the lecturers are just giving you the pages, the number of pages you must go and read... in high school, like they giving the notes, each and every notes on the board. They explain them... the lecturers are giving you everything ... you are supposed to do the notes by yourself, you are supposed to do the class work by yourself and more work is done by you ... [and] you don’t know whether you are writing the information that is necessary in your notes ...” [Thabu 2006]
- “At school you were the top student, and here you come and sjoe, you understanding absolutely nothing ... It took me ages to adapt ...” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “... I didn’t realise how much it would be different ... like in terms of how they want to work and study ...” [Sandy 2007]
- “... at school I didn’t study ... at school we were given the notes it got exactly into my mind and I didn’t have to remind ... to revise or do something, but I know exactly when we gonna write the exam today, I know I’m gonna pass it. So here its different, it’s really different.” [Paulina 2006]
- “... at school you are fed with a spoon ... here all of a sudden you have to think very independently and the work is a whole lot more at one time and that’s from the start and it is as if they don’t give you a bit of help or a little bit of piece of mind ... you must just jump in and you must sweat ... the work is obviously much more difficult ... in the beginning you don’t feel you fit in so well in this industry.” [Sophie 2006, translated]
- “ ... you don’t have people on your back the whole time ... I need my mom. I need her nagging the whole time, to be honest ...” [Sandy 2006]
- “... I have to change totally the way I was doing things in school. I have to change to a university ... and try little bit to adapt into a university situation ...” [Thabu 2006].

The students also noted how writing at school differed from university writing. Here they highlighted aspects such as the amount they are required to write, the type of language they are expected to use, the structure that has to be applied and the fact that university writing was generally at a higher standard than anything they had experienced at school. Some of the responses also pointed to the students having either been taught incorrectly or simply having not understood what was required.

- “The volume, amount that you are going to write is a lot more. The standard that they expect is obviously a lot higher than in matric. You have to use academic language ... they are a lot stricter ...” [Sandy 2006]
- “I first start using my Introduction, but in school there no like Introduction ... here in university I have to first start with Introduction. I have to go to the body which we used to do also in school. After the Introduction, Body, it’s a Conclusion. In high school Conclusion is not necessary ...” [Thabu 2006]
- “ My essays I write differently. OK sort of academically... and I have to study completely differently than at school ... before ... the teachers would say exactly what it is I must study ...” [Anna 2006, translated]
- “... writing essays at university and at school is completely different. The really ... they want the structure. They concentrate a lot on structure.”[Lincoln 2006]
- “ ... our essays included many more of your own ideas and stuff ... At school plagiarism was not so strict” [Anna 2006, translated]
- “... the way in which we write essays ... at university they expect so much more from you and your essay must be of such a better quality and well laid out and coherent.”[Sophie 2006, translated]
- “ ... it’s very different. It’s difficult. At school, it was not that difficult to write an essay, ... the topics was much easier ... If I don’t understand the topic then I can’t write a thing.” [Paulina 2006].

One student, despite his poor English, showed considerable insight into the fact that when one arrives at university one has to adapt one’s identity and way of doing to become part of this new community.

- “... in school you have to be associated with school and what is needed from the teachers ... So even here at the University, ... there’s this lots of things that is expected from you ... you have to learn them ... you can’t just come ... with the

mind of the place that you come from ... you have to know the stuff that is needed to you as a student.” [Thabu 2007].

The way that these students describe their schooling and contrast it with their initial academic experience fans the debate as to their under-preparedness and the extent to which they would be able to address the academic challenges of the first-year.

### **6.3.2.2 B: Academic challenges**

Students also shared what they had found difficult or challenging during the first year. During the 2006 interviews, their responses most often referred to aspects related to the transition from school to university, as described in 6.3.2.1, and how to deal with them. High volumes of work, a lack of time, the amount of required reading and technology were presented particular challenges during the first six months. Students also described how difficult it was to know what was important or relevant, again harking back to how at school they had been told exactly what to do and what to learn. In addition they described how there was little coherence in terms of expectations and approach from one subject to the next.

- “The work just seemed so very much ...” [Wena 2006, translated]
- “So, now I’m still a little bit struggling to get used to the modern things like computers and other stuff that is more technological, but I mean I’m coming right so far.” [Thabu 2006]
- “Sometimes I feel I get too much information at one time ...” [Female student, translated]
- “ ... I did not know what is important and what is not ... sometimes my brain feels too small to understand ... perhaps it is the way the question is asked” [Anna 2006, translated]
- “... the work was quite a bit more and self-study was a word that I had to learn quickly ...” [Female student, translated]
- “... I still don’t have enough time to cover all of the work ...” [Female student, translated]
- “ ... time management ... because I think it is one the of biggest things that students struggle with ...” [Sohpie 2006, translated]
- “... I didn’t like reading books at school ... it’s getting more complicated and complicated.” [Paulina 2006]

Paulina's comment needs to be read with the results from the ABQ reported on earlier (6.2.2.1), which highlights how many of the EDP students acknowledged that they had not read for personal pleasure during their final year at school.

Some students, when describing the challenges, also hinted at how they responded by either adapting to the situation, or turning their backs on it, highlighting how varied the students' experiences were.

- "... That subject<sup>47</sup> is a little different from the others... They expect different things from you... it is quite difficult ... each tutor expects something a little different from your writing style ... you have to be adaptable and able to do different things." [Sophie 2006, translated]
- "... the time which you, you have to complete your, your work, that was probably an adjustment one has to make academically, ... there is so many thing that you have to cover, that's probably the main issue, uhm, in terms of difficulty." [Lincoln 2007]
- "... I think the reasons why I didn't make [understand] that first lecture was uhm, the way the work was put out ... I've never encountered such a module, it was pretty complex ... I just, you know, I just want to turn my back on it, ja". [Lincoln 2007].

It would appear that in some instances the difficulties with workload persisted throughout the first year and became even greater in the second year, as indicated by the students who participated in the 2007 interviews.

- "... workload-wise it's become more hectic, ..." [Mohammed 2007]"
- "... the reality of the university is tougher. Last year we were sort of *spoonfed* by, you know, by *Texts in the Humanities* and now we are flying *solo*, but I can cope with it ..." [Johan 2007 Translated]
- "Now, being second year, you when reality hits you, and it hits you hard and eventually I realised you have to pull up your socks ..." [Gerald 2007]
- "Like in the first year, the workload was halved, and I in my second year ... the subjects that I didn't do in my first year, ... I am doing them now, mixed with my second year subjects. So I must say my second year is tough." [Aneesa 2007]
- "... like the tasks that we had, they weren't so big compared to now ..." [Mohammed 2007]

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<sup>47</sup> Student is referring to a subject that is not one of the four subjects I highlighted in this study, hence the subject is not described as Subject A, B, C or D.

- “I misjudged myself ... It’s very different from first year... it’s starting all over again, it’s far more difficult, the level of expectation is much higher” [Wena 2007].

None of the lecturers indicated that they believed the content of their modules to be difficult, but rather acknowledged that accessing the texts required a certain level of language proficiency and dedication (see 6.3.1.2), and challenged students to work swiftly and smartly through large volumes of work (see also 6.3.5.1).

- “Overload of information. They suddenly have to cope with so much more ...”  
[Female lecturer, Subject D].

The students’ remarks regarding the academic challenges that they were confronted with were often accompanied by comments on how they were forced to adapt and do things differently. This also emerged in the reflective writing exercises where the students wrote of how they now realised that they would have to do things differently. One of the main points that emerged here was the study methods that they were employing.

### **6.3.2.3 C: Study methods**

The way in which many students described their study methods suggested a fair amount of uncertainty and a reliance on being told what was important and necessary. In the ABQ, all of the EDP respondents indicated that they had memorised facts so as to be able to repeat them in similar form when required to do so in a test or examination situation. In the interviews they were asked about how they set about studying for an examination. Many of the responses highlighted that the students recognised the need to change former practices.

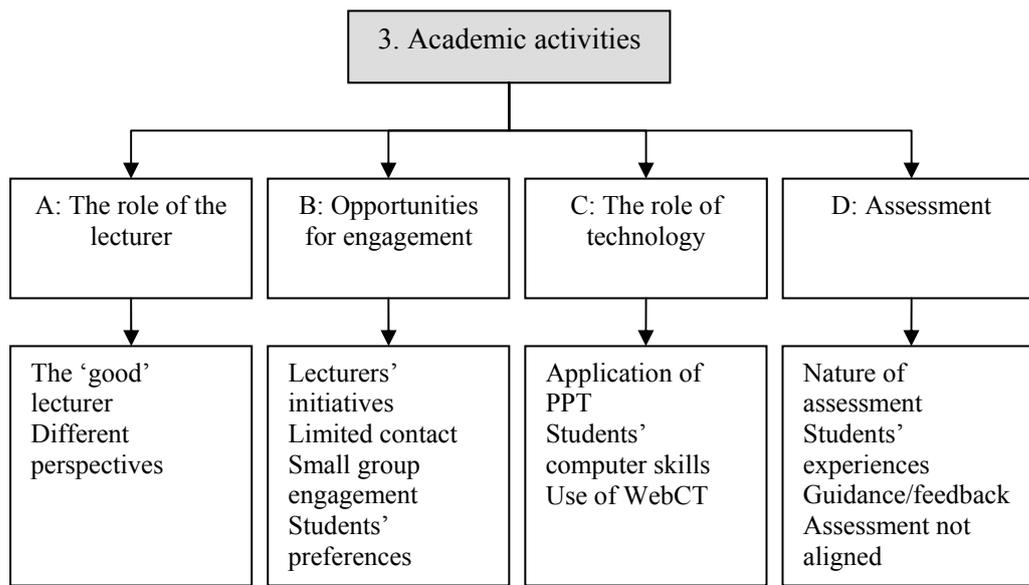
- “... I underline the stuff in the class ... when I get at home I take my book and my scrap books where I’m writing my notes ... I’m reading through the notes ... that’s how I prepared for a test ... [but] I got a tutor... I had to all of a sudden change the way I was studying and take the tutor’s method ... some of the students they are struggling because they are still using the same method that they did in Secondary school ...” [Thabu 2006]
- “... when I start learning then I try to make summaries and then study from the summaries ... unless something is clear in the book then you don’t have to summarise it. I just put my mind to it and decide this stuff I am going to get into my head.” [Attie 2006, translated]

- “If there’s something I don’t understand then I go back to the textbook ... sometimes I’ll make summaries ...” [Lincoln 2006]
- “... I can’t study on the table cause I fall asleep... I sit on my bed, ... while everybody in the house is asleep ... then I have my books in front of me. Then I start reading, highlighting the important things, but I only work with my summaries ...” [Paulina 2006]
- “Mindmaps, I’m only using them in *Texts in the Humanities* and in English ... as an essay preparation ...” [Paulina 2006]
- “I can only study a little bit at a time ... what I need to do is start a lot before ... then read these little-bits, little bits, little-bits ...” [Sandy 2007]
- “... you can’t study the night before, you can’t get away with that ... you actually have to do it in depth ... the load of work here, it is impossible.” [Sandy 2007]
- “... I just have to go and get some tips in, in the class, but, but then I have to do everything.” [Thabu 2007].

During the classroom observation, I also noted how, despite the fair amount of student engagement during the discussions on the text and during the presentations that took place during the second set of visits, there were students who did not take any notes or even have a book or a piece of paper in front of them. However, what also emerged from the ABQ was that the students claimed to be accustomed to employing what would be regarded as appropriate study methods. These included studying in groups, evaluating the relevance of information that they had gathered from different sources, and using ideas and concepts across disciplines. Evidence of this was, to some extent, also noted in the students’ interviews. For example, when describing why they preferred, in most cases, the small group tutorial, their reasons were the interaction with their fellow students and working in groups (see 6.3.3.3). Similarly, the students’, particularly in the 2007 interviews, spoke of how certain concepts were used, often in different contexts, across different disciplines (see 6.3.5.2). Several students also said they applied the lessons learnt in *Text in the Humanities* in their other courses (see 6.3.4.1), and the ability to assess the value of information sourced was one of the key expectations that the lecturers held for their students (described in detail under 6.3.5.1).

### 6.3.3 Themes relating to academic activities

The way in which the students described their academic experience during their first-year is taken a step further in this third cluster. The focus here is specifically on academic activities as they took place in the classroom, thus the roles played by the lecturer and technology, the opportunities that were created for engagement and, finally, how this, and the issues addressed in the previous cluster, all led towards the eventual assessment.



**Figure 6.5: Diagrammatic representation of themes relating to academic activities**

#### 6.3.3.1 A: The role of the lecturer

The role of the lecturer in the learning process was foregrounded in all of the interviews conducted with the students. The students described their lecturers in a number of ways, differing from student to student and from one module to the next. The reliance on support and guidance from the ‘expert’ had become a habit at school that students now found difficult to reconcile with the perceived aloofness of their university lecturers. Of note, however, is how the students were able to define what they perceived a ‘good’ lecturer to be, referring to issues such as their subject knowledge, ability to explain and a sense of humour.

- “... [he] goes to the board and draws a sketch and he explains exactly what is going on and when you learn that stuff how much more you see it in your mind’s eye.” [Sophie 2006, translated].
- “I thought he knew he ..., his stuff but more so he had a, he had a character that, that could uhm interact with the audience and we could really follow him ... keeping us

focused on what he was talking about and that made the subject even more enjoyable”. [Lincoln 2007]

- “... the lecturer ... he made the classes and the work we were doing much easier to understand ... in a fun way” [Aneesa 2007]
- “... everybody pitches for his class, it was, ja it was very interesting to actually go to his class” [Mohammed 2007]
- “... there was sort of a sense of humour within the lecturer uhm, the language didn’t matter, you know you could follow him, uhm, his presence uhm, his loud voice, ... the way he just communicated with the students, ... that’s how you can follow a lecturer easier” [Lincoln 2007]
- “some of my big lecture classes, was immensely successful, even though it was three-hundred plus students because of the lecturer” (see also 6.3.4.1). [Wena 2007]
- “even though it is such a big lecture, she does pick on people ... as opposed to mostly other ones, where you can just sort of sit ... She made it very involved in the whole lecture ... but if you weren’t listening she always had a sarcastic remark.” [Sandy 2007].

The focus in this section points directly to the pivotal role of the lecturer - also addressed in section 6.3.4.1 - specifically relating to the lecturers involved in the academic literacy module. However, in the section that follows, the extent to which the classroom activities were taken beyond the one-to-many communication that is reflected here, is raised.

### **6.3.3.2 B: Opportunities for engagement**

The lecturers all felt that in spite of the large classes, that they created opportunities for engagement with group discussions, practical exercises, the use of real life examples and applications, and question and answer sessions during lectures. Some students confirmed this.

- “he would start talking ... but in between ... he would throw out questions where students were, had the opportunity to answer him, ...” [Lincoln 2007]
- “ ... when any of the lecturers ask if we could comment, I normally do, because it helps me again to make the subject my own ... most of the lecturers encourage us to talk, they really do ...” [Wena 2007]
- “... the lecturers, they are really, really encouraging the student to participate in the class” [Thabu 2007].

But these opinions were not shared by all, and many students remarked on how they felt isolated and distanced from their lecturers.

- "... we are just basically a number ... he won't easily look at you and say this is the chance to ask questions ... [at school] there is just sort of more space for it." [Attie 2006, translated]
- "I'm not saying that everyone must have a relationship with the lecturer ... but here and there at least the lecturer should link a face to a number ... then the lecturer and the student can perhaps understand one another's work better ... I will understand what he means in the long questions" [Anna 2006, translated]
- "... the class doesn't provide the opportunity to sort of unpack ... the difficult content into a simpler way ... you don't get the sense that ... there's an attempt to make it more accessible ..." [Sandy 2007].

The students' perceptions are possibly not unfounded. For example, one of the module outlines reviewed did not contain the contact details for the three lecturers involved in the module. Students were instructed to contact the module coordinator, a post-graduate student, if they had any enquiries. The lecturers themselves acknowledged that the student numbers forced them to apply coping mechanisms of this nature, resulting in less and less lecturer – student contact, which has implications for both teaching and learning, and the acquisition of academic literacy (see also 6.3.6.2).

- "So we have no connection with the students in terms of that [marking written work]." [Female lecturer, Subject D].

Most of the students appeared to prefer the tutorial or small group format, enjoying the opportunities that these presented for interaction, questioning, and more direct assistance. The students also often commented on this as one of the advantages of the academic literacy module's classes, which were all in small-group format and appeared to lessen the boredom they reported experiencing in the larger lectures.

- "That was the nicest ... you get to know one another ... basically in the large classes you are just one of the masses ..." [Wena 2006, translated]
- "... with lecturers, I mean in the end talking to them, helps a lot, ja, and with peers, like senior students, uhm, they can always help you in some way ..." [Gerald 2007]
- "The *Texts in the Humanities* is almost like a workshop ..." [Male student, translated]

- "... the seminar groups, you get to know one another ... its nice there because you can say your say ..." [Attie 2006, translated]
- "I get terribly bored in the large classes, they just go on ..." [Anna 2006, translated]
- "... then automatically throughout the lecture you just get bored and then you know and then you like talk to your friends ... but then you try to focus but just that talking ... you didn't find it interesting at all ..." [Mohammed 2007]
- "... the tutorial just uhm, uhm gets a (feeling) of nervousness uhm off your shoulder. In lectures you feel you, you can't answer or ask this question 'cause you feel you might be stupid, but in smaller groups you, you just have a greater confidence ... and the lecturer in the tutorials just concentrates on you, you feel more important than say in the bigger lecture ..." [Lincoln 2007]
- "I prefer the little tuts ... because in the big lectures ... if I know the lecturer can't see me I tend to day-dream." [Sandy 2007]
- "[in tutorials] it's easier to talk to the people because you see them every day ..." [Johan 2007, translated]
- "You get more info ... communicating with someone, face-to-face, there's more info than you would receive because it is as if he is talking to you .... In the lectures, it is demotivational ..." [Aneesa 2007]
- "I prefer tuts ... because you have to listen, because teachers do pick on you ... if you're not listening you are gonna look like an idiot." [Sandy 2007]
- "She [the tutor] will explain quite well in class and those who do not understand can still like make a consultation with her ..." [Anna 2006, translated]
- "... yes, they [the tutor] told you exactly what you had done right and what you had done wrong and ... helped you to *improve* and so on. " [Johan 2007, translated] (see also 6.3.1.5).

The module outlines, however, also showed that despite the preference for small group tutorials among the students, these were only used on a regular basis in one of the four large enrolment modules, with one of the other three offering tutorials on an ad hoc basis. Also of relevance, however, was the level of engagement and debate that characterised the *Texts in the Humanities* classes and that is attested to in section 6.3.4.1. These small groups undoubtedly facilitated an active learning experience.

Some students did express a preference for lectures, but these reasons were not necessarily sound from a teaching and learning perspective.

- “ ... the large class works better for me than the small groups do. Because in the small they expect you to give your opinion ...” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “It is much nicer for me if the classes are so big, in the big classes you just sit, you don’t listen ...” [Mauritz 2007, translated]
- “There just some students that just ... they just don’t want to ...” [Wena 2007].

### 6.3.3.3 C: The role of technology

The students also had quite specific ideas about the use of technology, both in the classroom, typically PowerPoint, and in the module as a whole through WebCT. The students’ remarks show how they appeared to have a clear picture of the appropriate use of PowerPoint. They were sometimes critical of how it was used, referring to how lecturers simply read from their slides without providing any additional detail, or how they might discuss something quite different to what was put up on the screen.

- “I do not like it when the lecturer stands in front and reads just like that out of the book. Stands, reads out of the book and then now and then a PowerPoint slide. I can sit and do that on my own. I want to have what is written there coloured in.” [Sophie 2006, translated]
- “... take many of my lecturers, they read off their PowerPoint *slide* and if they *spend* time on one PowerPoint slide, then its one *slide* the whole *lecture* ... then they fly through the rest ... what the *use* of that?” [Anna 2007, translated].
- “Or they talk about other things than what you can see on the PowerPoint *slide*” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “I find a lot of teachers, or lecturers rather, just read off, off them [PowerPoint slides] ... I wouldn’t say it is the be-all and end-all, but if they’re not there, you miss them.” [Sandy 2007]
- “ ... he just reads from the slides, you can do it on your own ...” [Aneesa 2007]
- “PowerPoint slides are sort of, they are supposed to be the framework that covers the chapter and so on. But it does not work so well for me ... a pack of notes are sort of better ...” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “he would use a PowerPoint and then he’d elaborate where necessary” [Lincoln 2007].

The importance of tools such as PowerPoint in providing additional support to students, particularly those students who have to deal with a language of learning that is not their L1, was not foregrounded in the interviews. What students did emphasise, however, was how the PowerPoint slides were often used as summaries and part of their class notes, which they then used to prepare for assessments (see 6.3.3.4).

The use of WebCT was also raised in different contexts. The students, for example, referred to it, both positively and negatively, in the interviews.

- “I don’t like that format at all ... I like to physically hand in something that I can see what it looks like ... [ but] they couldn’t make it much more simpler than that if they tried.” [Sandy 2007]
- “No, I stay away from computers ... I am not interested in them at all.” [Attie 2006, translated]
- “... some of the features of the computer, I know them ... but up to so far I can do emails, printings. I can type, at least I am getting used to the keyboard.” [Paulina 2006]
- “... you’re sitting at the back of the class and you hear the, the start of the lecture, but then ... you don’t know what’s going on. So then you go on to WebCT and ... you can get up to date ...” [Gerald 2007].

In addition, the module outlines showed that the large enrolment modules utilised the e-learning technology for a number of purposes, such as disseminating information, providing additional support and for assessment. The students’ responses in the ABQ, however, emphasise the fact that there was considerable diversity in the students’ computer experience, particularly in this EDP group, which is at odds with the lecturers’ impressions of their abilities in this area (one of the lecturers having profiled the first-year students as being technologically driven).

#### **6.3.3.4 D: Assessment**

Ultimately, every discussion with the students led to assessment, with various issues being raised during the data collection process, such as the nature of the assessment, the preparation or guidance given for the assessment, the marks received versus the students’ expectations and the role of feedback. The description of the assessment in the module outlines also illustrates the differences across the different modules of lecturer expectations, particularly

the amount of written work required for assessment. The students' responses suggest that their preference for writing, or not, also influenced the type of questioning they preferred.

When asked to reflect on their preferences in terms of different forms of assessment, the students had mixed reactions as to whether they preferred multiple choice questions, longer paragraph or essay-type questions.

- "... at this stage we literally are only writing one word answers ..." [Wena, 2006, translated]
- "I don't like writing ... I would rather answer monkey puzzles ..." [Attie 2006, translated]
- "... I knew it is multiple choice and then I study completely differently because what happens then is that I recognise the answer ... sometimes ... it is given so close to the exact answer that I choose the wrong one. But yes, multiple choice is great because then you do not have to study so hard." [Wena 2006, translated]
- "... a longer question. I could give them more input, ja." [Lincoln 2006]
- "I like to write *essays* because then you can a little ... you often win lots of marks in what you say. With *multiple choice* ... sometimes there are four things, then two are correct but which one does the lecturer want ..." [Sophie 2006, translated]
- "Multiple choice questions are like tricky. Multiple choice questions, I don't like them, but at least short questions, not long questions." [Paulina 2006]
- " I find that that [multiple choice questions], for me I find it difficult because ... I battled to learn things parrot fashion." [Sandy 2006].

When the lecturers were asked about their assessment practices, they described their approaches and how support was provided to the students in order to prepare them for tests and examinations. Their responses also highlight their differences in expectations.

- "It is probably a shock, but I do not spoon feed ...but it [the test] consists of multiple choice questions that are very close to what they can expect in the exam ... also to help them as first years to overcome that anxiety of not having a clue what to expect." [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- "We give them examples ... that can help with preparation for the examination. We put it [a particular definition] to them, show what it entails, critique another definition ... and then there are different ways in which the question can be posed ..." [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated]"

- “I seldom assess for just the facts ... I hate parrot work ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D, Translated]
- “We do not use *Monkey puzzles*<sup>48</sup> at all ...” [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated].
- “We naturally try to use *Monkey puzzles* as much as possible. We put a lot of work into this ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated].

This latter lecturer, however, explained how the text book they used had a complete test bank, but that she restricts herself to using these questions for only half of the test set, in some instances changing the American context to a South African one. Another lecturer emphasised the way in which attempts are made to remain current, by using relevant texts from magazines, rather than the textbook. A further contradiction can be seen when the lecturers’ expectations for the students (see 6.3.5.1), the stated outcomes of the modules, and the actual assessment tools (the examination and test papers) are placed alongside one another. These anomalies and the lack of constructive alignment between outcomes and assessment (Biggs, 2003, see also 3.4.4) contribute to the academic challenges that students are required to address.

The support that the lecturers mentioned was also reported by many of the students, although some of their responses suggest that this was nevertheless perceived as spoon-feeding. Other experiences, such as the amount of work that they had to study, the focus on facts requiring rote-learning and the way that some students’ felt that they were required to give back what the lecturer wanted, were also shared.

- “... they gave us ... guidelines and, not in-depth, but they do tell us ‘Right at this particular time you are going to do this and take this into consideration’ and so forth.” [Lincoln 2006]
- “... she *introduced* us to the issue [in class]... she gave us a piece on it, and then you had to apply research techniques ... in the exam she gave us an extract again ...she basically gave it to us ...” [Wena, 2006, translated]
- “... mostly ask facts ... maybe a discussion of one thing ... but it more just focused on facts.” [Attie 2006, translated]
- “... some subjects were a little more involved, but Subject C was, you could just about learn it like a parrot.”[Attie 2006, translated]

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<sup>48</sup> Popular term for multiple-choice questions

- "... its not that I am negative about learning, it's either learn what you want to do, or learn what lecturer has given, then give it back in the exams ...” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “I found the exams to be an eye-opener ... it was like a hundred pages that you had to answer in two or three hours ... it was a seriously big challenge ...” [Aneesa 2007].

Several students spoke or wrote of how the assessment experience and the marks they received did not correlate with their expectations, and how this had an impact not only on their own sense of achievement, but also on their parents.

- “... the first time when I was writing a ... test I studied it. I mean with my everything. I was using the same method that I was doing in Grade 12. So I was expecting more marks like secondary school, but only to find out that the marks are also different ...” [Thabu 2006]
- “My writing pieces were given back with lower marks than I expected.” [Female student]
- “ ... I failed the last exam ... obviously I answered the question incorrectly, but in the supplementary exam I felt much better and I knew my long questions, ... I felt *confident* and then I still failed.” [Anna 2006, translated]
- “... I was quite disappointed, ... I knew the work really well but the way they asked the question, you couldn't really apply the work that you learnt to do it ... For me it was a stupid question.” [Sandy 2007]
- “... I couldn't understand why I didn't make it ...” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “... because you can study and study and study yourself blue, but the way you study and the marks that, that okay, I'm talking for myself, that I got, I was, I was really shocked.” [Mohammed 2007]
- “I was also disappointed where I was, sometimes I study really, really hard and I just don't get the marks I expected ... and then like what must I do to get a better mark?” [Aneesa 2007]
- “Nobody will understand it. You didn't study enough ... that's parents...” [Gerald 2007].

An important aspect of assessment relates to the need for feedback, particularly when students are uncertain about whether they are doing the right thing, and interpreting assignment, test and exam questions effectively.

- “They sort of put in [the marked assignment or test] on a table in the passage ... sometimes I just quickly go through the test ... You prefer to have the lecturer speak

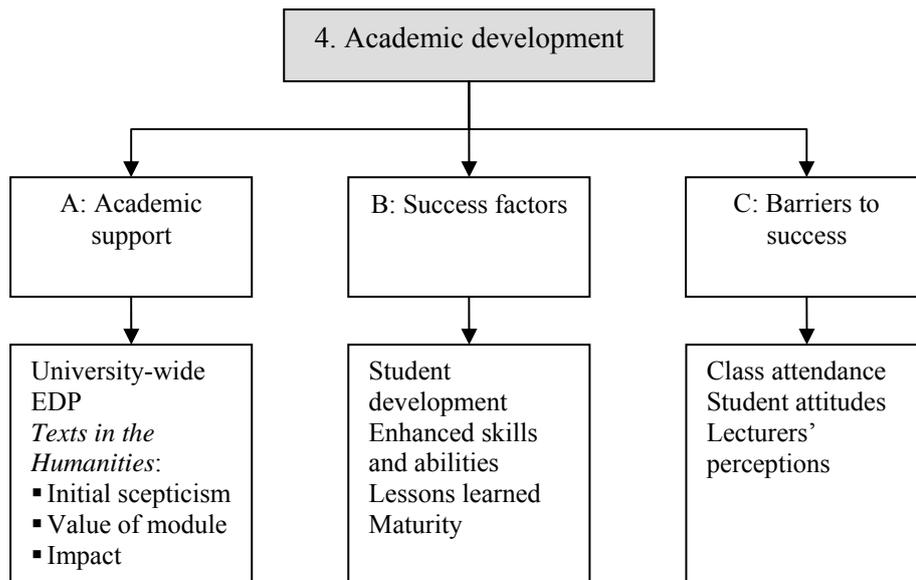
to you, sort of when it wasn't actually good and there's a lot of people that would like more feedback, you know, from the lecturers." [Lincoln 2006]

- "Mrs XX [one of the *Texts in the Humanities* lecturers] gives good feedback, but then she goes to a lot of trouble with her feedback, but generally, sometimes there is just a red mark at the bottom ... I want to see where I can improve ..." [Sophie 2006, translated]
- "When I handed in a test or an *essay* and I already didn't feel good about it or understand ... then afterwards the marks look good and I still don't understand why the marks are there, but its *fine*." [Anna 2006, translated]
- "I was happy because the tutor ... she goes through the assignment ... she gave good tips and you are more equipped to write essays" [Lincoln 2006]
- "We just get marks ... They don't say anything. In *Texts for the Humanities* ... we do get quite a lot of feedback ..." [Sandy 2006]
- "... yes, they [the tutor] told you exactly what you had done right and what you had done wrong and ... helped you to *improve* and so on. " [Johan 2007, translated] (see also 6.3.1.1).

Some stated that they received no feedback at all, although one student suggested that because they had a number of different lecturers in a single module it was difficult for the lecturers to give any feedback at all. The themes in this cluster point to the important issues of engagement and the way in which outcomes, classroom activities and assessment need to be aligned to promote student success.

#### **6.3.4 Themes relating to student academic development**

At Stellenbosch University the EDP is known as an academic development programme. The main focus of the EDP is to provide students, who as a result of their Grade 12 results are regarded as under-prepared for university studies, and requiring additional support and a lighter course load, so as to improve their chances of being successful students. Themes that emerged in this cluster include one relating specifically to the EDP and the academic literacy module, *Texts in the Humanities*, a compulsory component of the EDP, as well as those factors within the programme that were seen either as enablers or barriers to the students' success.



**Figure 6.6: Diagrammatic representation of themes relating to academic development**

#### 6.3.4.1 A: Academic support

There are a number of other sources of academic support on the campus apart from enrolling for an EDP. A limited number of students had also made use of the University-wide support structures, such as the mentor programme run by the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Writing Lab, run by the Language Centre. The students gave different reasons for using this support:

- "... in the class they don't clearly say that this thing they are definitely going to ask in the exams, ... but in the mentor group they tell you this is important, this is important underline it." [Attie 2006, translated]
- "... [the Writing Centre] ... help me with the construction of words ... some of the words I don't understand ..." [Paulina 2006].

The students did, however, comment on the EDP in a number of different ways. Some of the students' dissatisfaction at being placed on the EDP in the first place was illustrated earlier in the section when the students' attitudes towards their university studies in general were set out (6.3.1.2). However, in reflecting on the impact of the EDP on their studies, they generally responded positively, explaining how, for example, the programme gave them more time for their studies and a safe space in which to adapt to university life, also often indicating a change in their original expectations or impressions.

- "... I really had it easy this year [with the fewer subjects] ... it has meant that I actually believe I can *swot*" [Wena 2006, translated]
- "The EDP was actually the best choice because now I can spend a certain amount of time on all my studies without having to neglect some." [Female student, translated]
- "... now I am glad [that I am on the EDP], because it is really easy for me. It is really not an intensive programme..."[Attie 2006, translated]
- "... when you drop out it is just a psychological thing and so I thought I would play it safe ... I am very glad I took it [the EDP]." [Sophie 2006, translated]
- "... it's a lighter workload ..." [Sandy 2006].

The students described quite a variety of expectations when it came to the academic literacy module (*Texts in the Humanities*). Some appeared to be under a misconception as to what the module would entail while others were dissatisfied with having to do the module.

- "... it dawned on me that it is obviously an extra subject to help us along our path of study." [Female student]
- "I thought that this is a class where you will be helped with your study problems and any personal problems ... I felt that I did not need it." [Male student, translated]
- "I was expecting it be a sort of like a subject improvement class ... [that] would boost my marks and give me extra tools to use during my studies" [Female student]
- "I have a problem in putting my thoughts on paper and therefore I thought by doing this module it would help me getting over this difficult barrier." [Male student]
- "I expected *Texts in the Humanities* to be a subject that helps me with my academic abilities, especially that it would help me with different methods to study, how to read in different ways and efficiently." [Female student]
- "My initial expectations of the module were more of a psychological education so as to grow within myself." [Female student, translated]
- "I was angry because at that stage I still felt that we were just there because we were 'dumb' and that the subject actually was for people who are shy or who have problems with their self-image." [Male student, translated].

A feature of many of the students' responses, especially with regards to the academic literacy module *Texts in the Humanities*, was the way in which they described changing their perceptions of and attitudes towards the module even after just a few weeks, evident from their remarks in the reflective writing paragraphs.

- “At the start I was very sceptical ... I now have a lot more self-confidence ... because there is a module that helps me to do better and that lifts your ability to work ...” [Male student, translated]
- “ I believed that this wasn’t necessary ... [A]fter attending class I am optimistic about what lies ahead ...” [Male student]
- “Thus far I have found this class very useful and interesting. In contrast to what I had expected from this course.” [Male student, translated]
- “[*Texts in the Humanities*] made me realise how ‘behind’ I was with certain aspects of, for example, how to prepare for the examinations.” [Female student]
- “My initial expectation was to tackle the module to the best of my ability and get it behind me, but I have realised that it might take me a while to achieve this ...” [Female student, translated]
- “My initial expectations for the module did not amount to much ... but I have definitely learnt a lot during these first four weeks ...” [Female student, translated]
- “Now that I have attend the classes for a while I am pleased that I have the subject *Texts in the Humanities*.” [Male student, translated]
- “*Texts* is of course a big advantage, but you don’t see the projection immediately ... you don’t understand immediately why these things will be so important, but in the future ...” [Attie, 2006, translated]
- “I feel much more confident about myself than I did at the start, because at the start I did not feel so good, but now that I know what is going on I am a different person.” [Male student, translated].

Most of the students felt that the academic literacy module (*Texts in the Humanities*) had made and would continue to make an impact on their studies, in particular on their academic writing (see also 6.3.5.3). Reference was also made to the way in which the module had made them aware of their need for guidance in dealing with university writing.

- “... we speak to each class ... I mean if you can’t speak ... you can’t get the class without saying the words.” [Paulina 2006]
- “... and I am really happy to see how we as a class are yet also each helped as individuals.” [Female student, translated]
- “Help you study like really well. I mean really focus ... writing essays and that really helps.” [Lincoln 2006]

- “You can’t like copy from a textbook and assignment or you can’t take what’s in the text and manipulate it in such a way that it might not look that it came out of the text ...” [Lincoln 2006]
- “... I definitely feel confident about my writing skills because when I read now, I do it with more insight. I feel that now when I read I know I’m doing it right and I’m learning something while doing so.” [Female student]
- “ I am confident. I am looking forward for my writing skills and so far I am doing alright.” [Male student]
- “we focus quite, quite a lot of our time on just improving writing, uhm, how, how one should write an essay ... the steps that are necessary, ... answer what is being asked ...” [Lincoln 2007]
- “... I’ve only been to class a couple of times and learnt so much and the whole year still lies ahead of me. I can put into practice what I have learnt.” [Female student]
- “Taking notes in classes was also quite difficult at the start, but *Texts in the Humanities* taught me how to approach such instances, so that has made my month of attending classes easier ...” [Female student, translated]
- “I was happy to hear that there was a subject being offered that would help us academically to achieve ...” [Female student, translated – this student had been registered for a different programme the previous year and had dropped out].

In many cases students gave specific examples of how they had already used what they had addressed in the academic literacy lectures in some of their other courses.

- “... I do however feel that the *Texts in the Humanities* has helped me with my studying. For instance, I wrote a Subject C test and had large amounts to learn, the *Texts in the Humanities* class taught me how to mind map correctly in order to help minimise all of this written work ...” [Female student]
- “In Subject X<sup>49</sup> I have made use of the spider diagram method to make my summaries ...” [Female student, translated]
- “I had an incredible problem with Subject X<sup>50</sup>, but since attending this module ... I got 79% for my first Subject X<sup>51</sup> project which means that it [*Texts in the Humanities*] has really helped.” [Female student, translated]

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<sup>49</sup> Not one of the subjects included in the study

<sup>50</sup> As above

<sup>51</sup> As above, and for all other references to Subject X from hereon

- “We also have an opportunity of discussing some of our assignments [from other modules] in class.” [Female student]
- “This module has already proved to be an advantage because yesterday in the Subject X class we discussed things that I had already learnt in *Texts in the Humanities* and I felt very proud about that.” [Female student, translated]
- “I find it helpful and relevant. I found myself in a situation where in one of my Subject X paragraphs for the tut class I had not used quotation marks and enough references and so I received a low mark. I had not known how ... until recently.” [Female student]
- “*Texts in the Humanities* ... can be applied to all subject areas ...” [Male student, translated].

The role of the two lecturers also emerged as a critical success factor in many of the students’ responses and this was also observed during the class visits.

- “... because Mrs X lets everyone feel important and she motivates you all of the time.” [Female student, translated]
- “... it’s a lecturer helping me help myself with what I aim to achieve, a degree.” [Male student]
- “I learned to ... do the Introduction and a Conclusion in university ... with Mrs XX ...It helps me a lot ... I deal with the academic things.” [Thabu 2006]
- “... Mrs XX sometimes just says if you have got an assignment to submit you can bring it to class, we could sort it out ... if you don’t know what ‘objectivity’ is then she can help us with all those things.” [Paulina 2006].

The usefulness and value of the module for all students was also mentioned quite often:

- “I personally think that this module is an asset for all students ...” [Male student, translated]
- “I would propose this course for anyone who wishes to grow in himself and in the Humanities.” [Male student, translated]
- “It is a good thing that this module is a compulsory module for the EDP. All first-years should actually have this module ...” [Female student, translated]
- “ When I told my sister about this subject that I have to take she said: ‘It is actually the only subject that I need’” [Female student, translated]

- "... even people who do better I would say could still do it." [Sophie 2006, translated].

Even during the 2007 interviews students still mentioned the impact that the module had had on their studies

- "... I don't think I would be at the level of adjustment that I am at now if it wasn't for *Texts in the Humanities* ..." [Wena 2007, translated]
- "If I didn't do *Texts in the Humanities* last year, I wouldn't have had a clue ...that's the biggest thing I got from last year ..." [Wena 2007]
- "In the end it [the module] made things easier for me, I mean, without it I would struggled a bit." [Johan 2007, translated]
- "... *Texts in the Humanities* ... they taught me how to, just the way to write ... last year I didn't know, I wasn't sure, how to write." [Aneesa 2007]
- "One day she [the lecturer] said to me ... 'a student like you carries on and finishes her degree ...'" [Wena 2006, translated]
- "I'll be honest it's a boring subject, its not very interesting but I think it is honestly I think it is helpful ... in the long run it helps a lot more than you realise ..." [Sandy 2006].

Not all students were entirely persuaded of the value of the academic literacy module and displayed a measure of uncertainty as to its usefulness.

- "At the present moment I feel that the module could help me with what I have done during the past few weeks but I cannot predict if it will help me in the future. It all depends on the work." [Male student]
- "I strongly disagree that the module *Texts in the Humanities* has to be part of our programme because its actually holding me down from what I am supposed to learn for." [Male student]
- "My expectations for the rest of the year are basically the same as now, we are being helped slowly and are sometime irritated in class, but before we have the chance to open our eyes we become aware how much the class has helped us." [Male student, translated]
- "Since I've attended these classes for a few weeks we have not done too much but rather little ... we need to speed up the pace in order to cover more work and topics." [Female student]

- “I believe that my writing skills have not changed drastically but I feel that it is still very early days so there is always room for improvement.” [Female student].

Many of these comments reflect a naivety among the students that links to the unrealistic and almost childlike expectations described in 6.3.1. Several of their comments illustrate how they were still very much on the periphery of this academic community into which they were seeking entry.

#### **6.3.4.2 B: Success factors**

During both the 2006 and 2007 interviews, respondents attested to the ways in which they felt that they had succeeded or grown, either during the first six months (2006 interviews) or over their first year at university (2007 interviews). The following examples demonstrate how the respondents viewed their development:

- “In the beginning I was rather shy in the class and it was ‘difficult’ for me to attend, but now I feel much more at ease and I can participate in the class activities.” [Female student, translated]
- “I’m a better listener ... my writing is gradually improving ...” [Lincoln 2006]
- “At least in the second assignment I did better cause I knew what to do.” [Paulina 2006]
- “it’s all about building the character” [Lincoln 2007]
- “... I feel a lot more comfortable ..., confident ... I’m much happier” [Sandy 2007]
- “... my stomach gets in a knot when I think about the *oral*<sup>52</sup> that I have next week, but basically I am more *comfortable* in my second year ... my first year was rough.” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “... I half know more how to do things better ... do things on my own, but when I need help I know I can, I know where to find it ... I sort of know now what the lecturer expects of me.” [Anna 2007, translated].

In describing the skills or abilities that they had developed, students highlighted thinking critically (also in terms of the way they now approached texts), writing skills, and their preparation for assignments, tests and examinations. The students also spoke about lessons learned.

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<sup>52</sup> The use of italics here indicates the student practiced code-switching, using an English word in the original Afrikaans sentence.

- "... that I have to edit my work before I submit it. Again I have to revisit my work and check the spelling ...and the tenses." [Paulina 2006]
- "thinking critically was probably one of the big things ..." [Lincoln 2007]
- "... just to think also and analyse critically" [Sandy 2007]
- "[before] I would just take the information and just take it as truth,... but, uhm, I was taught throughout the year you just, you know, always question what you read, always, you know, scrutinise. Ja." [Lincoln 2007]
- "I started engaging in, in more newspapers, reading the front part ... instead of the back pages." [Lincoln 2007]
- "... writing skills, communication skills, ... I feel more confident in writing ..." [Aneesa 2007]
- "my writing skills or the way I wanted to uhm, explain myself, I didn't ... do it with great success but, since I came here last year, uhm, as the year progressed, my writing skills just became better and better" [Lincoln 2007]
- "I can sit down and properly write an academic text" [Sandy 2007]
- "... it has taught me ... how to study for a test properly" [Sandy 2007]
- "I could actually understand what the lecturer's saying ... I think that was the key." [Lincoln 2007]
- "knowing how things operate" [Sandy 2007].

Some students were rather tongue-in-cheek about what valuable lessons they had learned that would contribute to their success, emphasising the importance of going to class, particularly eight-o'clock-in-the-morning classes, and going out less. Several of these comments echo the reputation that Stellenbosch University has of providing a unique student experience (see 4.4.1). However, the students themselves, either directly or indirectly, identified what they believed to be contributors to their success, not only during the two set of interviews, but also even as early as their reflective writing exercises. Chief among these indicators are responsibility, hard work, approaches to learning and time-management.

- "Work hard right through the year ..." [Sophie 2006, translated]
- "... you have to cope ..." [Sandy 2006]
- "I didn't believe that it was that difficult if you did your work properly; if you put in the, enough, effort I think you would, you will be quite successful". [Lincoln 2007]
- "... you almost can't miss a class." [Sophie 2006, translated]
- "Don't underestimate university." [Wena 2007]

- “Keep up with the workload” [Gerald 2007]
- “I suppose responsibility, ... being responsible, taking responsibility for your work, ... responsibility to be in class at all times ... responsible for your own actions” [Lincoln 2007]
- “that work ethic” [Lincoln 2007]
- “... you just have to keep on reading or you will fall behind ...” [Sandy 2007]
- “...read [the section] again afterwards [after the lecture] ... ” [Sandy 2007]
- “... you just have to think outside the box ...” [Thabu 2007]
- “Study way in advance ...” [Gerald 2007]
- “Time, time is very important” [Johan 2007, translated].

What is less obvious from the transcribed texts, but what I also observed during the 2007 interviews, was a growth in what could be termed the maturity of some of the students. This is also seen in the level of insight displayed in some of the students’ responses. For example, one student, when discussing the computer skills module which he had found to be less challenging, stated:

“but perhaps I can understand for people who have never sat in front of a computer ... that they should do such a thing ... [but] perhaps there are some new thing you know technology’s always changing, something new is coming out so perhaps there’s something that, that they could pick up and find useful” [Lincoln 2007].

#### **6.3.4.3 C: Barriers to success**

The different attitudes displayed by the students to their university education broadly, and to their studies specifically, were highlighted in the first set of themes discussed in this section (6.3.1.2). The negative attitudes described there are of equally relevant in this category, as are the lecturers’ negative perceptions of some of their students. Although the comments are not repeated here, they also contribute to this discussion.

One fundamental aspect that was mentioned by almost all the respondents, lecturers and students alike, had to do with the attendance of classes. Three of the four lecturers listed poor class attendance as one of the main barriers to success. One of the lecturers described it as “... a general culture that has been developing since I have started teaching ...” and “... a very important issue at the moment on campus ...” [Female lecturer, Subject D]. Three of the four lecturers stated that they were currently involved in some sort of project to determine whether

there was any correlation between class attendance and the students' results. Most of the students indeed listed good class attendance as a factor that would contribute to being successful (see 6.3.1.5). A factor relating to class attendance may have to do with the way in which students respond to the freedom they experience when they first arrive at university. This is in contrast to what they encountered at school where, according to the ABQ, 78% of the EDP respondents stated that they had never missed a class at school.

One lecturer felt that a second semester module often suffered or benefited depending on how the students had experienced the first semester module.

- “We think we inherit it (problem of poor class attendance) in the second semesters if the module in the first semester was more interesting perhaps ... [Male lecturer, Subject C].

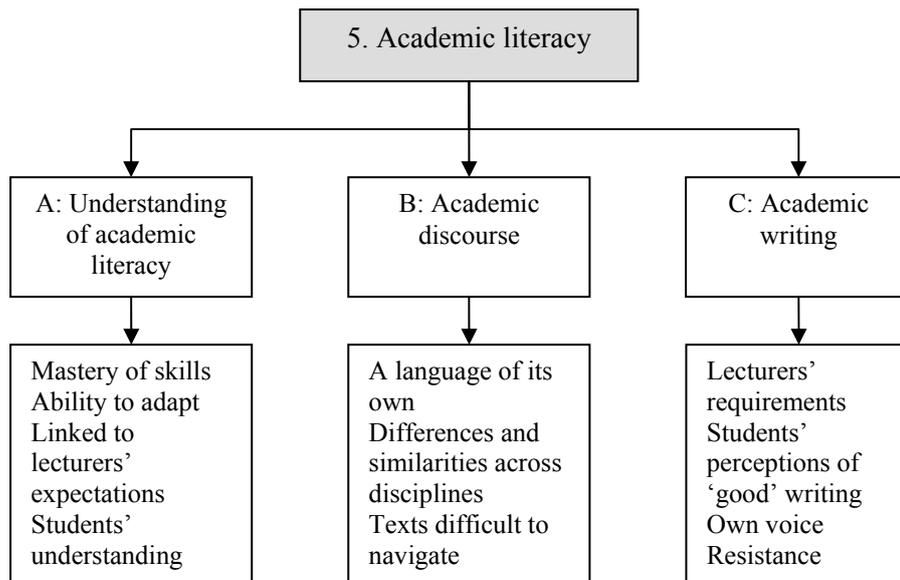
The students also described how the persona of the lecturer and the extent to which they found the subject interesting influenced the extent to which they attended classes (see 6.3.1.1), but listed many other reasons as well:

- “I was just too lazy.” [Sandy 2007]
- “... often it is like that with the tut classes, they take role call so you must go ... and often when it is such a big class then I think, oh well I can *skip* this ...” [Mauritz 2007, translated].

During the final interpretation and synthesis of all the data, several of the themes across all six clusters point to the different barriers that could have been placed in the way of student success and these will be drawn into the interpretation of these findings. The students' results at the end of their first-year of study (6.2.3.1), however, provide an additional perspective to this theme of the students' academic development, given the significant improvement in the retention rate for the 2006 cohort (75%) over that of the previous years (53% in 2005; 64% in 2004).

### **6.3.5 Themes related to academic literacy**

As the focus of this study, several themes relating to academic literacy and its acquisition were identified. These included the lecturers' perceptions of academic literacy, the impact of the academic discourse on the students and the crucial issue of academic writing.



**Figure 6.7: Diagrammatic representation of themes relating to academic literacy**

### 6.3.5.1 A: Understanding of academic literacy

The lecturers' descriptions of academic literacy showed some congruence and also gave an indication of what their expectations were of their students. The focus in many of their responses was on students' ability to adapt their practice to the way of a university. Their responses highlight the importance of mastering the skills that they deemed necessary, such as dealing with high volumes of work swiftly, being able to scan, and analyse, lengthy texts and read with insight.

- "... it refers to the ability of a student to adapt academically and to cope with the different academic skills that they are expected to use. To understand the study material and to read it, demonstrating a level of insight, ... and to do so swiftly. To apply it, within the discipline, and also in a broader sense, ... in an evaluation situation. Must not only be a head issue, it must include social issues ..." [Male lecturer, Subject C, translated]
- "... the ability of a student to master the basic skills that are required to achieve academic success and to practise these skills in a systematic manner as part of their academic activities ..." [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated]
- "... you must start learning how to work with large volumes and to analyse it and *scan* to make sense of it ... how to build a solid argument ..." [Female Lecturer, Subject B, translated]

- "... a formal way of expressing your thoughts on a piece of paper. Trying to sound as objective as possible therefore not saying what I think about this issue, I feel like ... you know trying to get away from that... To express abstract ideas by means of writing and to do it in such a way that the person on the other side knows what is going on in your head." [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- "... to apply abstract concepts ... to understand and then apply it to practical examples ..." [Female lecture, Subject B, translated]
- "... the more academically literate someone is, the more convincingly they can express themselves ..." [Female lecturer, Subject D].

In most instances, the lecturers' expectations that they set for their students were taken up in the way in which they described their understanding of academic literacy. It was clear from the lecturer interviews that they had quite specific ideas in terms of what contributed to being a successful student.

- "... intelligent, critical people ... who have the ability to absorb a large amount of work, to analyse it and to synthesize it... a student who is prepared to accept challenges, who can read, who can write, who can discern relationships [between the information] quickly, who is sharp and who can take the work they are busy with and immediately apply it to a broader context." [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated].

Several of the students inadvertently described their understanding and/or experience of their different modules in ways that attest to their at least being on the periphery of a particular academic community and meeting their lecturers' expectations:

- "Subject B just gives me a greater understanding of how the world works and how I can, I myself can, uhm, influence or be part of this world language and this world system. ... Subject A also just teaches you to, to think in a different way, you know, uhm, like economists think differently, so do philosophers and XXX think differently and ... its taught me to be able to think in a unique way." [Lincoln 2007].

#### **6.3.5.2 B: Academic discourse**

Even though none of the students referred to academic literacy per se, several of their responses inadvertently spoke of an understanding of academic discourse:

- "you need to use the language of the specific subject." [Wena 2007]

- "... if I understand the term then it is not that difficult to write in an essay." [Paulina 2006]
- "Subject A definitely has its own language ... incredible terminology that you definitely must know and use in the correct context otherwise you are going to completely lose the people and the philosophy" [Wena 2007, translated].

When discussing two other modules (Subject C and D), another student noted:

- "they've got similar terms, but then they explain different contexts" [Thabu 2007], while a lecturer commented on the subject discourse as follows:
- "... I know there are students who find Subject A difficult ... or the subject language ... when the student sees the study material for the first time it is not that easy." [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated].

These responses of the students underline one of the lecturers sense that:

- "... the students quickly become aware of the logical status of words and meaning." [Male lecturer, Subject B, translated].

This same lecturer observed that sometimes this awareness of word and meaning create a dilemma for the students who end up over-analysing, and this dilemma can be seen in many of the students' responses cited in this section.

Gaining access to the prescribed academic texts, texts books and articles, and even class notes proved to be problematic for some students in certain modules. Students attested to this in a number of ways:

- "... the lecturer is very good. I think it's the text. You know, trying to understand what the text is saying." [Lincoln 2006]
- "... I like the way the text books have been set up. Last year I battled with Subject B. I didn't like those text books and I can't handle the Subject A notes this year, I hate them. I don't understand them. Nothing. Whereas the Subject D text books, I think they're written on like more to our levels sort of our mind thoughts so it's easy reading." [Sandy 2007]
- "... sometimes it's confusing because Subject D and Subject C use the same words ... the concepts are the same ... different in context ... it confuses you sometimes" [Gerald 2007]

- "... it's all this terminology and jargon that I just don't understand. He hasn't simplified it in any way ..." [Sandy 2007].

While some of the students appear to have adopted certain terms and phrases that would be deemed appropriate to academic discourse e.g. 'scrutinise'; gathering scientific information; 'engaging', 'use in the correct context', others clearly had not ("chunks [of information] and stuff"). Another angle to this issue of the students' use of terminology and discipline-related concepts is that, in some instances the students appeared to deliberately use the terms without having a clear understanding of what they meant. For example, when describing how he had benefited from the *Texts in the Humanities* academic literacy module, the student responds as follows:

- "It has helped me a lot on coming to things of ... deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning ... I mean the conclusion, the introductions ... it has helped me a lot ..." [Thabu 2007].

During the preliminary phase interviews, I was struck by the different 'levels' of language the four respondents used. The two older lecturers, both speaking in Afrikaans, spoke in an academic style that mirrored the discourse of their discipline.

- "Die vierde (oefening) is om argument soorte te onderskei in 'n deduktiewe redenering"<sup>53</sup> [Male lecturer, Subject A]
- "... dan nog 'n sub-argument wat kan lei tot 'n finale konklusie, waar 'n premis, 'n stelling, 'n konklusie kan wees van 'n sub-argument ..." <sup>54</sup> [Male lecturer, Subject A]
- "..., vind 'n eie voorbeeld van 'n denkfout, bespreek die aard en struktuur daarvan aan die hand van noukeurige analise."<sup>55</sup> [Male lecturer, Subject C]
- "Die vermoë om te kan skryf tot op 'n redelike mate, om 'n bron te gaan lees, die kern daarvan uit te haal wat nodig is om 'n ander probleem op te los ..." <sup>56</sup> [Male lecturer, Subject C].

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<sup>53</sup> The fourth exercise is to differentiate between different forms of argumentation using deductive reasoning.

<sup>54</sup> ... then another sub-argument that could lead to a final conclusion, where a premise, a statement, a conclusion could all be part of the sub-argument.

<sup>55</sup> ... find your own example of an error of reasoning, discuss the nature and structure thereof by way of careful analysis.

<sup>56</sup> The ability to write to a reasonable degree, to read source material and to draw out the essence that would be needed to solve another problem.

These responses differ substantially in terms of the discourse from the two younger lecturers whose responses mirror a more informal level of code-switching that characterises much of the language style of the Afrikaans youth at the present time.

- “... maar wat daaruit belangrik is en wat mens of daardie stadium eintlik self uit te kan *figger*”<sup>57</sup> [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- “... vir die eerstejaars *obviously* ja”<sup>58</sup> [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- “... dit raak net erger en erger soos taalgebruik en sulke goeters. Dis *shocking!*”<sup>59</sup> [Female lecturer, Subject B]
- “So ek dink regtig hulle het nie die *skills* want veral in ons vak moet jy baie opstelle skryf ... en dit voel net vir my hulle het net nie daai skryf *skills* nie.”<sup>60</sup> [Female lecturer, Subject B]
- “Dis nou eintlik die standaard vir *six credits*”<sup>61</sup> [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- “Daar moes êrens al *exposure* gewees het tot hoekom is dinge soos wat dit is.”<sup>62</sup> [Female lecturer, Subject D].

These differences across disciplines and between lecturers are also evident in the different tones and registers that characterise the module outlines that were reviewed.

### 6.3.5.3 C: Academic writing

The lecturers all mention the importance of solid writing skills as a prerequisite for academic success, highlighting language proficiency, being able to get to the point, working systematically and making the work their own as crucial in this process. It was also evident that when discussing academic writing that there are specific, albeit different expectations in terms of grammar.

- “... write in full sentences, old fashioned prose ...” [Male lecturer, Subject A, translated]
- “I do not expect perfect grammar. I do not expect perfect spelling, but I expect at least, you know, an ability to communicate with me ...” [Female lecture, Subject D].

<sup>57</sup> ... but what is actually important and what they should be able to figure out themselves

<sup>58</sup> For the first-years obviously, yes

<sup>59</sup> It just gets worse and worse, like language and things like it. Its shocking!

<sup>60</sup> So I really don't think they have the skills because especially in our subject you have to write a lot of essays ... and it just feels to me as if they don't have those writing skills.

<sup>61</sup> This is now actually standard for six credits.

<sup>62</sup> Somewhere there must have been exposure as to why things are the way they are.

The lecturers, however, generally feel that the students lack good writing skills, as they described when defining academic literacy (see 6.3.5.1).

- “... It is really, really bad ...” [Female lecture, Subject B, translated]
- “... they cannot differentiate between ordinary language and academic language ... poor language use and cannot spell ... don’t know what a sentence looks like ... what a paragraph looks like ... there is no coherence between paragraphs ... not a line than runs through the whole thing ... its almost like a thought process that has not been fully developed.” [Female lecture, Subject B, translated]
- “... you realise that the person has a good argument but they [the tutors] do not know what mark to give the student because it is put across so poorly that you can hardly let the person pass because the essay is so *terrible*, but you can see that they sort of know what is going on ...” [Female lecture, Subject B, translated].

The students also shared their understanding of academic writing in a number of different ways most often pointing to similar issues such as the specific language used, the structure involved, the conventions and so forth. They describe academic writing as:

- “... it’s a proper way of communicating a message ..., an idea ..., a concept... in an advanced language instead of just using everyday speak ... language.” [Wena 2007]
- “... big words ... try to sound academic ... you have to answer the question. Just don’t go and write the stuff that’s got nothing to do with the topic, ja ...” [Mohammed 2007].

According to the students a ‘good’ essay is one that “elaborates on a certain issue”, that “answers the question fully”; where “even your sentence construction has to be up to scratch and the right language needs to be used”; “the detail is more important now”. They tend to measure themselves against such an understanding, which also influenced their attitude towards the process.

- “... I wrote even more information than maybe other students ... it was not necessary to be written in there” [Thabu 2006]
- “... I don’t write academically enough ...” [Wena 2006, translated]
- “I don’t yet feel one hundred per cent about my writing skills because I never know exactly what the lecturer expects of me ...” [Female student, translated]
- “At the start of the year it was like a mountain in front of me ...” [Wena 2006, translated]

- “Yes, it requires more self-confidence without being scared, if it’s right, whether I am going to commit plagiarism or something like that ...” [Johan 2007, translated]
- “I think it’s difficult because ... you’re not always right, ja” [Gerald 2007].

They felt there were specific aspects to academic writing, such as:

- “having a relationship between the introduction and the body and the conclusion ... how all these things work in a chain.” [Thabu 2007]
- “it’s a lot more [than other writing] technical ...” [Sandy 2007]
- “... it’s very structured, at university there has to be that specific way ...” [Aneesa 2007]
- “You don’t have to just take the, the something from the book and write it like that, just make your mind broad, think about anything ... just apply everything in it ...” [Thabu 2007].

Several students drew attention to the role of the first person in academic writing and their responses display a variety of interpretations as to what is appropriate and what is not. However, their responses also reflect uncertainty and the extent to which they had possibly only understood half the picture:

- “It is very sort of here are the facts, and even if it is my opinion, ... it’s not very personal ... I suppose the closest way we could get to giving our own input [was to give] reasons for it. That’s about as close as you could get to it.” [Sandy 2007]
- “... by saying like ‘one should never ...’ and then continue your sentence, instead of saying, ‘I think, or I ...’” [Aneesa 2007]
- “You know I can sit down and do all the referencing, bibliography, ... not only that. There’s like, they’ve taught us how to actually, not like writing it properly, but you know the term, the way, I can’t explain it right ... for instance ... we’re never allowed to say ‘I’ this, ‘I’ that ... it was always supposed to be ... what’s the word? Like ‘one must do this’, never ‘me’. [Sandy 2007]
- “I would say in the essay question ... you give more of your own opinion ... so you improve on expressing yourself.” [Lincoln 2006]
- “... then we mustn’t put our opinions on the short story. You mustn’t say, you mustn’t judge.” [Paulina 2006]

- “ ... here [at university] you are expected to use your own ideas, but it’s other people’s stuff that you must get in ... you must include references...” [Anna 2006, translated].

Some students registered significant opposition to requirements of academic writing and the restrictions it placed on them.

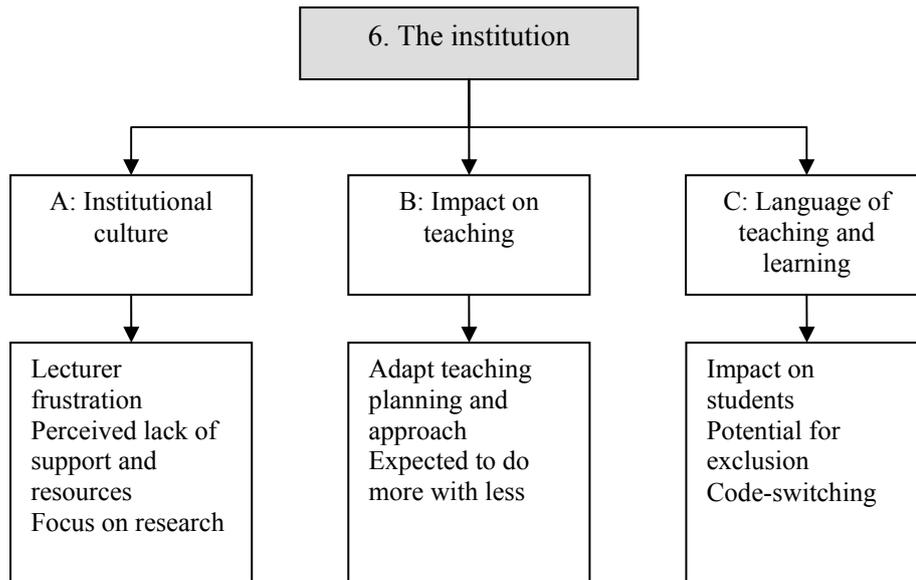
- “Why all the trouble? ... I don’t know why one has to use such long words and such high words just to say what you want to say...” [Anna 2007, translated]
- “... when I write, I just write, the ideas just come, and my pen flows, but knowing you have to write an academic essay, but then you respect it and you don’t know what you should, that’s why the whole planning should come into it ...” [Mohammed 2007].
- “... you have to prove everything ... to make sure it is not plagiarised ... very restrictive” [Gerald 2007].

Some of the students’ responses, even during the 2007 interviews, attest to the way in which they were still adopting approaches that would generally be regarded as inappropriate for university writing:

- “I obviously look at the question and then I’ll go and get my information and stuff and then I will sift through a lot of it, ... what I like to do is take the chunks that I’m gonna use and then quickly either write on a piece of paper just that chunk. Or if I’m cutting and pasting from the Internet, just put and then copy it as I go... I mean I sort of write it ... I don’t really do it sort of rough draft or anything ...” [Sandy 2007].

### **6.3.6 Themes relating to the institution**

The final cluster of themes points to the institution as a whole, its culture, the realities of the current context and, importantly, the language of learning and teaching.



**Figure 6.8: Diagrammatic representation of themes relating to institutional issues**

### 6.3.6.1 A: Institutional culture

The attitudes of the students and the lecturers towards the institution, particularly its impact on teaching and learning, differ in a number of ways. The lecturers expressed considerable frustration and dissatisfaction, some in an almost resigned fashion.

- “Stellenbosch is not a campus that promotes academic literacy ...” [Male lecturer, Subject C, translation]
- “The focus is absolutely on research, there is no focus on teaching and learning ... there is much we can do if we focus on the students and identify their needs ... but this is not going to bring money for the lecturers ...” [Male lecturer, Subject C, translation]
- “... there is a tendency that I find among those people that are not teaching to assume always that the student is actually working and the student actually reads the textbook. They do not ... and no wonder they cannot ... think up an answer.” [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- “... it seems to me you can’t do it [change the status quo] on your own. You must do it in a department ...” [Female lecture, Subject B, translated].

The dominance of Afrikaans on campus, which also speaks of the prevailing culture, is aptly highlighted in the English version of one of the module outlines which invites Afrikaans students to the Afrikaans group and ‘non-Afrikaans’ students to the English group. While this

could be interpreted as an attempt to include all groups who are not Afrikaans speaking, it does serve to emphasise the language divide.

A final comment on institutional culture relates to the many comments of the students that speak of their need to disassociate themselves from the non-academic lifestyle that is prevalent on campus. Their responses in this regard, many of which have been noted in section 6.3.4.2, emerged particularly during the 2007 interviews where the students recognised the impact that this could have on their studies.

### **6.3.6.2 B: Impact on teaching and learning**

All of the lecturers who were interviewed spoke about the impact that class size and other institutional realities had on the structure and the administration of the modules for which they were responsible. In one instance, for example, the impact of a limited number of lecturing staff meant that the schedule of one of the first year modules had to be adapted. Their comments on these issues include:

- "... the only move here is not pedagogical, but really is there enough space? We only have one large venue" [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated]
- "There is no way [that I can mark the first-years' written work] ... because I have the third years ... [and] about 60 Honours. So I have to focus on them ..." [Female lecturer, Subject D]
- "This [the revised scheduling] brings its own problems as a result of the short period of time during which the student is exposed to the course. If you are sick for two weeks, you miss a third of the course, ..." [Male lecturer, Subject B, translated]
- "... the module has not changed. The amount of content has not changed, but the amount of contact time has changed. It has decreased and of course with the *language issue* you can think for yourself ... we essentially deliver the same amount of content in Afrikaans and in English in the same lecture ... *so actually very little transfer of content during a lecture.*" [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated]
- "... and there are no practicals because there are not enough rooms in the building or on the campus to form smaller groups from that large group ... so we just gave up with the practicals ..." [Female lecturer, Subject D, translated].

The impact of the larger groups and fewer resources is overtly mentioned in one of the module outlines. It actually states the lecturer-to-learner ratio, and says that this, together with time-tabling and space limitations, means that the department relies "strongly on an approach

of self-study and the development of a culture of learning and a personal working ethic among students” [Module outline, Subject D]. This is proffered as motivation for making extensive use of e-learning and for providing students with the opportunity of working ‘systematically and individualised’ at any time of the day. The negative effect that such an approach could have on the learning of the 30% of EDP students who stated that they had never, for example, accessed the Internet, is self-evident. The influence of massification at grass-roots level will be seen to be an important theme as the next level of analysis is undertaken.

### **6.3.6.3 C: Language of teaching and learning**

In spite of the visibility of the language debate on campus, and the fact that in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences the T-option was the recommended approach for undergraduate modules, fewer negative responses directly related to issues of language emerged than expected. Nevertheless, as was noted earlier (6.3.1.4), the lecturers had pertinent comments about the language proficiency of the students, and spoke of how these issues could affect the students’ learning or participation in class. In addition, when discussing the impact that increased numbers and reduced resources have had on the pedagogical decisions made in the classroom, the issue of language and having to duplicate everything was mentioned as a further contributor to the current unsatisfactory state of affairs (6.3.6.2).

Several of the students referred to the language of teaching and learning in both positive and negative contexts:

- “... the tut classes are very helpful, because ... the third, fourth year student that is taking us, because she’s very helpful, she’s excellent, ... actually its difficult because of the language ... 80% of our class is English, ... but our lecturer mostly speaks in Afrikaans ... with our tut lecturer ... it is easier to understand what is happening ...” [Mohammed 2007]
- “No, I don’t think it is the language [in the English textbook] ... you have to sit and think and go through the work to understand it ...” [Attie 2006, translated]
- “The only problem with her [the tutor] ... she’s English and I am Afrikaans ...” [Anna 2006, translated].

One African student expressed particular problems relating to Afrikaans:

- “I’m struggling with Afrikaans more especially ... so I have to go to the lecturers ... Sometimes they tell me they can’t repeat the same thing that has been done in the

class and I do understand they can't, but ... I was sometimes ashamed of asking the other students ...” [Thabu 2006]

- “Because sometimes I feel that I can answer the question and okay or give my opinion. But then ... I have to think about how am I going to say this question, how am I going to put the stuff and I say to myself ‘shut-up and listen’” [Thabu 2007].

This same student, however, spoke with enthusiasm about an Afrikaans proficiency module that he was doing and for which he was achieving a pass mark.

Other African students noted:

- “I just came from a school that was bilingual so I was, I could follow the work easily, I could follow the lecturer easily, so uhm, I didn't have a problem ...” [Lincoln 2007]
- “... English that they are speaking here is mostly different with ours we did when I was at school cause when I was doing English as a second language ...” [Paulina<sup>63</sup> 2006].

The oral responses of the Afrikaans students tended to be characterised by a fair amount of code switching, also during the class visits. This is in contrast to the limited amount that was observed in their reflective writing exercises. Although only a few examples are given here, there are several included in all the clusters and themes that have been discussed thus far.

- “... met hierdie *oral* ... basies is ek *comfortable* in my tweede jaar<sup>64</sup>” [Anna 2007]
- “Laas jaar is ons maar *gespoonfeed*, hier deur, jy weet ... en nou vlieg ons *solo*, maar ek *handle dit*<sup>65</sup>.” [Johan 2007].

Code-switching was almost completely absent among the English students. One example, however, can be found in a student's response to a question regarding the nature of the assessment that he encountered during the end of year examinations, and thus suggests that this assessment tool was discussed in Afrikaans at the time, hence his reference to it as such.

- “... for the languages it, there was a *begripstoets*<sup>66</sup>...” [Lincoln 2007].

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<sup>63</sup> This student has not done any Afrikaans at school

<sup>64</sup> “... with this oral ... basically I am comfortable in my second year ...

<sup>65</sup> “Last year we were spoonfed by, you know ... and now we are flying solo, but I can cope with it...”

<sup>66</sup> Comprehension test

Contrary to expectations, the responses of the students do not raise as many issues directly related to language use in the classroom. However, it is interesting to note that in both the academic literacy modules and a number of the large enrolment first-year modules there are often sufficient students to warrant offering either an English or an Afrikaans lecture. Such an approach could have minimised the impact for the first-year group and, in such cases in the future this practice should be seen as advantageous to their acquisition of academic literacy. It does not, however, address the needs of students like Thabu, for whom English is a second or even third language. It should be noted that, the language policy notwithstanding, only four students out of the entire EDP group had not been exposed to Afrikaans during their final school year. Three of these already ‘at-risk’ students’ had also not had English as their L1 at school, having written one of the African languages for their first language Grade 12 examination. These students all performed poorly in their first-year and only one returned in 2007 with only 36% of the required first-year credits.

The final cluster differs from the five that precede it in that it addresses broader issues, institutional realities that are being replicated in higher institutions across the country and across the world. While the detail may differ, the over-arching themes of language, of growing student numbers and of having to do more with less, are universal. To close this section, I offer a quote from one of the students that encapsulates much of what underpins their understanding of the acquisition of academic literacy – that it is a process over time, that it is here (at the university), that it is potentially overwhelming and that there is always so much more to learn.

- “There’s so much knowledge here that it is actually like scary and you mustn’t think that you can like learn everything in a day or two, or in a year even ... otherwise it can overwhelm, the knowledge ... [Wena 2007].

## **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the process of analysing the data and the findings that emerged from it. Thus Level One and Two of the three-tiered analytical ladder (Figure 5.3) have been addressed. In Chapter Seven, the ongoing process of interpretation and discussion will be drawn together to provide a synthesis of the findings into an explanatory framework.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INTERPRETATION AND SYNTHESIS

*Interpretation illuminates experience, refining the meanings that can be sifted from the account of the experience. Meaning, interpretations and representation are thus intertwined.*

Wildy 2003:122

#### 7.1 Introduction

In Chapter Six the first two steps in the three-tiered process of analysis (see Figure 5.3) that informed this study were described. In this chapter, the findings were set out according to the key themes that were identified through the analysis across all of the data sets. These themes were drawn together into six clusters that highlighted the issues that emerged from the study as a whole (see Table 6.10). In this final chapter the many strands of this multi-layered study are drawn together to construct a synthesis of the study according to an explanatory framework, and to ultimately respond to the research questions and thereby complete the third step of the analysis process. Thus this chapter commences with the discussion and interpretation of the findings that were presented in the previous chapter, highlighting the relationships between these findings and the theory. Thereafter, the recommendations both for future practice and for future research are discussed, then the limitations of the study, followed by my concluding remarks.

#### 7.2 Constructing an explanatory framework

In the opening chapter of this dissertation, the aim of the study is described as one that would explore the experiences of a specific group of first-year students in order to determine how they acquire academic literacy. In support of this aim, four research objectives were posed:

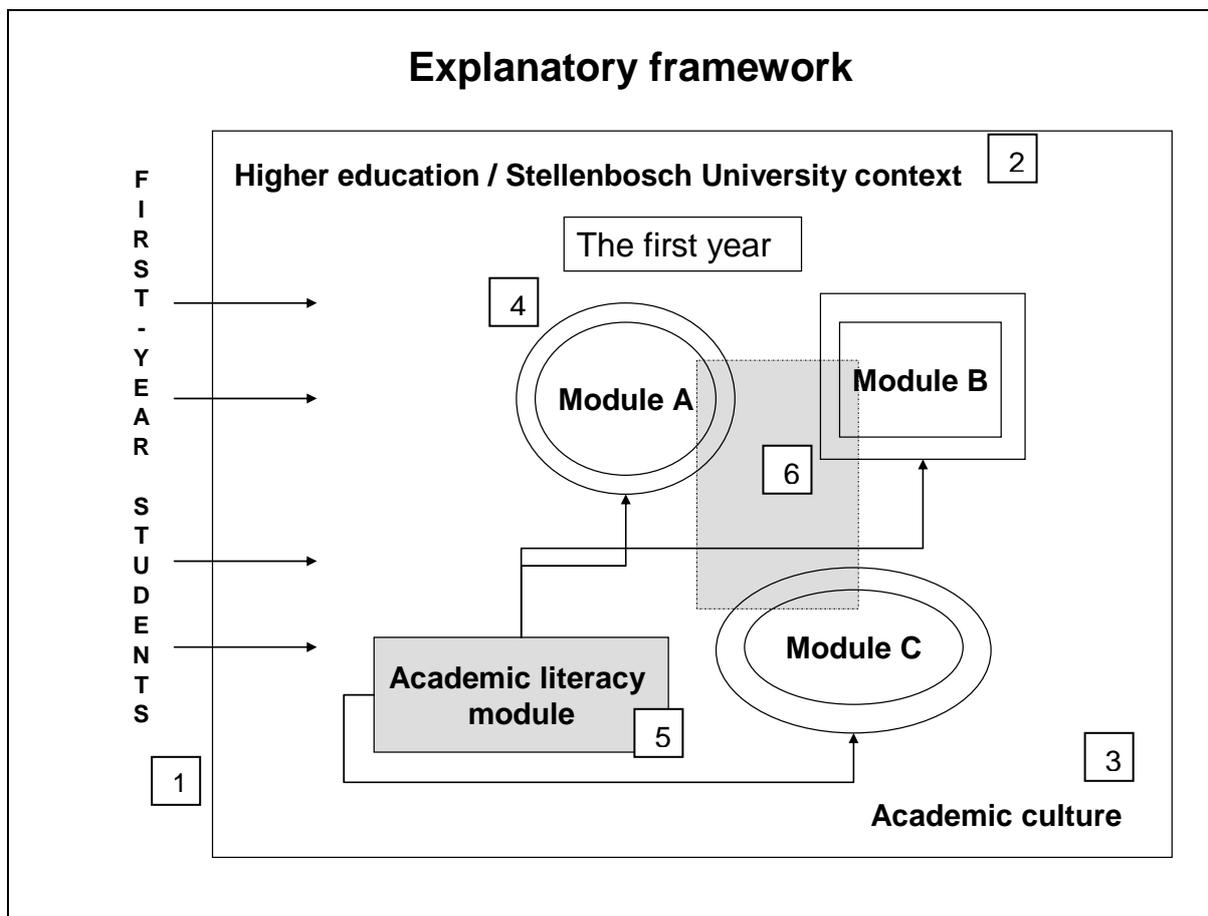
- To understand how under-prepared students on an extended degree programme experience the interventions that are aimed at facilitating their acquisition of academic literacy,
- To discern the nature of the academic literacy demands that such students face,
- To understand how the bilingual and sometimes multilingual context at Stellenbosch University impacts on their acquisition of academic literacy and, finally,
- To determine what the specific challenges are that this group of students experience in seeking to acquire academic literacy.

The response to this aim has been detailed and described throughout the preceding chapters. First a comprehensive study of the body of scholarship in the field was provided; then an exposition of the empirical work was given. This was followed by a description of the first two levels of analysis conducted as part of a three-tiered process. In this final chapter, the third level of analysis is now presented.

According to the three-tiered approach, the final phase of analysis is characterised by a process of synthesis, which requires “integrating the data into one explanatory framework” and to do so by reviewing the initial findings in order to develop and test propositions as they have emerged through the analysis process (Miles & Huberman 1994:92). Thus, in seeking to construct an explanatory framework according to which the interpretation of the findings could be presented, it was necessary to revisit the abundance of data that was shared in Chapter Six. In doing this I was also guided by the body of scholarship that was described in the literature review in the early chapters of this dissertation. It is important to note that the role of the explanatory framework is not to provide a graphic conceptual representation of what the data means, but rather to offer a visual depiction or representation of how the explanation of the findings have been organised.

The process of establishing a framework was characterised by a series of iterations before the final framework (Figure 7.1) was constructed. Wenger’s (2000) work on communities of practice was of particular value. According to this, the acquisition of academic literacy is facilitated by the students being drawn into membership of the different disciplinary discourse communities that they encounter at university. Here the notion of communities having boundaries and the types of activities that occur at the periphery or boundaries of such communities resonated with the experiences of the students. Thus the framework mirrors the chronological nature of the study and positions the experience of the acquisition of academic literacy for the under-prepared first-year student as one of having to negotiate a series of boundaries in order to assume membership of the academic community. According to the framework, the students (see 1 in framework) obtain access to higher education, which then presents the first boundary (see 2). By virtue of this access, they obtain entry into the academic community at large (see 3) – which is then another potential boundary. Within the academic community, during their first year, they also encounter the different disciplines, each with its own conventions and discourse, and this is a further boundary (see 4). Students who seek entry into the disciplines thus initially engage on the periphery (Paxton 2006).

According to the findings of the study, in the case of the Extended Degree Programme students, these different sectors impact on the students' experience, and the extent to which this impact was perceived as either enabling or exclusionary is accordingly discussed. Finally, underpinning each of these contexts is the academic support module. This module focuses directly on the acquisition of academic literacy and seeks to help the students to establish links with the different disciplinary discourses (see 5). What the framework finally points to, however, is the desirability of an academic literacy module that is more directly integrated (see 6).



**Figure 7.1: Explanatory framework**

In the sections that follow, therefore, the findings of this study are discussed and interpreted according to the explanatory framework. The different themes that were presented in the previous chapter are present in the discussion, which first focuses on the students as the main role-players in this study, and then draws on the relevant theory to enrich the interpretation.

### **7.2.1 The under-prepared first-year student**

Academic literacy in higher education points to reading and writing in the different disciplines where such reading and writing constitute the central process through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge (Lea & Street 1998:160; 2.3.4). Reading and writing therefore play a fundamental role in student learning, and their acquisition during the first-year at university could be regarded as a critical factor in student success. For most students, the nature of this reading and writing will differ from that which they have been accustomed to at school. Nevertheless, many students enter university with the ability to adapt their approaches and methods in order to effectively participate in the different disciplinary discourses or communities of practice that they encounter. The literature suggests, however, that this is not equally straightforward for all students and that under-prepared students will, for example, experience the gap between school and university more acutely (Niven 2005:774; see also 2.4).

The students who were the focus of this study had all been placed on an Extended Degree Programme based on their Grade 12 results that had placed them in the lowest percentile of students entering the university. Accordingly, these students were labelled under-prepared for higher education and were regarded as being at-risk. All of the students in the study spoke of the transition from school to university as their biggest challenge, and attested to the many differences that they experienced between school and university, and the difficulties they had in addressing them (6.3.2.1). The differences covered a wide variety of variables, from having to take responsibility for their own studies, to the way that they now had to approach reading and writing. Whether the entire first-year cohort would have described their experience of the change from school to university in the same way as this group is not known. What is of relevance, however, is the way in which the students in the study experienced the effect of these differences during their first-year of study, and this will be addressed as the discussion continues.

Bourdieu and his colleagues (1994:5; see also 2.2) spoke of how the degrees of sophistication of the students' background could influence, for example, their ability to deal with academic language, with students from a less sophisticated background encountering more difficulty in effectively employing the language of academe. Quite a number of the students on the EDP, both by their own admission, and based on the data drawn from the SIS, came from rural areas, and/or had attended poorly resourced schools (6.3.1.1). But this was not true for all

students on the EDP and the group reflected a fair amount of diversity in terms of sophistication, given that they represented all spheres of society, different races, a variety of school and family backgrounds and varying levels of life experience (6.3.1.1; see also 5.4.2 and Addendum A). This apparent contradiction emphasises the fact that there are other factors that may contribute to students performing poorly at school and their being labelled under-prepared and to their subsequent difficulty in adapting to an academic discourse. For example, many of these factors could be discerned from the students' responses, which in some cases highlight their lack of commitment and a lack of direction (6.3.1.2). However, the importance of background and the identity that the under-prepared student brings to the university community cannot be discounted.

The lecturers who participated in the study also appeared to hold the view, when looking at student learning more broadly, that the environment from which the students had come, their family background and their schooling influenced not only how they approached their studies, but also their potential to be successful in their studies (6.3.1.4). In these responses, the issue of differences across race were also specifically highlighted, with the lecturers stating that transition to university and problems with academic writing were more marked among black students (6.3.1.4). Their comments, however, highlight more than purely a racial issue also pointing to such factors as under-resourced schools, first-generation students possibly coming from rural areas and so forth. It would appear that the change in the composition of the student body in recent years, however, is a factor that many lecturers are still struggling to come to terms with. The racial diversity among the EDP students is, however, relevant here. The percentage of black students was much higher in the EDP group than in the entire first-year cohort, which points to a greater cultural diversity in this group. Canagarajah's work (2002:33; 2.3.2) with minority students (as black students are within the Stellenbosch University context) attests to the additional challenges that these students have to address (see also Starfield 2004:67; 2.3.5). Also relevant is the significant percentage of students in the study who were first-generation students and thus, according to Penrose (2002; see 4.3) potentially less prepared for what they encounter at university.

A review of the students' identities also speaks to the role played by their approaches to their studies in acquiring academic literacy and experiencing academic success. Part of one's identity is encapsulated in one's perception of self and, therefore, also in how one envisages the future (Leibowitz *et al.* 2005:25; 3.4.9). This was of particular interest in the study as the

students' responses in the ABQ pointed to markedly positive perceptions in terms of their academic and related abilities, with the exception of computer skills. This same source also projected extremely positive expectations in terms of the students' potential university achievements, expectations that could be described as unrealistic (6.3.1.3) in light of their school results. This was unexpected, particularly as in several instances their responses in the ABQ rated higher than those for the entire first-year cohort in the Faculty. One possible contributing factor could have to do with the drive towards improving the diversity ratios on campus. Some of the black students, particularly the African students, for example, described how they had been top of the class at school, and had been selected for leadership programmes and positions. In addition, a large proportion of the black students on the Extended Degree Programme had also received financial support for their studies, this despite being 'at-risk' students (6.3.1.1). This highlights how the current impetus to improve equity has created anomalies and has either generated false expectations or served to reinforce existing expectations among the new students.

Nevertheless, in her work on student agency, Walker (2006:7; 9) suggests that an appropriate disposition towards learning "... turns on a confident sense of self ...", and this would suggest that tapping into the positive self-image of these students could be significant in facilitating their success. It is unfortunate, therefore, that in many instances the students' later responses in their writing exercises and in the interviews suggest that these perceptions and expectations had been somewhat tempered, in some cases to the extent that the students had entirely abandoned their initial dreams (6.3.1.3).

The positive perceptions and expectations gleaned from the ABQ were somewhat in contrast to the way in which some of the students described their attitudes towards their studies – also alluded to earlier. Apart from being resistant to the EDP in general, some students provided what were clearly non-academic reasons for studying and for their choice of subjects (6.3.1.2). Although this was obviously not true for all of the students, it is disconcerting and serves to reinforce the opinions that the lecturers held about the students' commitment to their studies. These opinions are important, as they would influence, either consciously or unconsciously, how the lecturers approach their students and their teaching. Furthermore, while it is inevitable that there will always be students at university who seek entry to higher education for reasons other than academic success, the impact of the presence of these students in the classroom, adds to the responsibility and workload of the university teacher

and, over the long-term, influences the teaching and learning experience of all students. This issue will be raised again in the following section (7.2.2).

Another source of concern emanates from a fairly derogatory response related to the broader choice of study within the Humanities. In Chapter Four the way in which some perceive the Humanities as being sidelined, given the current drive toward science, engineering and technology, was discussed (Viljoen 2005; Wright 2005; 4.4.4). This is problematic for higher education institutions, like Stellenbosch University, seeking to improve their equity profiles and to provide more opportunities for students from previously disadvantaged groups. For many of these students, registering for a BA degree is their only option and the value of this degree should not be underestimated. Successful BA graduates can go on to create environments that could enable a future generation of students to seek entry to a broader sphere of disciplines.

At the start of this section, reference was made to the role that academic literacy plays in students learning. As a newcomer to the academic community the student brings with him or her an existing body of knowledge, and such knowledge ought to be useful in creating new meaning and thus facilitate learning (Kern 2000; Buckridge & Guest 2007; 3.2). However, despite their diversity, none of the students alluded to any such prior knowledge or any former 'ways of doing' that had proved helpful in their first-year of university studies. Instead, they noted on numerous occasions how they had to dispense with what they thought they knew and could do well, as this was in conflict with what they now encountered (see also Niven 2005; 2.4; Bourdieu 1986; 3.2). These students, therefore, saw no currency in what they brought to the academe and, with one exception, all seemed to accept that they should attempt to adopt the university 'way of doing' uncontested. Canagarajah (2002:36; 2.5.1) when describing how in communities of practice conventions could be adapted to embrace different styles, cautions that minority students, or in this case less-prepared students, often seek to embrace the anonymity of the discourse rather than to critique it. This is an unhealthy situation. The students in this study obtained access to university studies via an academic development structure. In granting such access the university assumes a responsibility to address the specific needs of the group and to work with the identities and knowledge that they bring to the academe. What emerges from this discussion, however, is that the students' early experiences were not enabling, but instead tended to dispel their initial expectations.

## 7.2.2 The university context

By virtue of having been granted access to higher education, the students are exposed to the specific context and culture of the university, and this often represents the first boundary that they have to deal with. In the study it was seen how this context and culture impacts on their learning and on their ability to participate in the academic community (3.4.1). One of the effects of the massification in higher education and a focus on widening access to enhance equity profiles has been increased student numbers on the one hand, and dwindling resources on the other. This has been well documented in earlier chapters (4.2). This effect has been felt in very real ways in the first-year classroom. All of the lecturers attested to how these factors (the economics of higher education) have influenced their decision-making around the organisation of classes, the number of small group tutorials, their teaching methodologies (e.g. making greater use of self-study approaches and technology) and assessment practices (6.3.6.1; 6.3.6.2). Such decisions have often led to a move away from practices that would encourage lecturer-student engagement and student conversation, or facilitate student writing (see also 7.2.3). Coupled with the perceived inflation of Grade 12 results, the increased student numbers have resulted in students entering higher education who, up until the very recent past, might not have done so. The lecturers' responses showed that they perceived some of their students to be weaker than they would have expected them to be, such that they ought not to have been granted access to university (6.3.1.4). This predominantly negative perception, reinforced by a sense that the campus culture is not one that is conducive to student learning, could be expected to subconsciously filter through to the way in which the lecturers interact with the students (see also 7.2.1). This is important, particularly given that they did not feel that the content itself was difficult, but that the weaker students experienced problems with the workload and with the transition to university, and not the complexity of the work (6.3.2.2). How they might seek to mediate this was not raised specifically in the interviews, although the fact that they felt they were expecting too much suggests that they were adjusting their expectations of the students (6.3.1.4). Of concern would be whether such adjustment was leading to lower expectations as opposed to different expectations which could require changing their own ways of doing – thus the sort of activity that Wenger (2000; 2.5.1) describes as being meaningful within a community of practice. Again, however, the issue of high student numbers and limited resources, as well as a lack of departmental and even institutional support, were regarded as barriers to their seeking out opportunities to enhance engagement and provide support.

The findings highlight how a number of the students offered non-academic reasons for having selected Stellenbosch University for their studies and for making their subject choices. In addition, the study also drew attention to the impact that the high level of social activity among the student population had on the groups' own studies. Most of the students mentioned this during the interviews, which suggests that avoiding some of the many social activities may have enhanced their chances of success. This non-academic perspective articulated by several of the students in the study contrasts with the strong research focus of the institution as a whole. Ironically, this research focus emerged during the study as a barrier to lecturers offering further support for the under-prepared student group and first-year students in general (see 6.3.6.1; 6.3.6.2).

An important indicator of university culture resides in the language of learning and teaching and at Stellenbosch University this is a particularly contested issue. As mentioned in Chapter Six, I had expected that the issue of language would emerge strongly during the study and, as this was not the case, have highlighted some of the possible reasons for this (6.3.6.3). The students described how they devised strategies to deal with the different challenges that the language issue presented them with and could thus be considered to have adapted to facilitate their participation in the academic community (Lea & Street 1998:159; 2.2). Of relevance, however, is the extent to which the language of learning and teaching served to exclude some students from participating in the community of practice and so create further difficulties in their acquisition of academic literacy (see 6.3.6.3; 2.5).

It would appear, therefore, that the institutional climate and the university context significantly influence what happens in the first-year classroom, and, as has been shown, can constitute barriers for student success, particularly when students are under-prepared for university education.

### **7.2.3 An academic culture**

Having been granted access to the university, the students are then confronted with the rules and norms of the academe, the conventions of the discipline and the expectations of the lecturers. The academic community represents a site of power that is dominant, and, for most first-year students, is initially perceived as impenetrable (Moore 1994:37; 2.4; 6.3.2.1; 6.3.2.2). When describing their expectations at a general level, such as when defining their understanding of academic literacy, there was a fair amount of congruence among the

lecturers' responses (6.3.5.1). Notions of being able to 'adapt academically', deal with large volumes of work and master the 'necessary' skills were common, with the focus on skills suggesting an alignment with the study-skills model for academic literacy (2.2). But their responses were not limited to a basic skills level, as they also require students to display more abstract and higher-order cognitive reasoning, to be able to analyse and synthesise texts, and so forth. On the other hand, however, there was some divergence in their expectations of how the students should, for example, prepare their written texts, with one lecturer placing greater emphasis on, for example, grammar and spelling, than the next (6.3.5.3). The way in which the lecturers perceived of academic literacy and their expectations for academic writing, in particular, are important as the power in the academic environment resides with the lecturers. Their interpretation of the discipline and its conventions and their use of the disciplinary discourse influences the setting of disciplinary boundaries and thereby also the students' access to the academic community (Starfield 2004:67; 2.3.5). This is exacerbated when the expectations and understanding differ from one lecturer and one discipline to the next.

The students' exposure to the discourse of the discipline is bound up in the words of the lecturer, the texts the students are required to engage with (this includes textbooks, notes, modules outlines, PowerPoint slides, and so forth) (6.3.3.1; 6.3.3.2). Students pick up clues of what is expected of them from these different sources. A number of issues that emerged from the study needs to be noted here. First of all, students learn quickly that there are conventions that govern the way in which academic writing occurs at university, but the extent to which they are clear about what these conventions are and what they imply is less certain. In several instances their responses pointed to an understanding of academic writing as being at the next level to which they should aspire, using 'advanced language' and 'big words'. Such writing, they explained, needs to be done in a very specific way (6.3.5.3), and they often described the process of 'introduction, body, and conclusion' in almost a mantra-like fashion. Their experiences resonate with what was discussed from the literature where newcomer students are often in awe of the academic conventions, treating them with considerable respect. Bourdieu and his colleagues (1994:4; 2.2) describe how, when there is no deeper understanding, the students are "condemned to using a rhetoric of despair", as they try to include all the academic-sounding words in their own texts. In the students' written work there are examples of instances where they attempted, with varying degrees of success, to incorporate a more academic-like style in their writing, while in the interviews they highlighted how the discourse differs from one discipline to the next (6.3.5.2).

The fact that the students often linked successful academic writing with knowing what the lecturer expected is significant and speaks to the notions of deep, surface and strategic learning that were discussed in Chapter Three (3.2). If the expectations of the lecturer are such that they would encourage a deep and critical approach to learning, it appears likely that students would respond accordingly. However, the strategic learner might simply be giving back what the lecturer wants without critically engaging with the content or concepts (6.3.3.4). The link between lecturer expectations and student learning is an important one and is raised again in the next section (7.2.4). Those students who felt that they could do so with some success, expressed preferring essay questions in their examinations, believing that this way they might generate better results than with the more clearly right or wrong answer-style that characterises, for example, multiple-choice questions. But generally, the way in which the students appeared to experience academic writing could be likened to working through a mine-field, where you know you have to get to the other side and you have several sets of guidelines and criteria, some of which are contradictory, but you don't understand them because they are written in a language and style that is unfamiliar to you. The landmines represent horrors such as plagiarism, not answering the question properly, giving too much information, saying what you think instead of saying what someone else thought, and so forth. In addition, you have to do all of this “with self-confidence, without being scared ...” (6.3.5.3). This not only illustrates the challenges faced by the students in the study, but also speaks to the body of research that cautions against simply trying to teach students ‘how to’ be academically literate by providing them with a set of rules and guidelines, rather than, as mentioned earlier, seeking to apply what is new to what the student already knows and understands. It also highlights what Northedge (2003b:172) calls “ ... a classic dilemma for students ...”, as students, particularly weaker students, struggle to reconcile the need to present their own original work, while still weaving the voices of others into it.

In the literature, several researchers highlight how simply providing access to under-prepared students is not enough, and that universities have a responsibility to also ensure “*epistemological* access to the processes of knowledge construction ...” which sustain the university (Boughey 2002:305; 3.4.1; see also Amos & Fischer 1998; Fraser & Killen 2005). The extent to which the students in the 2006 EDP cohort experienced being enabled to participate in the different disciplinary discourses and communities of practice is central to this study, and the findings on this are discussed in the following two segments.

#### **7.2.4 Participation in the community of practice**

The acquisition of academic literacy is clearly not a natural result of obtaining access to higher education, nor is exposure to the community of practice (disciplinary discourse) of itself a sufficient pre-condition. The literature speaks of how immersion in the discipline can facilitate acquisition and that students who complete an apprenticeship in the discipline eventually become part of that discourse community (Gee 1998; Paxton 1998; 2.4). However, this notion is not uncontested in the literature, and points to two particularly important issues that emerge from this study. Firstly, that while completing this apprenticeship students need to become actively engaged in the discipline, thus with the community and the texts that comprise it by way of the curriculum, and secondly, that under-prepared students may need further support before they achieve membership (Scott 2006; 4.3). The findings in this study provide much insight into both of these issues. In this segment, those related to creating opportunities for engagement are discussed, while the findings on academic support interventions are interpreted in the section that follows (7.2.5).

The dominance of the use of the lecture in the first-year modules described in this study, with the exception of the academic literacy module (which will be discussed in the following section) is self-evident. The limited potential of this format for encouraging engagement between the student and lecturer, or even between students and the texts, was emphasised in the students' responses (6.3.3.2). Even when the students described what they felt was a 'good' lecturer - someone who was able to unlock the meaning of what was being discussed and hold their attention during the class by virtue of being a good communicator – the sub-text still speaks of a relatively passive student who, while possibly being entertained, is not necessarily challenged to participate actively (6.3.3.1). While there were references to instances of interaction in the lecture situation, it was usually the small group tutorials that were seen as potential sites for student-tutor and student-student engagement. It was here that the students felt safe to ask questions, share their opinions and generally try out their 'discourse-legs', so to speak. It was also in the small group tutorials that the issue of language of learning and teaching seemed more easily addressed (6.3.3.2). Essentially, this format has the potential to address Chickering and Gamson's (1991) well-known principles of good practice and to facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy by enhancing the opportunities for students to participate in the discourse community. There is, however, a caveat that should be noted. The small group tutorial will not in and of itself encourage interaction, particularly

not if conducted lecture style. This highlights the role of the tutors, the extent to which the lecturer remains directly involved with the tutorials, and the importance of adopting a student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Adopting such a student-centred approach to teaching and learning implies a reorganisation of the roles of both the lecturer and the student, where the latter takes greater responsibility for their own learning, and where the lecturer assumes the role of an expert facilitator who seeks to open up conversations with the students so that they can take part in the process of making meaning (Northedge 2003b:173; 3.4.2). The students' responses on the role of the lecturer highlight the desirability of the lecturer being available to facilitate such meaning-making and colouring in the one-dimensional text that is projected on the screen in PowerPoint (6.3.3.3). This establishing of roles can, however, be a potential site of misunderstanding between student and lecturer if not carefully explained. For example, the students consider what they perceived as a lack of guidance from the lecturer and their simultaneous expectations of greater student self-discipline and responsibility as among the biggest academic challenges they have to face (6.3.2.2). On the other hand, the facilitation role assigned to the lecturer appears to be less visible in the mainstream modules where the traditional one-to-many style of communication currently persists. This is also emphasised in the repeated references the students made to doing what 'they' (the lecturers) wanted, demonstrating that the students recognise that there is a manner of doing things, a way of being in an academic milieu that differs to what they (the students) did and had been used to. This then underlined for the students a polarised 'us and them' situation, and not a community.

Careful reflection on what emerged from the study appears to point to fewer enabling opportunities for students to participate in the discourse community than are desirable. The reasons for this are fraught with a number of contradictions between what is considered desirable and what actually occurs. It would thus be true to say that a series of binaries characterise the process of becoming academically literate. Firstly, we have seen that the students arrive with specific expectations of their academic ability and a particular way of doing with regards to the own learning, only to find the reality somewhat different. Similarly, the lecturers' expected the students to be enthusiastic about and interested in the different disciplines. They expected their students to read widely, to keep abreast of what was relevant and current in the various fields, and to demonstrate a certain level of writing and related

skills, which the lecturers believed should have been acquired at school. These expectations of skills, competencies, and even attitudes were explicitly formulated as desired outcomes in the module outlines in some instances, but were generally not expressly stated (6.3.3.4). The literature notes this as often true in higher education. Having long been accepted members of the discourse community (insiders), the lecturers are unaware of the challenge that the students experience in trying to negotiate entry into the community and therefore fail to make explicit underlying and assumed expectations (Ballard & Clanchy 1988:13; 3.4.5; Williams 2005:157; 3.2).

A second binary that is seen here is that while the lecturers desired the students to be immersed in the discipline and engaged with the relevant texts, the external factors appeared to result in them being increasingly distanced from the students, with them overtly encouraging the students to engage in self-study. In addition, while the students were expected to acquire the conventions of sound academic writing, few opportunities to practise such writing were generated. In contrast, several of the students expressed that they did not even want to be doing the courses for which they were registered, that they often found the content boring and that during their school years they had not acquired the habit of reading, even for pleasure (6.3.2.2). In addition, in many cases, it was the students whose cultures and home language differed significantly from that of the lecturer, who appeared to be the furthest removed from the lecturers' expectations.

A third binary relates to the notion of a student-centred approach to learning and, more importantly, to providing opportunities for students to engage in the different communities of practice of each discipline. Although some students commented on how, in some classes, they were encouraged by the lecturer to question or even comment on what is being discussed, the more dominant response was that the lecture was a place where you could passively obtain the hints and tips needed for the examination. While several students stated that they preferred the more active and engaging experience of the small group tutorial, there were some who preferred the anonymity of the larger class and their passive role there. (6.3.3.2). To some extent, the use of technology, such as WebCT, which provides significant opportunities for lecturers to manage large classes and to expand the learning experience for the students, could be seen in the case of the EDP group to potentially be a source of further tension. An additional rider to this discussion relates to the poor class attendance levels that characterise many first-year modules. This was one of the few areas where there was

agreement between the students and the lecturers. They both believed that good class attendance was an enabler for success and poor class attendance a barrier (6.3.4.2; 6.3.4.3). Such understanding, however, did not necessarily impact on the students' behaviour, as during the class visits and with the completion of the reflective writing paragraph exercise, it was evident that classes were not well attended. The fact that the follow-up interviews pointed to the necessity of attending classes as one of the lessons learned is, however, a positive factor.

The issue of assessment and the extent to which such assessment was aligned with the module outcomes and the teaching methods proved to be another potential site of misunderstanding between the students and lecturers. In the final examinations it appeared that the papers were often designed with somewhat lower levels of cognitive expectations than the level that was overtly stated in the module outlines, or that had intrinsically been sought by the lecturers (6.3.4.4). More than one student spoke about how giving back (in exams or tests) what the lecturer wanted was the key to success. This is in spite of the fact that the lecturers had said that their intentions had been to deliberately discourage rote learning. The notion of reproducing what is perceived to be the expectation was alluded to in the previous section and speaks to the idea of a reproductive conception of learning (Boughey 2000:282; 3.2) that fails to encourage a deeper and more critical approach to learning.

In other instances the students' described how the end-of-year examination required responses that were quite different from those they had been exposed to or had prepared for during the year. As, in many instances, the lecturers were not responsible for marking students' written work during the year, the extent to which they would have had a clear understanding of their students' abilities in this regard is questionable (6.3.6.2). Thus the process of assessment appears to be characterised by a series of mixed messages that hamper the conversation between student and lecturer. Even in the follow-up interviews students still spoke of their disappointment with their results, of having worked so hard and yet not achieving, many questioning their study methods or describing how they had tried to adapt them to ensure greater success (6.3.2.3; 6.3.3.4). Nothing could be more disabling than to be at a loss as to why one's efforts met with so little success. They wanted more and even direct feedback on their work, acknowledging that, particularly with written work, even when they received good marks they did not always know why. While the students' reference to 'hard work' and study needs to be understood from their point of reference, their dilemma cannot

be discounted and questions why, even after a full year at university, the students were still uncertain as to the ways of being within an academic community.

The students' responses to being encouraged to actively engage in the classroom and to adopt the conventions of the different disciplines (or not) reflect a fair amount of diversity across the group. Some appeared nonchalant, seemingly content to passively remain on the sidelines, having obtained access to higher education. This ties up with earlier comments on student agency and persistence, as well as the fact that all students, including under-prepared students, need to actively participate in teaching and learning. And, there were a number of students who displayed persistence and determination, which points to the agency and intrinsic motivation of the students who either in spite of, or because of, their experiences were still determined to be successful. It is presumably students like these who the lecturers described as being 'exceptions'.

It is also important not to assume too much gullibility on the part of the students. Even though as a group they had not been regarded as high achievers as school, their responses at times displayed considerable insight. Here, I found the response of some of the students heartening, particularly in how they constructively critiqued certain activities (e.g. the use of PowerPoint, see 6.3.3.3), recognised how discourses could differ from one discipline to the next (6.3.5.2) and spoke about the value of student-lecturer engagement (6.3.3.2). In so doing they projected considerable insight into what might facilitate their acquisition of academic literacy, even if they did not actually express it as such. These insights, contrary to some of the earlier discussion, reflect a measure of participation as critical members in the community of practice, albeit still on the periphery, and will be addressed again later in this chapter (7.2.5).

One of the four mainstream modules that were reviewed in the study appeared to have adopted a slightly different approach to first-year students than the other three. Subject B was the only module that offered regular (time-tabled) small group tutorials. These tutorials focused specifically on academic writing and related activities, and students were given opportunities to practise their writing, and this was included in the module outline as a desired outcome of the module. Longer-style questions were also included in both the text and the examination and the analysis of the questions posed in B's examination paper pointed to the most effective spread of expectations across Bloom's six cognitive dimensions. It

would appear that this module did achieve a fair extent of alignment, and had created meaningful engagement opportunities. Here a quote from one of the students bears repeating:

“Subject B just gives me a greater understanding of how the world works and how I can, I myself can, influence or be part of this world language and this world system...” [Lincoln 2007].

The significance of this module achieving a fair degree of alignment and seemingly encouraging engagement, both between students and lecturers and well as between students and texts, and the fact that specific attempts were made to expose students to writing in the discipline, cannot be underestimated. It speaks to the realms of possibility, even given the difficulties inherent in the current climate.

### **7.2.5 The role of academic literacy support interventions**

It appears that both the students and lecturers in this study are caught up in a vicious circle that is problematic for all concerned. Each of the juxtapositions described in the previous sections contribute to this unsatisfactory situation that seems to negate the potential, particularly for under-prepared students, for effective participation in the discourse community. It is here that Paxton's (2006:86; 2.5.1) notion of interim literacies and Scott's (2006; 4.3) comments offer a response, if not a solution - that students who are less prepared for university might need additional support in order to reach their full potential.

In Chapter Two much of the discussion that centred on academic literacy and its acquisition among university students focused on how, over the years, approaches have evolved to more effectively meet the needs of students and to address acquisition, in its broadest context, more appropriately. The literature points to how important it is that acquisition occurs in context within the discipline, often critiquing any other approach. Nevertheless, as was noted in the review, many institutions still follow what Warren (2002:87; 3.3) described as a semi-integrated approach (see also McKenna 2003a:61; 3.3) at best. I cannot comment directly on why this is so at other institutions. However, I would venture that given the current student numbers and the 'doing more with less' approach that characterises first-year teaching at the present time both globally and at Stellenbosch University specifically, it is unlikely that the desirable level of integration that the literature posits will be facilitated across mainstream modules.

Thus, I adopt a more pragmatic stance in the interests of the students' academic development. The findings in this study appear to support the notion that there may yet be a place for adjunct academic literacy modules within certain contexts. Such modules would not only provide extensively for the level of student-centred methods that encourage engagement and deep learning, but would also be built around what is happening in the different disciplines to which the students are exposed. A key finding of the study points to how *Texts in the Humanities* went some way in fulfilling these needs, and specific reference was made to the format of the classes, the space that they created for the students' own voices to emerge, the nature of the context that facilitated learning in mainstream modules, and the significant role that the lecturers' played in supporting and encouraging the students (6.3.4.1). In short, its value lies in the way in which the academic literacy module created a space "where discourse could take place" (Northedge 2003a:20).

While the considerable increase in the retention rate of the 2006 EDP cohort over previous years could be attributed to a number of different variables, it is also true that the academic literacy module *Texts in the Humanities* was offered in small, language specific groups for the first time in that year. What is more relevant, however, is the evidence of the usefulness of this module as described by the students themselves in the reflective writing exercise and both sets of interviews. It is highly pertinent that almost all of the 38 students who wrote in the reflective writing exercise that they realised that the module would be important in their future success, as it resonates with the opening paragraphs of this discussion and how students' identities and their agency or persistence can be significant enablers in successful learning. If the perception among the students is that the module will be of tangible value, then in and of itself, it too becomes an enabler in the acquisition of academic literacy.

It would be naïve to imply that the presence of an academic literacy module as part of an academic development programme such as the EDP could be a panacea, nor do the findings point to this. In spite of acknowledging the potential of the module in contributing to their academic success, issues such as finding the pace too slow and the work too boring were also raised (6.3.4.1). However, comments about being bored were made with respect to several mainstream modules as well, and pacing in such diverse classes is always difficult. Another concern relates to the resistance that students expressed both towards the EDP in general and the academic literacy module in particular. Such resistance is noted in the literature (3.3) and needs to be carefully moderated if the positive impact of the module is not to be lost.

In addition, the findings point to the potential pitfalls inherent in offering an adjunct module of this nature, specifically with regards to the content and the crafting of the curricula. The danger in offering a module in academic literacy is that, in endeavouring to equip students to effectively negotiate their entry into communities of practice, the approach can become one of skills acquisition and of providing the students with unchallenged rules and guidelines. In many of students' responses the focus on the 'doing' and few descriptions of experiences that made space for discussion or reflection on, for example, the nature of good writing in the academy generally and within the discipline more specifically, were evident. To this end, the lecturers' responsible for the modules will need to maintain the practice of reflecting regularly on their teaching that characterised their work in 2006, when we met on a regular basis to carefully review the module.

### **7.2.6 Summary**

The extent to which the 2006 EDP students were enabled to acquire academic literacy during their first-year is difficult to determine in any definitive way. The findings that have been discussed here emphasise the numerous tensions that impact on the students' experience of this process. By the second year, a few of the students appeared to have moved to a better understanding of what, for example, academic writing entails and what could facilitate their becoming active members of the discourse communities to which they had been introduced. Several of the students spoke about how they have changed their practices. While some of the students' responses were focused at a fundamental level, other responses imply that they had already acquired some insight into what it means to be part of an academic community. Importantly, students spoke of how they had grown in confidence simply by knowing how things work – and this is relevant for their ongoing participation in the academe. Yet, despite the general soberness and maturity that was observed during the follow-up interviews, their responses still appear to suggest that their actual mastery of these skills and practices was still some way off (6.3.4.2).

The realist may well ask whether the almost nurturing approach that was employed in the academic literacy modules, where the students were given the additional guidance and support that they appeared to need and later seemed to value, is appropriate to higher education. As was seen in the lecturers' responses, there is some question as to whether such under-prepared students should even be granted access. This again emphasises the tension that has been highlighted throughout this study, between the national imperative to expand

access and enhance diversity on the one hand, while expecting all students to display traditional approaches to learning and to demonstrate an ability to adapt so as to effectively participate in a particular community of practice, on the other. One might, however, question how the lecturers see their own roles as university teachers. Are they making their own expertise available to the students so that they become able to participate in the making of meaning? Are they designing well planned excursions into unfamiliar discursive terrain and coaching students in speaking the academic discourse (Northedge 2003b:173-175) – this while acknowledging the students’ own responsibility toward his or her learning and providing space for such learning to happen? Niven (2004:787) suggests that in the face of current evidence it is necessary for lecturers to consider the possibility of their own under-preparedness, particularly with regards to the increasingly diverse student body that they are being confronted with in the first-year classroom. The notion of community implies engagement, a negotiation, a place of adapting and realignment in the joint activity of making meaning.

In concluding this section, it is useful to revisit an earlier quote of Jacobs (2004:477) where she suggests that although it is generally recognised that you cannot achieve mastery of the discourse by teaching the discourse, “teaching (for acquisition) and teaching (for learning)” will enable students “to achieve ‘liberating literacy’ (where students are able to critique and change a discourse)”. This speaks to transformation in the classroom, in our own ways of doing and being as lecturers, and it is, therefore, such liberating literacy that should be our endeavour.

### **7.3 Response to the research questions**

The above section provided an explanation of the findings in response to the research questions that guided this study. While not seeking to imply ‘cause-and-effect’, a number of general responses, governed by the specific context of nature of this study, can be drawn from the discussion:

- Adjunct academic support interventions aimed at promoting the acquisition of academic literacy may contribute to student success specifically when interventions are designed to promote active, engaged learning, suggest links with discipline-specific modules and endeavour to encourage a critical approach among the students.

- Diverse academic literacy demands are made on first-year students. These demands across different disciplines often represent sites of misunderstanding where the lecturers' expectations of their students and the conventions that govern the particular discourse are often not explicit or are not understood by the students. This creates barriers that hinder students' effective participation in the discourse community and this is particularly true in the case of under-prepared students.
- The bilingual or sometimes multilingual context that students encounter at university can exacerbate the potential for misunderstanding between student and lecturer and between students and the discourse, and in this way can become exclusionary, particularly for those students whose language and culture differ from the dominant language and culture of the institution.
- Students at first-year level are expected to adapt their identities in order to participate in the different disciplinary discourses that they encounter at university, and this is in spite of the fact that the environment is not always enabling or conducive to providing opportunity for the interaction that could facilitate such adaptation.

In summary, exposure to an academic development module that focuses on academic literacy gives under-prepared students a measure of informed insight into the expectations of university study. It is enabling in that it offers guidance on the conventions that govern academic writing, particularly when it points out relationships between academic writing and the discipline-specific mainstream modules that are part of the students' academic offerings. Its potential to enhance student success over the longer term is, however, dependent on the extent to which mainstream modules and the responsible academics will, in greater numbers, acknowledge a joint responsibility in facilitating the acquisition of academic literacy for their students within their particular discipline and, at the same time, believe it feasible for them to do so.

#### **7.4 Recommendations**

In the opening chapter of this dissertation I undertook, by way of this study, to contribute to the growing body of scholarship in the fields of academic literacy and student development within a higher education context. I now put forward recommendations in response to this commitment, following on the conclusions discussed above.

#### **7.4.1 Recommendations for the academic literacy modules**

The students generally found the academic literacy module to be of value, particularly within the given context. To this end, I recommend that academic support interventions of this nature continue to be included as part of the students' programmes. Such inclusion, however, should be exposed to ongoing review, reflection and evaluation to ensure that the modules continue to meet the needs of the EDP students specifically. Such curricula should aim at developing a critical literacy amongst the students, and at finding ways in which the diverse literacies that the students bring with them to university might be more effectively channelled. The ongoing approach of these modules should be to seek opportunities for integration with the discipline-specific mainstream modules and, to this end, to create stronger links between the teachers in the academic literacy module and those in the mainstream.

#### **7.4.2 Recommendations for the university**

It is unacceptable that logistical and resource imperatives are permitted to drive pedagogical decisions to such an extent that they have a significant impact on how teaching and learning takes place at first-year level. It is therefore necessary to review from an institutional perspective what has emerged with regards to the acquisition of academic literacy. In this context, I recommend that the impact of large first-year enrolments on teaching and learning practice be investigated. Here the Policy for Teaching and Learning which foregrounds a student-centred approach could provide the basis for commissioning such an investigation. Of specific relevance would be to review the first-year student-lecturer ratio and to explore ways in which the current situation might be more effectively mediated. A more effective use of teaching venues, and the finalisation of longer-term plans in acquiring new venues or refurbishing existing venues in a style that would facilitate a more interactive approach to learning also need to be addressed.

It is necessary to note that recent initiatives in the form of the establishment of the First-year Academy point to a realisation on the part of the university that first-year success for all students, including those on academic development programmes, needs to be addressed at an institutional level. The First-year Academy could serve as a vehicle through which some of the recommendations made here could be set in motion.

### **7.4.3 Recommendations for the academics**

Addressing the logistical and resource issues that currently influence first-year teaching and learning generally, and therefore by implication also the teaching and learning of students on an extended degree programme, is only one piece of this puzzle. While there are examples of good practice that were also described in the study, it is crucial that there is ongoing discussion at departmental level that will explore the implications of adopting a student-centred approach to learning, that recognises the currency that entering students bring with them and that facilitates interaction between insider and newcomer. Such discussion could lead to an increased awareness of the potential that this approach has for establishing academic literacy in the student body, particularly a diverse student body. To this end the raising of awareness among academics as to issues of difference in language and culture among the students, and the implications that these differences can have for student learning, is recommended. In addition, inter-departmental deliberation on these matters, and the sharing of best practice, should be encouraged. While the value of using WebCT in the teaching of large modules cannot be discounted and the importance of self-study at university is not contested, creating spaces for students to engage with lecturers should also be encouraged. In addition, while the problems of marking large numbers of written assignments cannot be discounted, lecturers should be encouraged to explore innovative ways of creating opportunities for students to express their learning in their writing. To this end, assessment that encourages sound student writing is critical.

As mentioned above, I foresee that the establishment of the First-year Academy, which this year created faculty structures that focus on first-year student success, could play a pivotal role facilitating inter-departmental debate on these issues. It should be noted, that even as I write this final section of the dissertation, courageous conversations in one of the four mainstream modules featured in this study have recently led to considerable transformation in the approach, format and structure of their first-year modules. Such steps highlight a growing understanding among university teachers and departmental leaders of the need to move forward and to do so innovatively.

### **7.5 Limitations of the study**

In Chapter Five the limitations of using a case study design and some of the ways in which I endeavoured to address these limitations were discussed (5.4.1). This discussion made

reference to issues related to generalisability of the findings in a case study, the rigour with which case study data is handled, the effect of the researcher being both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, the process of obtaining access to the participants in the investigation, and delineating the boundaries for the study. In addition, throughout this dissertation, aspects of the study that could be regarded as limitations have been highlighted. Over and above those already noted, however, I would like to add some further comments.

I positioned myself in the study as practitioner-researcher. Through the years of the project I remained intimately involved with every aspect of the work, even to the extent of transcribing the initial interviews that were undertaken with the lecturers. In so doing I took on the role of director, scriptwriter, stagehand and player. This meant that I had to be particularly disciplined when dealing with the data. Ehrich (2003:49) suggests that “[w]hile it is not humanly possible to be completely unbiased and to bracket completely the natural attitude, by being more aware of this process it is possible to try to control it”. During the process of data collection and during the analysis, therefore, I deliberately sought to objectively and conscientiously adhere to appropriate research conventions. Nevertheless, even though I took great care in this matter, it needs to be noted that the desire of the qualitative researcher to intervene in her study remains a source of tension.

On a more pragmatic level, the study displays further limitations in that it essentially offers insight into only a single year of the EDP students’ four-year study period. Tracking the students through their four years at university would have offered a richer and deeper understanding, not only of the process of acquiring academic literacy, but also with regards to the impact of the interventions they were exposed to in the first year. Longitudinal studies of this nature are, however, not easily addressed in doctoral research, but point to possible research for the future.

Finally, although there were 61 students in this EDP group, 38 submitted the reflective writing exercises, while only 13 participated in the interviews (with five students being interviewed twice) this despite my diligent endeavour and employing a variety of strategies. On the other hand, the abundance of data that was presented in Chapter Six, particularly in light of the multiple data sources that formed part of the study, would imply that data saturation was indeed achieved. However, I recognise that, for example, following up on students who left the programme and the university at the end of the first year could have

generated additional insight into the challenges that the students experienced. In similar vein, conducting two case studies that focussed on an EDP group and a mainstream group respectively, might have offered greater opportunity for comparison across the two groups.

## **7.6 Opportunities for future research**

The need for ongoing research into teaching and learning practice in the current fluid and shifting higher education context remains critical if the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to be able to reposition itself to create an environment that will embrace the diversity of students that are now entering its portals. Such repositioning, even transformation, needs to be guided by sound educational research. In an earlier section reference was made, for example, to the desirability of more longitudinal studies that will track the progress of students, in this case under-prepared students, throughout their undergraduate careers. The acquisition of academic literacy is an ongoing process of adaptation and negotiation as one is exposed to many different disciplinary discourses, indeed even different levels of discourses, during ones' academic career. Such long-term research would therefore be recommended.

Another opportunity for further research could emerge from the work of the First-year Academy and the role that academic literacy plays in student learning across a broader spectrum of students. Linked to this could be an inquiry that revisits existing first-year curricula and the extent to which such curricula provide for the acquisition of academic literacy across a diverse spectrum of students.

Finally, when discussing the limitations of the case study in an earlier chapter, the problem with a lack of generalisability was discussed. One of the ways that the literature recommends addressing such a limitation is to investigate multiple cases (Yin 1994:45), although Yin (1994:45) himself goes on to caution that it is possibly not so straightforward and that often the rationale that was used for the single case cannot be easily transferred to the multiple-case setting. Nevertheless, given the popularity of case study research in recent years, there is a sense that seeking to draw together what has been learned from individual cases within disciplinary groupings could be of some value (Street 2003:87). To this end Tripp (2006:215) suggests

... We must find ways of utilising the cumulated wisdom of the case studies we have available. ... We also need to build archives of the cases similar to those of the

legal system, and we need to develop more formally organised and broadly based networks through which teachers and researchers can communicate among themselves.

I believe research into how this could be brought about is pertinent at this time.

## **7.7 Concluding comments**

I am aware that the style that I have adopted in writing this dissertation could be critiqued. I have, for example, used the first-person particularly when I wished to emphasise my position or understanding, I have incorporated personal reflection, and have utilised what could be described as a more literary style (see Clark & Ivanič 1997). Atkinson and Delamont (2005:823) suggest "... [t]here is a danger [in] ... implicitly revalorizing the authorial voice of the social scientist ..." as they believe it draws the attention away from the true actors in the research, in this case the students. I do not believe this to be so in this case and would venture that it is precisely herein that the value of qualitative research lies. Furthermore, I believe the writing process ought not to be either mechanical or abstract. The learning resides in the activity of the writing – I offer no apology for the approach I have followed.

Thus, I conclude by revisiting my opening thoughts. Higher education in South Africa is currently being challenged in a number of ways, not least of which is the issue of high dropout rates among first-year students. Universities across the country are seeking suitable interventions to address the current impasse. In this study I have explored the experiences of a group of students on one such intervention, specifically with regards to their acquisition of academic literacy and how it influenced their learning. The study has shown how exposing students to an academic literacy support module that seeks to create links with mainstream modules and is managed within a specific student-centred context, can support student learning. To this end, the findings of the study could make a contribution to the field of higher education in the broader context and to the renewal of curricula within academic support programmes.

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**Addendum A:**  
**Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences EDP cohort (2006) – Selected data**

	Date of birth	Race	Gender	Language	Gr12 year	Gr12 %	Access test
1	19870303	White	Male	English	2004	52.3	47.44
2	19770329	White	Female	Afrikaans	1996	61.1	40.83
3	19830119	White	Male	Afrikaans	2002	48.8	38.93
4	19760412	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	53.5	37.03
5	19860912	Coloured	Male	English	2005	54.9	33.91
6	19870317	Indian	Female	English	2005	54.1	45.49
7	19851222	White	Female	Afrikaans	2004	55.9	31.51
8	19870409	Coloured	Male	Afrikaans	2005	54.8	n/a
9	19870224	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	52.3	48.69
10	19820915	Black	Male	Zulu	2003	63.5	24.3
11	19870323	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	60.1	31.84
12	19841206	White	Female	English	2003	53.3	43.33
13	19871122	Coloured	Male	Afrikaans	2005	60.3	26.67
14	19871225	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	53	42.28
15	19870327	White	Female	English	2005	54.8	43.04
16	19861230	Coloured	Male	English	2005	57.5	34.08
17	19870813	White	Male	English	2005	64.6	32.44
18	19870728	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	51.4	43.77
19	19870305	Coloured	Male	Afrikaans	2005	57.4	36
20	19821117	White	Female	Afrikaans	2004	51.9	46.29
21	19820510	Black	Male	South Sotho	2003	51.5	24.81
22	19870917	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	53	45.49
23	19851211	White	Female	English	2004	57.2	38.56
24	19871017	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	54.9	34.14
25	19870702	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	58.1	35.97
26	19840912	White	Male	Afrikaans	2002	57.3	70.42
27	19870715	Black	Male	Xhosa	2005	63.2	20
28	19870717	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	56.4	50.54
29	19870108	Coloured	Male	English	2004	55	57.5
30	19861109	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	54.1	49.19
31	19861014	Coloured	Male	Afrikaans	2004	56	41.78
32	19860901	White	Female	Afrikaans	2005	55.6	38.61
33	19830613	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2002	45	25.15
34	19871230	White	Female	Afrikaans	2005	54.6	34.61
35	19871112	Black	Male	Xhosa	2005	67	24.22
36	19880206	Coloured	Male	English	2005	50.4	29.17
37	19870912	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	53.5	43.88
38	19861221	Black	Male	Xhosa	2005	53	26.67
39	19870921	Coloured	Female	English	2005	52.1	51.53
40	19880330	Black	Female	English	2005	50.5	37.08
41	19790913	Coloured	Male	Afrikaans	1998	47.1	49.09
42	19851027	White	Male	Afrikaans	2003	53.3	38.75
43	19870812	Coloured	Female	English	2005	53.6	54.89
44	19870113	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	53.9	46.33
45	19870320	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	55.4	31.21
46	19861119	White	Female	Afrikaans	2005	50.6	39.03
47	19880125	Black	Female	Pedi	2004	54.5	14.95
48	19880421	Indian	Male	English	2005	49.7	23.72
49	19860212	White	Female	English	2003	52.1	38.39
50	19871207	Coloured	Male	English	2005	55.7	40

	<b>Date of birth</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Gr12 year</b>	<b>Gr12 %</b>	<b>Access test</b>
51	19870505	White	Male	Afrikaans	2005	53.1	53.31
52	19860923	Coloured	Male	Afrikaans	2005	54.4	38.48
53	19880310	Coloured	Male	English	2005	54	32.41
54	19860225	White	Male	Afrikaans	2004	51.8	46.24
55	19870310	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	63.2	28.08
56	19710321	White	Female	Afrikaans	1989	45	50.91
57	19870822	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	53.3	23.39
58	19860516	White	Female	German	2005	60.8	40.3
59	19860809	White	Female	English	2005	67.3	n/a
60	19870630	Coloured	Female	Afrikaans	2005	56.5	35.05
61	19860613	Coloured	Male	English	2004	53.7	32.38

(Source: Stellenbosch University 2007c)

**Addendum B:  
Information sheet and consent form**

**INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM**

**STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY**  
**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

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**TITLE OF STUDY**

Acquiring academic literacy: a case of first-year Extended Degree Programme students at Stellenbosch University

You are asked to participate in a research study that will be investigating how a selected group of students (in this case Extended Degree Programme students) deal with the acquisition of academic literacy in their first-year in the Faculty of Arts. Susan van Schalkwyk, a PhD student in the Faculty of Education is conducting this research towards in fulfilment of the requirements for this qualification. The results will be written up in a PhD thesis and will be used for presentation at a professional congress and for possible research articles. You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you are enrolled as a first-year EDP student in the Arts Faculty at Stellenbosch University.

**1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this research is to investigate how a selected group of first-year students acquire academic literacy in the Faculty of Arts.

**2. PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you would be asked to do the following: Participate in an interview that will probably last between 30 and 45 minutes. This interview will be conducted at a time and place that suit you and will focus on how you have experienced your first-year studies, with a specific focus your written assignments and the challenges that these will have set you. The interview will be audio-taped and the tape-recording will be transcribed for the purposes of analysing what was said.

Select two pieces of written work from designated modules for discussion during the interview. This written work will form part of the discussion during the interview and with your permission, will be photocopied and used as data by the researcher. The researcher will share her comments and suggestions, where relevant, with you. This discussion will have no impact whatsoever on your achieved mark.

**3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

The only potential inconvenience or risk to you will be the time that you may be asked to make available for the interview and the fact that you will be asked to share some of your written work with a third party other than your lecturer/tutor.

**4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Participating in the interview should lead you to reflect on your academic progress and it is envisaged that in discussing your written work you will benefit from additional insights from the researcher.

**5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will not receive any payment for participating in this study.

## **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be linked to you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality of audio-tapes and transcribed data will be maintained in the first instance by only identifying each with a code and date. The master list linking codes with identities will be saved on a personal computer that is protected from direct access by requiring a username and password, to which only one (and not multiple) username has access and that is protected from network access by a firewall maintained by Stellenbosch University's Information Technology division. Confidentiality of the audio-tapes will be further maintained by keeping them locked in a filing cabinet in an office that is always locked when unattended. Only one person (researcher) has access to the keys for this filing cabinet. Electronic and printed transcripts of interviews will be used. Electronic versions will be kept on the computer described above. Printed transcripts, which will also be identified by only a code, will be kept locked in the filing cabinet as described above for the audio-tapes. Your identity will thus remain confidential at all times and nothing that you say during the interview will be reported at any stage in a way that could be linked to you.

Should you be interviewed, you will be welcome to listen to the audio-tape made of your interview. These audio-tapes will not be used for any purpose other than transcription for the study and will be erased once the data has been published in a professional journal. It is intended that the results of this study be made available in a PhD thesis to the examiners concerned. In addition the researcher hopes to present the findings at a professional congress and published in a professional journal. In all cases, the results will be reported in such a way that no information can be linked to you.

## **7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

## **8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATOR**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

- Susan van Schalkwyk (Centre for Teaching and Learning, Room 1007a, House Manewales, 15 Bosman Street, Stellenbosch; email [scvs@sun.ac.za](mailto:scvs@sun.ac.za); tel 021 808 2956).

## **9. RESULTS OF THIS STUDY**

If you decide to participate in this research and would like to see the results of this study, you are welcome to do so. Please indicate this in the space provided at the end of this form.

## **10. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Maryke Hunter-Husselmann at the Unit for Research Development (tel: 808 4623; fax: 808 4537; email: [mh3@sun.ac.za](mailto:mh3@sun.ac.za)).

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE**

\*: *Please delete as applicable*

I (please print) \_\_\_\_\_  
(full names and surname)

have read the information sheet above. I have understood the information provided/would like an Afrikaans version of this form\*. I have had the opportunity to discuss the study and my participation in it with

\_\_\_\_\_  
(*investigator name*)

and to ask questions about the study and my participation in it. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Contact telephone number:**

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to \_\_\_\_\_ [*name of the participant/participant*]  
[He/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in [*Afrikaans/\*English*] and [*no translator was used/this conversation was translated into* \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_].

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Investigator**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT**

I would like to receive a summary of the findings of this study

Yes

No

If you have answered yes above, please complete the information below:

Address (*email or physical*): \_\_\_\_\_

**Addendum C:  
Interview Schedule: Lecturer interviews 2005**

**Pre-interview data:**

Module: .....

Number of students enrolled: .....

No of classes per week: .....

Assessment opportunities:  
.....

.....

(as per module outline)

1. How would you profile a typical first-year student in this module?
2. What do you think has the biggest impact on the success of students in this module?
3. What do you believe is the biggest barrier to student success in this module?
4. How would rate the writing skills of your students?
5. Is there a difference in the writing skills of your Afrikaans versus your English students?
6. How would you describe the role(s) that writing fulfils in your module?
7. How would you define or describe 'academic literacy'?
8. Do you believe that generally your students are academically literate? Give examples of why you believe this to be so or not.
9. What are the academic literacy challenges that students completing this module have to address?
10. Do you believe that this module provides students with opportunities to enhance their academic literacy? If yes, how? If no, why not?

## **Addendum D:**

### **Interview Schedule: Student interviews 2006**

[explain reason for research, give students opportunity to read through information sheet and sign consent form; questions can be used in different order depending on the progression of the discussion]

1. What is the one thing you found most difficult about the change from school to university? [academic]
2. What do you do differently at university [possible prompts: as far as preparation for class/study methods/approaching a task, etc. is concerned] as opposed to school?
3. What caused you to change? [What guided you to change?]
4. How do your lecturers differ from your teachers?
5. How do you study? Is this different from the way you studied at school?
6. Do you study for longer or shorter time than you did at school?
7. How do you go about writing an essay?
8. What do you do when you are asked to describe something in a paragraph question?
9. What do you do when you are asked to explain something in a paragraph question?
10. What do you think is the key feature of an academic piece of writing?
11. How much have you written this semester? [refer to students' examples]
12. What were the most difficult challenges of an academic nature?
13. What was the nature of the different assignments/tasks you received?
14. Do you usually understand the tasks you are given?
15. What about exam and test questions? [share example either from the student's work, or from a fictitious context]
16. What is easier to answer – long questions or short questions or MCQ's? Why?
17. How do you feel about your academic abilities? Which are your strengths – reading, writing, critical thinking, ability to sort data/info?

**Addendum E:**  
**Example of transcribed interview**

**INTERVIEWER:** Mrs Susan van Schalkwyk  
**RESPONDENT:** Lincoln  
**DATE:** 18 April 2007

**INTERVIEWER:** Lincoln, thanks very much for coming, that's the first thing I have to say. So it's good to see you again...

**RESPONDENT:** It's good to see you too.

**INTERVIEWER:** ...and it's really good to see that you've had such a fantastic first year which is, which is amazing, so uhm, the focus of today is really to now reflect back on the first year. [okay]. So you'll remember that when we, when we spoke last year we talked quite a lot about writing and adapting from university to school and all that sort of thing. So today we now, that was almost sort of looking forward to what were your expectations, what did you think was gonna happen and so on, and now we're really having a chance to look back a little bit.

**RESPONDENT:** Right.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, so, I just want to close here. Okay so I've again got a series of questions and I suspect some of them we might sort of answer earlier along the line but we'll sort of try and stick to this, this general outline. And I'd hoped that we'd be two or three students to get a bit of interaction but, okay.

So perhaps I'll start off by asking you, uhm, what was the most valuable lesson that you think you learnt last year?

**RESPONDENT:** Well, uhm...

**INTERVIEWER:** You can think a while.

**RESPONDENT:** I suppose responsibility, uhm, being responsible, taking responsibility for your work, uhm responsibility to be in class, at all times, uhm, ja, that, that's probably one of the main reason that, probably can take out from last year. [uhm, uhm]. And also that, probably that work ethic because it was such a transition [uhm] from, from school, so, it's all about building the character and being responsible for your own actions.

**INTERVIEWER:** Ja, ja. Well then that, I mean that's sort of picks up on, on the third question so we could move to it straight away. Perhaps you can tell me which of your classes last year did you enjoy the most and why? What sort of classes were they, what sort of thing appealed to you?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, I enjoyed Philosophy, I thought the, the lecturer was very good, I thought he knew he..., his stuff but more so he had a, he had a character that, that could, uhm, interact with the audience and we could really follow him because he had that character of, you know attracting a audience, so, uhm, keeping us focused on what he was talking about and that made the subject even more enjoyable. And the other one is Political Science {clears throat} uhm, I really enjoyed political science, perhaps the lecturer wasn't like the Philosophy but all lecturers differs..., differ, but uhm, the work itself I, I just enjoy it. It's, it's what I like and uhm, I want to pursue Political Science. So, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Tell me a little bit about the way they lectured..., wh.. uhm, because as you were saying not everyone's the same.

**RESPONDENT:** Yeah. Uhm... I would say philosophy was, uhm, there was sort of sense of humour, within the, within the lecturer, uhm, the language didn't matter, you know you could follow him, uhm, he, his presence uhm, his loud voice, the voice was important, you know, uhm and, and the way he just communicated with the students,

that that's, that's how you, you can follow a lecturer easier, if, if the lecturer uhm, communicates well with the students.

**INTERVIEWER:** Uhm, uhm Ja... Uhm, did, in any of your classes last year did you find that, uhh, that there was mostly a matter of you sitting as a student or just not you but all the students; but did you find that there was a lot of the lecturer talking and you having to focus on listening, or was, what sort of interaction was happening in the classes?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, he would go about {clears throat} his work, he would start talking about a specific subject or what we would have to do for the day, but in between there, that he, he would throw out questions where students were, had the opportunity to answer him, uhm, obviously time is against us but, the... there was always enough, enough time, there was almost enough opportunities for us to answer him. [Uhm, uhm]. So, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. So wa... he, he did allow for that opportunity [ja, ja] of the question and answer sort of technique? Ja, tell me, did any of your lecturers use PowerPoint?

**RESPONDENT:** Yes, quite often, uhm, most of the time they did, and that's how you basically follow the work, uhm, he would use a PowerPoint and then he'd elaborate on the points where necessary.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, alright. Lincoln tell me a little bit about the English and the Afrikaans in the classroom. Most of your modules, E modules, English modules?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, uhm... Except for Political Science and e\_r, Philosophy, the, the most of them were English, uhm, for me it wasn't really a problem because, uhm, I just came from a school that was bilingual so I was, I could follow the work easily, I could follow the lecturer easily, so uhm, I didn't have a problem, for me, that wasn't the issue, really.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm. You grew up in Franschoek, hey?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** I remember well.

**RESPONDENT:** That's it

**INTERVIEWER:** {laughs} Okay, uhm, right. You've spoken a little bit about the lessons you learnt in terms of, you know, what, what you got out of, of, of the first year. But perhaps, do you think, in your first year you developed any, or required any skills or abilities that you think you didn't have when you arrived here, that you think led to you being successful? Because you were very successful last year.

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, thinking critically was probably one of the big uhm, things that e\_r, I grew into, uhm, able to write well, uhm, I think that was another...; before that my writing skills or the way I wanted to uhm, explain myself, I didn't... I do it with great success but, since I came here last year, uhm, as the year would progressed, my writing skills just became better and better. I could explain myself, a, a lot better as well. [uhm, uhm]. And just to think also and analyse critically, you know, uhm, usually I didn't, uhm, recognise that I would read something but I would just take the information and just take it as truth, like, for instance your newspapers and, your textbooks, but, uhm I was taught throughout the year you just, you know, always question what you read, always, you know, scrutinise. Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, hmm. You gave an example now with the critical thinking and the fact that you scrutinise and question and so on, but you also said that your writing skills developed. {Yeah} Now, what do you think led to that?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, a lot of it owes to, uhm, the EDP degree, a lot of it, we focus quite, quite a lot of our time on just improving our writing, uhm, how, how one should write an essay, you know the, the steps that are necessary, uhm, able to answer what is being asked, not, uhm, going around about it and then coming to the point by getting to

the point specifically...; [uhm] yeah and gathering scientific information, you know, that is necessary to the, to the question.

**INTERVIEWER:** Ja, ja. Okay. Uhm, do you think you had, if you, I mean we know you did Texts in Humanities and you did a lot of written work there, , but in you other modules, in your other first year modules, uhm, what sort of opportunity did you have to actually write, and what sort of feedback did you get on that written work?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm... the things that we had to write about was just, uhm, every, every term you have your, your term essay, uhm, but there wasn't really... Some, some lecturers will give you like steps on how to write an essay [uh-uhm]. They'll tell you what you need, uhm, and others didn't do so, and then the feedback, it was generally, uhm, most of the time you, they'll tell you, you know, this was a good essay perhaps you should concentrate on this area, so there was, uhm, feedback from the tutors in the answering the essays. Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you felt that the feedback you received was, was useful?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** You could do something with it?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. What were, if you can remember perhaps..., a typical sort of bit of feedback that you, was something that came up and that you were able to address or change, can you remember something?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, I think Political Science definitely it was more of, uhm, ja..., 'it was a good essay, but perhaps you should elaborate on a certain issue, perhaps you should gather more information on there'. Because, norm... usually what I do is, I tend to not answer the question fully, you know, I, [okay] I'll, I'll get there and I'll do, I'll, you know, I'll browse about it but, perhaps I'm not, you know...

**INTERVIEWER:** Getting to the heart of the matter?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. Good. Uhm, if you think back of the first year, which, which was a good year for you, uhm, what do you think was the most difficult part of last year? And I'm specifically looking at, from an academic perspective.

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, well, the time which you, you have to complete your, your work, that was probably an adjustment one has to make academically, uhm, you know you have a specific time, but there is so many things that you have to cover, That's probably the main issue, uhm, in terms of difficulty I didn't believe it was that difficult if you did your work properly; if you put in the, enough effort I think you would, you will be quite successful.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, hmm, okay. Uhm... Is there any aspect of any of the first year modules that you did and completed last year that, that you still don't feel confident in, if, if I had to come to you and say to you, you've got to write a three page essay using this, this and that, you know, would that make your heart still feel a little...? Or is there anything of last year that, that you still feel [yeah, I've] you've carried in to the second year with you?

**RESPONDENT:** Yeah probably my, my very first Philosophy module. I just, I never managed to grasp it, uhm, I didn't think, it wasn't necessary the fault of the lecturer or the work itself, uhm, I think the reason why I didn't make that first lecture was uhm, the way the work was put out, uhm, the module, uhm, I've never encountered such, such a module, it was pretty complex, I would say, [hmm] uhm, I've never encountered such a thing and that's probably the, I still carry it today, that's the one I feel I still find difficult to grasp and I'm not sure why, uhm, but I think it's, ja every time I hear of Philosophy 112 {laughs}, I just you know, I just want to turn my back on it, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, now you're redoing that this year?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how's it going now?

**RESPONDENT:** It's going better, it's going better, uhm, because of last year, and I have a background, I could actually focus more on it uhm, I could actually understand what the lecturer's saying, uhm, I think that, that was key. Last year it was, uhm...

**INTERVIEWER:** Not sure?

**RESPONDENT:** Not quite sure [ja] but this year I could follow him and then I could go back to the notes and I could pick up what he said and, and follow it on the notes as well.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, hmm. Lincoln when we spoke last year, and even now, we sort of hinted at the fact that one has to change when you come to university, but you come to university with your own personality, with your own identity and we all do, we go into any new – when I came to work here at the centre two years ago I came with an identity {telephone ringing} that was my own, that was different and you come, we all come to a university setting with a different identity... Uhm, to what extent do you think now, being able to look back on your first year and even somewhat into your second year, to what extent do you think you're required to change who you are, to become part of the system, or, are you, do you feel that you still are able to stay Lincoln and to look at things from where you come from and where you, you know, the way you approach life, how do, how do you feel about that?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, for me I think I, ah, I could still maintain my old identity if you can say. Uhm, for me to, it wasn't a, a mountain or a huge obstacle to, to adjust to Stellenbosch that much, uhm, yeah, there are you know different people from, e\_r, from all over the place, but uhm, for people like myself you know there, there's every - like the Afrikaans issue that for them it's an issue but for me it's, it was never an issue because I grew up in, and went to a school where there were both Afrikaans and English and black and white, so for me it wasn't a mission to adjust to Stellenbosch, ja I could get on with things.

But perhaps the only obstacle was the adjustment from school to university, that was probably the big obstacle [hmm, ja] but in terms of, uhm, getting on with people or feeling uncomfortable around certain people for me that wasn't an issue. [uhm, uhm uhm]. Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** One thing that usually characterises the first year, that makes the first year difficult for a lot of students is the fact that they really have to get used to a whole new language [Yeah] the terms, the concepts, the, the way people talk about things and, and that can differ from Philosophy to Political Science [ja] to Psychology to computers, even. [Yeah] Uhm, to what extent do you think you've become part of the world of the Political Science, or the world of the Philosopher?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm..., well..., Political Science especially, uhm, I think e\_r..., it just, it gives, Political Science just gives me a greater understanding of how the world works and how I can, I myself can, uhm, influence or be part of this world language and this world system and it's, it's made me, uhm, see things in a different perspective [uhm], uhm, able to understand things better, not fully but grasping things every day, uhm, and Philosophy also it just teaches you to, to think in a different way, you know, uhm, like economists think differently, so do philosophers and Political Science think differently and, and I think that's what it's, it's taught me to, to be able to think in a unique way [uhm, uhm] Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, hmm... Did any of your first year modules have tutorials?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Smaller groups? [Ja] Which ones? [Uhm...] I know English, hey?

**RESPONDENT:** English.

**INTERVIEWER:** I know English works on that system.

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, I think Afrikaans was like that [okay], Philosophy and Political Science...

**INTERVIEWER:** So, so there were - apart from the big lectures there were the {smaller} smaller groups {yeah} as well?

**RESPONDENT:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And uhm, to what extent did you find that students participated and engaged to feel, joeg (exclamation), [yeah, yeah] there's really something happening here...?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja ja, ja the tutorials just uhm, uhm gets a (inaudible) of nervousness uhm, off your shoulder. In lectures you feel you, you can't answ... or ask this question 'cause you feel you might be stupid, but in smaller groups you, you just have a greater confidence to ask that question and, and, and the lecturer, in the tutorials just concentrates on you, you feel you, you are more important than say in the bigger lecture, ja, [ja] the attention is, is on you and, and the people around you, so, it's sort of easier to come out of your skin, basically.

**INTERVIEWER:** Ja, ja... Okay so you actually had lecturers running some of the tutorials?

**RESPONDENTS:** Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, okay, good, that's nice. Right, let's, let's think a little bit about the first- the second year now. Uhm, we spoke about the challenges of the first year and the things that you've learn..., adapted and changed and so on, uhm, you're now already almost at the end of your first semester of the second year [Yeah]. Did the second year present you with any new challenges? And if so, you know what, what were they? What was different? Or is it just more of the same?

**RESPONDENT:** In most areas more of the same, but there was sort of uhm, second year, it's, well second year, it's, it's..., it's slightly different to first year, 'cause you've now settled down, uhm, you know how things operate, so you, you can get on with things a lot better, but modules such as Political Science, uhm, go up a different level now, this is [okay] in terms of first year, the first year was more of a basics and [ja, ja] knowing how things operate but here it's, it's really more intense, more complex, and e\_r, ja, it, it's things that you could say you can, could apply outside in the world [uhm, uhm] at this very minute, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Good, okay. Uhm, a couple of more specific questions now, uhm, to do with specific aspects is, how important was reading in the first year? Any sort of reading? Did you, how much time did you spend reading? What were you reading?

**RESPONDENT:** Reading is, is imperative, it really is, it, uhm, the more you read uhm, the easier things, you make things easier for yourself, uhm, for my instance I, I started engaging in, in more newspapers, uhm, reading the front part of the newspapers instead of the back pages (laughing)...

**INTERVIEWER:** Instead of the sport pages, ja, okay.

**RESPONDENT:** Ja [laughing] Uhm, being able to, uhm, understand the world, uhm, even story books, uhm, I read a couple of novels for English, it, uhm, reading just makes things a lot easier, uhm, it, it place, uhm, you become more comfortable once you know how to read and (bell ringing), ja, given reading in a specific way.

**INTERVIEWER:** Ja. Good. How would you describe academic writing, if you had to explain to someone in, in your old high school, if you had to go back there and tell the Grade 11's and 12's, guys you're gonna (sic) do academic writing, what will you tell them what's different?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, it begins with the {clears throat} with the question itself, uhm, it, being able to interpret the question properly, being able to go out there and gather information, that is necessary for the question, uhm, uhm, having a unique approach in terms of how you set your paper up, uhm, importance of, of having that relationship between the introduction and the body and the, and the conclusion. How all these things work in a chain, uhm, I think in school you, you could dawdle a bit, you know, but here you can't really dawdle, you have to be specific, you have to be to a point and, uhm, ja,

you, uhm, even your sentence construction has to be up to scratch and the right language needs to be used and all those things [uhm, uhm] the detail is more important now [uhm, uhm] Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** And issues around plagiarism and [ja, ja] that sort of thing?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, as well, plagiarism, the importance of acknowledging someone else's work, uhm, I'm able to also, uhm put in your own ideas I think encourages one to bring up his own ideas with this plagiarism thing [uhmm]so e\_r, it gives you room for growth.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yes. Nice, nice, okay. Good! How many written assignments did you complete last year?

**RESPONDENT:** Quite a lot {laughs}

**INTERVIEWER:** Is it, you, you had a lot of...?

**RESPONDENT:** Quite a lot.

**INTERVIEWER:** You did a lot of writing? Okay, alright no that's... Uhm, what was, what would be an average length?

**RESPONDENT:** Hmm, about three pages.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. Typed?

**RESPONDENT:** Typed.

**INTERVIEWER:** Three typed pages?

**RESPONDENT:** Three typed pages, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** So what's that, maybe about six hundred, nine hundred words?

**RESPONDENT:** Nine hundred to...

**INTERVIEWER:** A thousand...

**RESPONDENT:** ... a thousand two hundred words. Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay, all right that's it, so okay. And let's then think a little bit about exams, uhm, your exams at the end of last year, you would've written, ja, probably in Political Science, Philosophy, uhm, English Studies, was there an exam at the end of the year?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. Uhm, and Taalverwerwing?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was there, was there, so then you wrote quite a few exams at the end of last year? Uhm, tell me a little bit about the sort of questions that were asked in the exams. {Uhm...} Monkey puzzles, long, short, paragraphs...

**RESPONDENT:** For the languages it, there was uhm, a "begripstoets" or it...?

**INTERVIEWER:** Comprehension tests.

**RESPONDENT:** Comprehension tests, ja [okay] uhm, true and false questions, uhm they were often asked, uhm, cartoons were, were often used in, in the languages...

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh, in the languages?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Oh okay. And what would they make you do with the cartoons?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, they'll just, you know they'll just put a couple of characters and each of them have something to say and then from there onwards you will have to answer what, what does he mean by this word or they'll highlight a word and you have to give them an explanation of this word, or what does she mean when she says this [okay] and so forth. Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** All right. And how was Political Science and Philosophy examined?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, they were different, you had to be, you had to know your, your definitions pretty well, uhm, we wrote a couple of essays in the exams as well so you have to study a specific uhm, section of the book, depending on which question you, which section you find easy and comfortable, so, from that point of view it was more essay, [okay you concentrate more on essays.

**INTERVIEWER:** Not multiple choice, then?

**RESPONDENT:** No, no not... multiple choice.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. Uhm, the one subject that we haven't really spoken about at all was, was the Computer Skills. Uhm were you computer literate, fairly, when you arrived? Or...

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, ja, uhm it was part of this compulsory at school that we took [okay] took the computer courses.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you feel about that course? It's one of those irritating six credit courses [Ja] that most people don't want to do.

**RESPONDENT:** Ja, I als... I felt that as well, uhm, toward... there was, you know there was a lack of interest in it, uhm, uhm, to be honest, uhm, it wasn't really exciting like any, any of the other subjects, it, and the things we did, didn't pose such a challenge, uhm and, because it doesn't pose such a challenge you just don't give your time and your all to it [uhm, uhm] all to it as much. And it was very similar to the things I did at, at school as well, so [okay] but perhaps I can understand for people who have never sat in front of a computer, [uhm. Uhm] that that they should do such a thing.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, hmm. They've been talking about doing, like, pre-testing and students who have, you know for example if you, they take them at the end of the year exam and you do it at the start of the year and you pass it you don't have to go and do [yeah] Information Skills or something like that. How, how, would you think that would be an effective way of doing it? Or...

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, yes and no. Yes perhaps you could pick up uhm, yes, because uhm, maybe some people are already advanced and they're really comfortable and know, know how they're doing [uhm] and no maybe because, uhm, perhaps there are some new things you know, technology's always changing, something new is coming out so perhaps there's something that, that they could pick up and find useful {bell ringing}.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, hmm. [Ja]. When you handed in an assignment, or you know, you said a three pager or something [Ja] uhm, were you given specific guidelines usually, in terms of how it should be, from a computer point of view, you know how it should be set out and so on, font sizes, and all that sort of thing, or...

**RESPONDENT:** Yeah, uhm... It was more about the font size and the line spacing and that's, that's what they mainly concentrated on, in terms of uhm, ja they also spoke about contents pages and, and [okay] how to set out the bibliography, [uhm] {bell ringing} so they did give us quite a background on what to do.

**INTERVIEWER:** Good guidelines... Ja, ja. Okay. Right, uhm, how often did you visit the library last year, can you remember? Was it so many times that you can't remember or [ja, ja] was it like once off that you remember the day in {laughing} August when it rained and that sort of thing?

**RESPONDENT:** No, I, I visited the library quite often [okay]. Uhm, I'd go to the computer room or I'd just go to read the paper. [Uhm.} Or I'd get, get information for my next assignment [uhm] Ja so I'm there pretty much all the time [oh okay] Yeah.

**INTERVIEWER:** All right. But you do live off campus, hey?

**RESPONDENT:** Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** So, uhm, that also [yeah] sometimes it's a nice place to be able to [yeah, yeah] get all your work done and that sort of thing. Okay. Uhm, to what extent have you been required to do any online searches for academic articles, or pieces of

writing or, uhm, where have you, if, for, for doing your assignments, for example, where did you get most of your information from?

**RESPONDENT:** Uhm, most if it came from, from the books that I, I, I took out from the library [okay, so...]. Ja, and then a couple Internet sources, uhm, as well, but ja, the bulk of it was from the, from the books. Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** From the books. Okay, so you, you're like me, you're say a book person. [ja, ja]. {Laughter} Okay, I can relate to that, absolutely. Okay, really just the last questions, what extent is WebCT part and parcel of being a student at university, do you think? [uhm...]. How important was it in the modules that you did last year?

**RESPONDENT:** I could, very important, er, that's where I got all my notes and my updates on tests and, and, and assignments and, uhm, there you also communicate with the lecturer as well, so, it's, it's also an imperative part of the whole student, uhm, lecturer uhm] uhm, relationship, yeah, so I, I think it's [uhm] important and it should continue to do, to do so [okay] Ja.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think the student arriving here, who's not computer literate, don't you think it must be kind of tough for them? Or, how quickly do you, I mean you must've watched the other students, they've gotten on really quickly or...?

**RESPONDENT:** Yeah, yeah, ja, for the, for those who haven't, haven't got a computer background it is, it is pretty tricky, it's always tricky and er, uhm, 'cause you're first year you're nervous and you don't wanna (sic) sound stupid in front of others or you don't want to ask other people and uhm, it's very, it's very difficult to adapt, but once you get hold of the things very, it's very easy to follow.

**INTERVIEWER:** Hmm, okay. Thank you Lincoln.

## Addendum F: Sample of field notes from class observation

**Class visit:** 24 October 2006 (11:00 – 11:50)  
**Class:** *Texts in the Humanities 133*  
 English group

**Other:** 8 students present (2 absent)  
 Students conducted presentations on this day.  
 6 students presented

Observable features	Comments
Body language (NB eye contact; facial expressions)	Diversity in attitudes. 1 student makes no eye contact except when directly encouraged to participate/comment on presentation 4 students very laid back 3 students appear more focussed 2 students have no books/papers in front of them (until lecturer hands out assessment grid so that they can participate in the evaluation of the different presentations)
Student participation	Good as the lecturer encourages all to participate and selects different students to provide feedback for the different presentations 2 students not keen to participate
Role of lecturer	Facilitator (particularly because this is presentation day) Lecturer has very motherly approach to students (caring and supportive) – students appear to respond to this participating when asked even if they are not keen Preps class well, encourages them to critique the assessment grid and discuss what they understand under each of the different criteria
Students fluency (tone and register)	Two of the students are fluent in their presentations One student is very difficult to understand and has no logic in presentation Other presentations all fairly well-signposted, good structure Students all select topics related to their mainstream module [was this part of the instructions?]
Physical situation	Small seminar room. Tables in u-shape facing front of room which has a whiteboard, overhead projector and screen. Students place themselves fairly evenly around the room. Genders are grouped together

### Progression of the class:

11:00 Class takes some time to settle down. Tension in advance of presentations is clear. Students ignore me.

11:05 Class starts officially. Lecturer explains why I am there.  
 Lecturer reminds them of the focus of the day. Presentation assessment grids are handed out and discussed. This takes about 5 minutes. Students comment on how they have interpreted the instructions for the presentations.

11:13 After some discussion as to who will go first, first student presents. Student very well spoken. Presentation is well signposted. He includes his own views, critiquing what he is sharing. 2 students make notes while he talks.

11:19 Class gives feedback. One student has been designated. Three other students also respond using handout as guideline. Lecturer summarises feedback and shares her own comments. Next student starts – seems eager to present now that the ice has been broken.

[cont.]

**Addendum G:  
Task for students' reflective writing exercises**

**Reflective writing exercise**

[your responses to this exercise will form part of the formal evaluation of the *Texts in the Humanities* module]

You are required to write a short piece (300 – 350 words) entitled:

***Texts in the Humanities: my expectations and some early observations.***

What were your initial expectations for this module?

How did you feel about having to attend it as part of your Extended Degree Programme commitments?

How do you feel now that you have completed your first few weeks?

The above questions are prompts to get you thinking as you plan and then write this short piece. The idea is that you should reflect on how you felt at the start of the year and what you have experienced since then.

Your work will be assessed as follows:

Addresses the topic	10
Clear, logical discussion	10
Length	5
Language (grammar and spelling)	5
Style and presentation	<u>5</u>
	<b>35</b>

## Addendum H: Sample of students' written work

### Texts in the humanities

As a student that is taking a course the focuses a lot on reading and writing, I am hoping that the texts in the humanities will help me improve on this.

When I started at the university I was very confronted in my writing skills. This was something that I didn't have a problem with in high school, but unfortunately, I have discovered it is not the same here at the university. My writing pieces were given back with lower marks than I expected. I do feel however that these lectures are slowly helping me to improve my assignments. I am hoping that they will continue to help me, and show me the correct way to do all of these assignments.

I have found that the texts in humanities has helped me with my studying. For instance, I wrote a psychology test, and had large amounts of work to learn, the texts in the humanities class taught me how to mind map correctly in order to help minimise all of this written work.

I definitely think that the class given on the proper way to write a bibliography will help as this is obviously going to be very important, with all of the university assignment.

Another class that I enjoyed was when we did the VARK Test, this is also important, because it will help us to improve the weaker areas in our learning skills.

The only problem that I am having is that I don't feel as if I am improving quick enough, I have been noticing changes in the way that I do my written work and studying, but I would obviously like to see these changes happening faster.

I am enjoying the texts in humanities classes, I find them interesting, and I definitely think in the long run they will be beneficial, with helping improve the way that we do all of our work.

**Addendum I:**

**Interview schedule: Student interviews 2007**

**[interviews conducted with EDP students in their second year]**

[students will initially be asked to talk a little bit about what they are doing, how the first year went, which modules they are registered for, etc. – in general terms (ice-breaker)]

1. What was the most valuable lesson that you learnt in your first-year?
2. Share some of the skills/abilities that you believe you acquired during your first-year that might lead to academic success. What led to you acquiring them?
3. Describe the sort of classes that you enjoyed most in your first-year. Why?
4. What were the most difficult aspects of the first-year (from an academic perspective) for you?
5. Is there an aspect of the first-year modules that you completed last year that you still don't feel confident in?
6. What do you think you do differently/better now than you did in your first-year? What caused you to change?
7. Has the 2<sup>nd</sup> year presented you with new challenges? What are they?
8. How important was reading in your first-year? Give examples of the sort of reading that you were required to do?
9. How would you describe Academic Writing?
10. How many written assignments did you complete last year? What was the nature of the assignments?
11. What was the most difficult aspect of the exams at the end of last year? Do you think this will be better this year? Why?
12. How often did you visit the library in 2006?

**Addendum J:  
Coding categories per data source**

<b>Lecturer interviews (Table 6.1)</b>	<b>ABQ responses (see 6.2.2.1)</b>	<b>Module outlines (see 6.2.2.2; Table 6.2)</b>	<b>Students' paragraphs (Table 6.4 &amp; 6.5)</b>	<b>Student interviews (Table 6.6)</b>	<b>Classroom observation (Table 6.7)</b>	<b>Follow-up student interviews (Table 6.10)</b>
Student profile (LI1)	Background (ABQ1)	Teaching and learning activities (M1)	Expectations of the module <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive expectations (SE1)</li> <li>▪ Negative expectations (SE2)</li> <li>▪ Uncertain as to what to expect (SE3)</li> <li>▪ Incorrect expectations (SE4)</li> </ul>	Student identity (SI1)	Student engagement (CO1)	Student attitudes (FI1)
Expectations (LI2)	Schooling experience (ABQ2)	Academic discourse (M2)	Impressions of the module <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Positive impressions (SP1)</li> <li>▪ Negative impressions (SP2)</li> <li>▪ Mixed impressions (SP3)</li> <li>▪ Shift from initial expectations (SP4)</li> </ul>	Student attitudes (SI2)	Language proficiency (CO2)	Differences between 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> year (FI2)
Contributors to student success (LI3)	Perceptions of their abilities (ABQ3)	Expectations (M3)		School versus university (SI3)	Perceived attitudes (CO3)	Success factors (FI3)

<b>Lecturer interviews (Table 6.1)</b>	<b>ABQ responses (see 6.2.2.1)</b>	<b>Module outlines (see 6.2.2.2; Table 6.2)</b>	<b>Students' paragraphs (Table 6.4 &amp; 6.5)</b>	<b>Student interviews (Table 6.6)</b>	<b>Classroom observation (Table 6.7)</b>	<b>Follow-up student interviews (Table 6.10)</b>
Institutional factors (LI5)		Assessment (M5) (see also Table 6.8 & 6.9)		Student learning (SI5)	Role of lecturer (CO5)	Academic activities (FI5)
Language issues (LI6)				Academic writing (SI6)		Extent of development (FI6)
Understanding of academic literacy (LI7)				Expectations (SI7)		
Opportunities to enhance academic literacy (LI8)						

**Addendum K:  
Clusters and themes for Level Two presentation of the data**

	<b>Clusters</b>		<b>Themes</b>
1.	The students	A B C D	Identities (LI1; ABQ1; SI1; also data from SIS) Attitudes to university (LI2; SI2; FI1; CO3) Perceptions and expectations (ABQ3; ABQ4; SI7; SE1; SE2; SE3; SE4) Lecturers' impressions (LI2)
2.	The academic experience	A B C	Different from school (SI3) Academic challenges (SI5; FI2; SP4) Study methods (SI5; CO4; ABQ2)
3.	Academic activities	A B C D	The role of the lecturer (SI4; CO5; FI5) Opportunities for engagement (M1; M4; SI4; CO1; FI5) The role of technology (ABQ3; SI4; FI5) Assessment (M5; SI4; FI5 also Table 6.8 & 6.9)
4.	Student academic development	A B C	Academic support (SP4; SI4; FI3; CO5) Success factors (ABQ2; SP1; SP4; SI5; FI3) Barriers to success (LI4; FI4)
5.	Academic literacy	A B C	Understanding of academic literacy (LI7; M3; FI6) Academic discourse (M2; LI3; SI6; FI3; FI5) Academic writing (LI8; M3; SI6; FI3; FI4; FI6)
6.	The institution	A B C	Institutional culture (LI5; SI2) Impact on teaching and learning (LI5; SI4) Language of teaching and learning (LI6; SI4; CO2; FI5)