Chapter 1

Psycho-Social Factors, Student Retention and Attrition

This chapter introduces the broad issues related to student success and attrition in tertiary study, and establishes psycho-social factors as important contributors to academic success.

1.1 Significance of Student Retention and Attrition

The issue of student success and retention in tertiary studies is of considerable interest to academics, education policy makers, student support personnel, tax-payers and students themselves. In an era of funding constraints and greater demands for accountability, when Australian universities are facing changes to the delivery of education, along with increasing corporatisation and privatisation, understanding of the factors associated with successful student performance is more relevant than ever. Coping and adjustment to tertiary study has emerged as one of the personal factors associated with successful academic performance.

The growth in student enrolments in Australian tertiary education is one of the highest growth rates in recent years of any OECD country (DETYA, 1997). Between 1983 and 1995, undergraduate enrolment rates in universities increased by 60%. A recent thematic review of twelve countries on first years of tertiary education (OECD, 1998) with Australia being the first country to be reviewed gives an indication of the
increased interest in the early years of tertiary study. The OECD (1998) review notes that, “the university is no longer seen as a remote place where students acquire or add to academic and professional qualifications: it is a major force in economic development, in the advancement of knowledge in all its forms and in the advancement of a group, regional and national culture.” (p.5)

As initial enrolments of students have been increasing, so has the concern about the high proportion of students who do not actually graduate from their courses. The issue of student attrition is of concern not only for governments and universities but for students as well. The considerable economic costs to universities of early withdrawals has been described as ‘economically inefficient’ (Johnes, 1990). For students, the investment in a tertiary education is a costly exercise, not only in university and Higher Education Contribution fees, but also in the time and energy investment that is required and in the loss of potential earning while students are studying. Furthermore, failure in tertiary study often leaves drop-out students with reduced vocational and career opportunities, along with a decreased sense of self-esteem and self-confidence.

With the current interest in performance-based funding, it has been suggested that funding for undergraduate students may be linked to successful completion of courses. The Higher Education Council has examined the incidence and scope of performance-based funding and in identifying new priorities for Higher Education management, Dobson, Sharma and Haydon (1996) proposed that student “quality” as measured by academic success could become an important factor in university funding policy in the future. In fact, the Government is in the process of establishing a body to oversee quality issues in universities and has recently released its innovation package, Backing Australia’s Ability, which lists good retention, progress rates and successful completions.
of degrees as performance criteria. In light of these shifts to measuring outcomes and gaining increased efficiencies, various tertiary institutions have investigated student progress rates through their university courses and measured graduation unit costs.

1.2 Graduation Rates

A recent Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA, 1999) study, which tracked 120,000 undergraduate students who started university in 1992, found that 40% had not completed their degree after five years. One third had not completed an award and were not studying at the institution of enrolment, while 6% were still enrolled in a course. These figures are similar to previous research (West, Hore, Bennie, Browne and Kermond, 1986) which found that two thirds of full-time Australian university students who began a course went onto graduate from that course. According to OECD data, Australian course completion rates for first degrees are roughly similar to the US (63%), but lower than those for the UK (81%), and Japan (90%).

These broader figures on graduation rates highlight the importance of identifying students at risk, and of finding further ways to reduce student attrition rates and develop strategies to enhance student performance.

1.3 Who is most at risk?

Gender has emerged as one of the significant factors associated with differences in academic performance. Male, part-time, older, and disadvantaged students, as well as those with lower university entry marks are at higher risk of dropping out of university according to the DEETYA (1999) study. While 64% of female students completed their degree after five years, only 55% of male students achieved the same.
These figures are consistent with another large study on the academic performance of 10,000 students at the University of Wollongong between 1990-1993 (Lewis, 1994). One of the most robust findings in this study was that females perform at a higher standard than males. The difference between males and females is large in first year and this gap widens in subsequent years of study. This gap is consistent across all modes of entry and after controlling for other explanatory variables. Amongst the subgroups of school leavers and non-school leavers, females achieve significantly better results in both groups. Even in fields of study not traditional for women, females consistently achieve better results than men. Amongst non-school leavers, age was also related to better performance with older students doing better than younger non-school leavers.

Other universities have identified similar patterns of at risk students. At the University of New South Wales (1994) student progress rates were consistently much higher for female students than male students. Even when males and females of similar tertiary entrance ranking (TER) are compared, females perform better than males across all TER rankings. As the tertiary entrance scores decrease, the gap between female and male performance consistently increases, indicating that females with low TER most strongly outperform their male counterparts. This suggests that more than academic potential contributes to successful student performance.

At the University of Western Sydney, females outperformed males in their academic achievement and conversely, male attrition rates were higher (27.5%) than for females (24.4%). Overall, those who performed well in first year had lower attrition rates, though interestingly, there were exceptions. Students from non-English speaking
backgrounds had poorer performance levels than students from English speaking backgrounds but had lower attrition rates (Jorgensen and Spalding 1995).

Other studies showed females also had higher levels than males for academic orientation and academic application. Females had a slightly stronger sense of purpose and tended to be more satisfied with their courses (McInnes and James, 1995). Differences related to age were also apparent where students aged 19 years and under were significantly less academically orientated, and showed significantly lower levels of application to their study than older aged students. Students aged 20 years and over had a stronger sense of purpose for being at university and not surprisingly, were less influenced by the expectations of their parents.

Looking more specifically at attrition statistics in undergraduate studies at the Queensland University of Technology, where this current research was conducted, males, part-time and commencing students were found to be most at risk of dropping out of their course. In a worrying trend in Table 1.1, the course attrition index has been steadily rising since 1991.

Table 1.1 Student Attrition at QUT 1991-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
<th>Commencing</th>
<th>Continuing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>24.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student success can be examined from a different angle through Student Progress Rates, which indicates the rate at which subjects are passed and students are maintaining their expected workload. Of students that remain enrolled at university, their rate of progress through their course varies considerably. Table 1.2 shows that although these figures have remained at similar rates over a six-year period, there are noticeably marked differences for gender, with females progressing through their course at a faster rate than males. Also full-time students have better progress rates than part-time students. Similarly, continuing students have a higher progress rate than commencing students, which is consistent with the findings of student adjustment research, that attrition rates are far higher for commencing students (DETYA, 1999).

Table 1.2 Student Progress Rate at QUT 1993-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
<th>Commencing</th>
<th>Continuing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>91.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>89.8</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>87.1</td>
<td>90.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>91.8</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>90.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>89.3</td>
<td>87.9</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>90.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>89.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, this student data raises the first important research question: what accounts for these significant gender differences in progress rates, course completion rates and academic achievement? Psychologists and student support staff at universities are concerned about the social and psychological factors that play a role in promoting student success. Clearly, the evidence suggests that more than academic potential accounts for success in university studies.
1.4 Psycho-Social Factors Associated with Student Attrition

There have been numerous studies into the multifarious factors associated with persistence in and attrition from tertiary studies (Tindle, 1997). The reasons for student attrition are complex and the evidence indicates that both institutional and student characteristics have an impact on student attrition. These range from individual and personal characteristics; cognitive factors; academic background and skills; psycho-social adjustment and social integration; to institutional and environmental variables. The current research focuses on psycho-social variables and their relationship to academic performance.

Prior school performance has been shown to be a poor predictor of academic success at university (Clarke and Ramsay, 1990; Findlay, 1990; Johnes, 1990; Pantages and Creedon, 1978; Stanley, 1971). Early studies found that academic performance explained no more than half the variance in drop-out decisions (Pantages and Creedon, 1978). Cognitive variables, such as high school grades, class ranking and standardised aptitude test scores accounted for an average of 22 to 35% of variance in academic outcome. In Findlay’s study, only a 0.3 correlation was found between prior academic achievement at school and subsequent university examination results at the end of first year. Johnes (1990) concluded that the results of first year examinations are a far better predictor of non-completion than the results of school examinations. However, unlike these previous studies, data from the DETYA (1999) study indicates that prior academic performance as measured by the Tertiary Entrance Ranking is a significant predictor of course completion. Nevertheless, with 40% to 78% of the variance left unexplained, psycho-social variables warrant further investigation as a means for further enhancing student success in tertiary study.
1.5 Stress and Students

In this section, the types of psycho-social stressors affecting students will be identified and their effects on students' adjustment, health and well-being will be discussed. In particular, the relationships amongst the three variables of student stress, general psycho-social well-being and academic performance will be explored. Chapter 2 will examine the specific findings relating student coping to academic performance.

There have been many studies into the types of stressors affecting university students. Following are three examples of such studies. A comparison of stressors experienced by students in 1985 and 1993 found many similarities, as well as some differences (Murphy, 1996). Current students experience more demands due to shrinking campus resources, as well as increased pressure from a competitive job market.

Further evidence comes from a recent Cambridge university study by Surtees (c.f.Cotter and Morphet, 2000) which surveyed a representative sample of 1,500 students between 1995 and 1999. In terms of non-academic stressors, financial and romantic problems were most cited, followed by relationship with parents, a lack of friends or health worries. One in twenty reported having suicidal ideation. The study also examined the links between stress and academic performance. Although 60% of differences in academic performance can be attributed to subject choice and academic factors, the author concluded that stress was the most important explanation for the remaining difference in degree performance.

In a study examining sources of stress amongst college students, Ross, Niebling and Heckett (1999) identified intrapersonal stressors most often (38%), followed by
environmental stressors (28%), and interpersonal stressors (19%), while academic stressors were the least reported (15%). The top five sources of intrapersonal stressors were changes in sleeping habits; vacations/breaks; changes in eating habits; increased workload; and new responsibilities. Financial difficulties and change in social activities were also frequently reported.

Some authors have argued that university students are especially vulnerable to experiencing the effects of stressful processes because as a group they are experiencing social, emotional, psychological and academic developmental transition (Cohen, 1997). It is common for students to question their relationships, direction in life and self worth when making a major transition in life (Chickering, 1969). University students, especially those in first year, are a group prone to stress (D’Zurilla and Sheedy, 1991) due to these transition and adjustment issues. Also, first-year students experienced more chronic stress (defined as the persistence of a stressor for at least a month) than other students (Towbes and Cohen, 1996). Further studies have found high rates of emotional distress amongst college students (Scher, Wood and Gotham, 1996). In addition, college students report high levels of self-perceived trauma with 42% reporting such traumatic events as car accidents, harassment and death (Oswalt and Silberg, 1995). The authors estimate that 6% of these traumatic events would meet diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

There is a considerable body of evidence that the social adjustment of students may also be as important as academic factors in predicting persistence (Mallinckrodt, 1988; Tindle, 1997). In their longitudinal study of student retention, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found that emotional and social adjustment predicted attrition as well as or better than academic adjustment. Social integration into student and campus life has also been
shown to be associated with successful completion of studies (Allen and Nelson, 1989; Bers and Smith, 1991; Stage, 1989; Terenzini and Wright, 1987). Important aspects of social adjustment include: becoming integrated into the social life of university; forming a support network; managing new social freedoms; and dealing with homesickness and loneliness (Bennett and Okinaka, 1990; Rotenberg and Morrison, 1993; Rich and Scovel, 1987; Hays and Oxley, 1986).

Similarly, according to Johnson (1994) a student’s psychological state (which included problems such as: integrating into the social life on campus; crises such as homesickness and loneliness; financial hardship; anxiety; low self esteem and depression; lack of motivation; and marital and family conflicts) was the variable most strongly associated with student-initiated withdrawal from university. Other studies have also associated psychological variables of approach/avoidance behaviours (Eaton and Bean, 1995) with student departure. More evidence associates the influence of marital conflict between students’ parents, and conflicted, over-involved or poor attachment relations between the student and their parents as having a negative impact on a broad range of coping factors, including personal and social adjustment (Hoffman and Weiss, 1987; Lopez, Campbell and Watkins, 1988); academic adjustment (Lapsley, Rice and Fitzgerald, 1990); social skills and psychological health (Kenny and Donaldson, 1991).

Several researchers have sought to find a relationship between stressful life events and a number of health-related outcomes. The detrimental effects of stress on health have been documented (Zakowski, Hal and Baum, 1992). Poor personal and emotional adjustment may be manifested as global psychological distress, somatic distress, anxiety, low self esteem, or depression. The following are a few examples from the
large number of such investigations. A study by Damush, Hays and DiMatteo (1997) found that college students who experienced distressing life events also reported greater anxiety, bodily pain, or depression, which was associated with having a lower sense of belonging; and less positive affect; as well as, poorer social functioning; worse health perceptions; and poorer cognitive functioning. Further, Jung (1993) found a direct relationship between worry level in college students and the amount of psychological symptoms they experienced. Worry has been commonly associated with anxiety and tension, as well as unpleasant physical symptoms such as fatigue and headaches. In addition, high levels of stress have been associated with increased feelings of loneliness and nervousness, as well as insomnia and excessive worrying (Wright, 1967). The amount of stress experienced may reduce the problem-solving abilities of students (D’Zurilla and Heedy, 1991).

Other studies have found that psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety are commonly associated with stress (Simons, Gordon, Munroe and Thase, 1995). Depression is the most commonly observed psychiatric disorder among college students (Sherer, 1985; Vredenburg, O’Brien and Kramer, 1988). Anxiety has been found to predispose students to drop out of university (Pappas and Loring, 1985). Examining stress levels, affect and health related behaviours, Weidner, Dotzauer and Burns (1996) found that at times of high stress, negative affect increased while positive affect decreased, along with deteriorating health behaviours.

1.6 Students’ Reasons Given for Withdrawal From University

In the following section, the student attrition research will be reviewed, as the reasons cited by students when withdrawing from their studies suggest a number of important psycho-social stressors. Attrition from tertiary study can occur in a number of
ways either through involuntary academic dismissal (or academic exclusion), permanent voluntary withdrawal or temporary voluntary withdrawal/change (Power, Robertson and Beswick, 1986). Academic exclusions result from students’ consistent failure to perform in academic tasks to the required level. Students may withdraw temporarily from their studies in order to meet their commitments such as pregnancy or financial problems (Kalsner, 1991). Voluntary withdrawals from university involves students who are no longer interested in completing an educational course in the immediate future (Kalsner, 1991) with some of these students resuming their studies at a later date. There is some evidence to suggest that discontinuing students have the same problems as persisting students (Hayes, 1977). Students who persisted in their course but had at times considered withdrawing, gave the same patterns of reasons for considering withdrawal as did discontinuing students. However, Hayes did find that, compared to persisting students, discontinuing students lacked strong long-term goals, which required university attendance for their implementation.

Numerous studies have been conducted to elicit from withdrawing students their reasons for leaving tertiary study. Clearly, withdrawing students perceive a number of non-academic factors as impacting on them and their decision to leave. In a self-report survey of 1000 first year students (West, Hore, Bennie, Browne and Kermond, 1986): 43% cited course related difficulties such as poor course choice, lack of relevance, lack of academic preparedness, alienation and disenchantment with the institution, or a lack of support, care and enthusiasm from the institution; 24% had financial difficulties or trouble finding a job; 15% were tired of study and needed a break; 12% cited health problems and chance events as the cause; 6% had trouble juggling family commitments and demands.
A University of Western Sydney, Macarthur study of student withdrawals (Grierson and Parr, 1994) found that male students were more likely to cite practical problems (distance and travel to university); course related difficulty (failure, could not organise study time); and social problems (lack of social and sporting facilities, no close friends and support) as their reasons for withdrawing from university. Female students were more likely to cite course problems (course did not match description in course outline); family responsibilities and lack of family support; lack of child care and facilities for students with disabilities; and poor health.

At James Cook University students identified employment, personal, financial, and family problems as leading to withdrawal or considering withdrawal from their courses (Promnitz and Germain, 1996). Students reported the following kinds of problems as affecting their performance: employment (not coping with full-time work and study, loss of job resulting in reduced finances); personal issues (needing a break, resolving role conflict, tired of study, doubts about the course); and finances and health (overwork and exhaustion, exacerbation of some health problems without adequate support); and family matters (juggling family responsibilities, balancing job and study demands) as leading to withdrawal from courses.

Nearly half of withdrawing students at the Victoria University of Wellington, identified emotional or psychological stress, often linked with financial problems, as associated with their withdrawal from university (Boddy and Neale, 1997). Similarly, Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner and Barrett (1996) found that students cited personal problems followed by problems with employment, finances and academic preparation as being the most common reasons for withdrawal from a course.
Most relevant to the present research is the survey of 167 poor performing students on probation at the Queensland University of Technology (Vivekananda, 1996). Clearly, a number of academic and psycho-social stressors are viewed by students on probation as contributing to their poor academic results. Students were asked to identify, through open-ended questions, the types of stressors they believed affected their academic performance. The stressors identified in this study formed the basis for a list of nine stressors used in Study 1.

**Table 1.3 Stressors Identified by Students on Probation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Related Stressors</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of skill, knowledge, course difficulty</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation/interest/effort</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting on with lecturers and other students</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social and Personal Stressors</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family/relationship</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition/adjustment</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor time management</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Davenport, Dearing and Lintern (1998) have identified a similar pattern for failing students at the University of South Australia. The students who were interviewed for the study gave the following reasons for their poor academic progress: 23.7% identified too many demands; 18.4% cited relationship problems; 15.8 cited a lack of interest and motivation; 10.5% cited traumatic events; 10.5% cited illness; 10.5% cited inadequate teaching.
This review of student retention and attrition research, along with the studies on student stress leads to several research questions, which warrant further investigation. Clearly, many non-academic stressors affect students' general well-being, as well as their academic performance, but are there differences between the experiences of high and low performers?

What kinds of stressors affect high and low performing students? Do they experience different levels of stress, and different kinds of stress?

However, it is not just students' experiences and life circumstances that affect performance. How they deal with these stressful events must have an important effect. In Chapter 2, the role played by coping in enhancing psycho-social adaptation, and adjustment at university will be discussed in detail. The value of such an investigation is not only of theoretical importance but provides the opportunity to develop appropriate interventions to assist low performing students and hence, reduce student attrition.
Chapter 2

Introduction to Coping

In this chapter, changing conceptualisations of coping will be identified and the implications of taking a transactional view of coping will be discussed. Coping may play an important part in moderating the effects of multiple stressors on the academic performance of students. The broader theoretical and conceptual issues related to coping research will contextualise the research framework for this thesis. First, it will be argued that relatively little is known about the differences between coping with acute stress and coping with chronic stress. Second, it will be argued that previous coping research has frequently focused on single stressors, which has provided only a limited understanding of coping. Recent conceptualisations of coping with multiple stressors will be reviewed. Third, traditional individualistic conceptualisations, where active coping is valued over pro-social coping, will be critiqued. The research into newer conceptualisations of relationship-focused coping will be examined and the possible role that social support plays within a transactional-relational model will be discussed. New theoretical frameworks for understanding adaptive coping processes such as proactive coping and the development of resilience and thriving will be explored. Finally, reductionist models of coping will be critiqued.

There have been numerous studies over the last thirty years on the effects of coping in assisting people to adjust to stress. Both the structure of coping, as well as how people cope with specific stressors, has been studied extensively. The recognition that individuals differ in their response to stress is central to the study of coping. In other
words, coping research seeks to explain why similar stressors have varying effects on
different people; why and how people differ so greatly in their responses to stress and,
how differing responses relate to health and psycho-social outcomes.

2.1 Theoretical Approaches

Several main theoretical approaches - psychoanalytic, coping style, situational and
transactional models of coping - have been developed to structure our conceptualisation
of coping. The first phase of research into coping focused on examining one set of
influences namely, personality constructs. The second phase of research became more
detailed as two-factor models of coping were explored. The third phase investigated
different characteristics of the stressful situation. Most recent research has sought to
understand coping within a broader context of interpersonal interactions, the social
context and culture, as well as focusing on more adaptive patterns of coping.

In the following section the main theoretical approaches to coping - psychoanalytic
theories, coping styles and the transactional model - will be examined, prior to
discussing the theoretical position taken in this thesis: the transactional-relational
approach.

2.1.1 Psychoanalytic Theories

The first generation of theory and research was largely influenced by the
psychoanalytic school, which tended to equate personality and coping mechanisms.
Essentially coping was viewed as intra-psychic processes involving unconscious
defence mechanisms. There have been several defence mechanism taxonomies
developed. One of the most influential being that proposed by Vaillant (1977), who
ordered defence mechanisms on a four tiered hierarchy: psychotic, immature, neurotic
and mature. Immature defence mechanisms are considered the most reality distorting, whereas the more sophisticated and adaptive defence mechanisms are viewed as the least reality distorting. Such defence mechanisms were believed to alter perceptions of stressful events and thus reduced emotional stress, particularly anxiety.

Similarly, using a psychodynamic framework, Haan (1977) distinguished between defence mechanisms and coping mechanisms. Conscious coping processes were viewed as more adaptive than defensive processes which are seen as more pathological. Haan constructed a hierarchy of adaptation within which personality development consists of gaining progressive control over behaviour and shifting from defensive to coping modes. According to Haan, in the first mode coping is viewed as conscious, flexible and purposive, reality- and future- orientated and allows for moderate expressions of emotion. The second mode is described as defensive involving reactions which are compelled, negating, rigid and directed to the anxiety rather than the problem. In the third mode, fragmentation or ego failure most clearly distorts and is automated, ritualistic and irrational.

In the context of these models the term 'coping' referred to the most advanced or mature of ego processes. These psychoanalytic studies were often based on in-depth case studies and provided rich insights into the intra-psychic functioning of individuals. Although providing clinical utility such psychoanalytic taxonomies depended on the clinical observations made by highly trained observers. More recently, self-report inventories have been developed to assess defence mechanisms. However, psychoanalytic theories tended to neglect environmental considerations in coping and some defence mechanisms were judged to be inherently adaptive or maladaptive, mature or immature (Aldwin, 1994). Furthermore, defence mechanisms were not
distinguished from outcomes and implicitly did not allow for the possibility that a given
defence mechanism may result in either positive or negative outcomes (Folkman and
Lazarus, 1980). Given the emphasis on emotional restoration and maintaining
emotional equilibrium, problem-solving functions only received minor attention in
these psychoanalytic theories (Aldwin, 1994).

2.1.2 Coping Styles

Coping styles researchers moved away from psychoanalytic notions of viewing
coping as unconscious to more conscious processes, but nevertheless viewed coping in
terms of trait. The coping style approach assumes consistency within individuals across
stressors and a wide range of situations. In terms of research methodology, there was a
shift to measuring coping traits through self-report questionnaires.

Some studies have classified people according to different types of adaptation to a
stressor. For example, Wortman and Silver (1989) identified four coping styles
following bereavement as being: individuals who never appear distressed; acute
grievers; chronic grievers; and those who experienced a delayed reaction.

Other researchers have focused more on perceptual styles and numerous
dichotomous typologies have been developed to classify how people deal with
information, such as repression-sensitization (Byrne, 1964); nonvigilant-vigilant
(Averill and Rosenn, 1972); reducers-augmenters (Petrie, 1978), blunting-monitoring
(Mullens and Suls, 1982); and the most commonly used classification- approach-
avoindance (Moos, 1974). Such broad modalities provided simple ways of dividing up a
diverse range of coping strategies.
However, the empirical evidence suggested that coping styles were not so readily classifiable (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, a view of coping as all-or-nothing (i.e. one either confronts and actively deals with the problem or one avoids it) was difficult to sustain. There was an implicit assumption that some coping styles, such as approach styles, were associated with successful outcomes, whereas other styles, such as avoidant strategies, were inherently maladaptive (Suls and Fletcher, 1985). Both psychoanalytic and coping styles approaches implicitly assume environmental constancy, that is, individuals are responding to the same stressor (Aldwin, 1994).

While the coping styles approach and defence mechanisms went out of favour with the advent of the transactional model, there has been a revival of interest in personality factors, such as the Big Five Personality Traits (Watson, David and Suls, 1999). This line of research has sought to establish that more general coping strategies which are situationally based may be associated with more stable dispositional coping within the individual.

One such study by Stollack and Sanford (1999), combining both dispositional and situational approaches, examines university students’ attachment styles, along with their coping behaviours. They surveyed 1500 first year students at Michigan State University when they commenced university and followed them over a four-year period. Three types of coping styles (Secure, Dependent and Avoidant Styles) were studied and their relationship to different coping strategies used by students, as well as retention and attrition rates, and Grade Point Average (GPA). Prior to entering university there were no differences in academic performance scores amongst the three types of coping styles. In terms of attrition, the highest level of drop-outs for males (nearly 50%) came from the Avoidant group, whereas the highest drop-out rate for women (nearly 50%) came
from the Secure group. More curious is the data on GPA for students who remain at the 
university for the four years, the most insecure groups (Dependent and Avoidant) do 
exceptionally well in terms of GPA while the most emotionally secure do the least well 
academically.

The researchers subsequently examined three broad sets of coping behaviours, which 
they defined as Dependent, Resilient and Disengaging coping strategies. It was found 
that Secure students who also used Resilient strategies gained significantly better GPA. 
Resilient behaviour was defined as: assuming responsibility for problem-solving; 
instrumental strategy for solving problems directly; positive attitude towards academic 
work; planful thinking to solve problem; seeking social support to solve problem; 
persisting in efforts to solve problem. However, the relationship did not hold for any 
other sort of coping behaviour, GPA and Dependent and Avoidant students.

2.1.3 Transactional Model

Some of the key theoretical ideas of the transactional model (sometimes referred to 
in the literature as the situational, interactional, process or contextual model) of coping 
will be discussed in detail before outlining some of the gaps in the research literature.

The transactional model has produced several decades of research emphasising 
situational influences on coping processes while downplaying the role of individual 
dispositions or personality structures. Here, there is a shift from unconscious processes 
to assessing what a person thinks or does in relation to specific stressful situations. 
Furthermore, there is an assumption that people can be self-aware and mindful of their 
coping processes and can be trusted to report on their coping efforts.
Coping is conceptualised as a transactional process between the person and the environment and is a function of cognitive and environmental demands. (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In contrast to previous models of coping, the transactional model, at least in theory, does not assume apriori that particular coping strategies are necessarily thought to be either adaptive or maladaptive. Coping is viewed as a changing process, rather than a stable feature of personality. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, this view has given rise to some problematic measurement issues.

Some of the key components of the transactional model - Stress, Appraisal and Coping - will be defined below.

2.2.1 Stress

There have been many diverse definitions of stress used in the research literature with considerable variation across different disciplines. Generally, psychologists and sociologists have concentrated on the definition of external stress and the individual’s emotional reaction to it. Aldwin (1994, p.22) provides a generic definition in which “stress refers to that quality of experience, produced through a personal-environmental transaction, that, through either overarousal or underarousal, results in psychological or physiological distress.”

**Stressor types.** The types of stressors that university students experience is of importance in this research. The characteristics of different types of stressors is of major interest in the transactional model as it is assumed that different stressors evoke different types of coping processes (Mattlin, Wethington and Kessler, 1990). As the types of stressful situations are limitless, researchers have attempted to categorise
different types of situations according to harmful effects, such as loss, threat, and challenge (Brown and Harris, 1978; Lazarus, 1966; McCrae, 1984). Others have categorised stressful situations according to content type such as, illness, death, interpersonal and practical (Billing and Moos, 1984; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Mattlin et al., 1990). A different schema has been described by Aldwin (1994) in which stressful situations are categorised into major trauma, life events, chronic strains and daily hassles.

There is a renewed interest in the meaning of stressors, as Pearlin (1991, p. 266) points out, equivalent stressors do not necessarily imply equivalent meanings. “Outcome differences, however, may also be a reflection of unobserved differences in the configurations, meanings, and the power of stressors that on the surface appear to be commonly shared.”

Similarly, Thoits (1995) proposes that:

detailed qualitative information about surrounding circumstances, beliefs and personal values is crucial for understanding the meaning and emotional impact of negative events in identity domains that are important to the individual. Minimally, such qualitative details help distinguish major from minor events; maximally, they lead to new theoretical insights regarding the configuration of circumstances surrounding stressors which make them more damaging. (p.59)

### 2.2.2 Appraisal

One of the significant shifts in the conceptualisation of coping with stress has come from Lazarus (1966), and Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who view the cognitive
processes of perception or appraisal of stress as playing a central role in coping. They defined primary appraisal as an evaluation of the personal significance of the encounter. In other words, "What is at stake in this encounter?" Five types of appraisal have been identified as harm, threat, loss, challenge, and benign by Folkman and Lazarus (1984). Secondary appraisal of the stressor involves the question "What can I do?" This involves an assessment of the match between the environmental demand and the amount of resources that an individual has to cope with that demand. The severity of the problem depends on secondary appraisal, where the greater the mismatch between environmental demands and personal resources, the greater the perceived severity of the problem.

However, several limitations are apparent with this definition. First, there is bias towards conceptualising appraisal as an individual activity that one does in the privacy of one's own mind. Second, this cognitive emphasis in the transactional model favours rationality, consciousness and logic. Third, there is an assumption that appraisal does not change over a coping period. What might be initially perceived as a threat may be later considered a challenge, or what might be initially perceived as benign may actually later become a threat. Later, in this chapter, the discussion of chronic and multiple stressors further highlights the importance for research into these questions. It will be suggested that others may play not only a significant part in coping but also in the ongoing appraisal of stressors.

2.2.3 The Relationship Between Stress and Coping

The relationship between life stress, coping and adjustment has been extensively researched and the subject of considerable debate in both the empirical and clinical
literature. The transactional model shifted the depiction of stress as purely an external event and introduced individual differences in the perception of stress.

From the transactional theory viewpoint, stress results from an imbalance between the requirements of the environmental situation and one’s ability to cope with them. As such, stress is viewed as both a product of the environment and the person. From this model it is inferred that if stressors accumulate, coping resources can become depleted, which in turn increases the probability that illness, injury, psychological distress or disorders will occur (Brown and Harris, 1978; Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend, 1974; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, 1989). Later in this chapter, some of the limitations of reductionist models of coping will be discussed.

2.2.4 Types of Coping

How students cope with stressors is of major interest to this present study. As can be seen from the review in Chapter One, non-academic stressors are identified as one of the significant factors associated with student attrition. Which coping strategies maximise student adaptation and adjustment? Which coping strategies are efficacious of academic success?

A whole generation of researchers have attempted to codify the wide range of coping strategies that are used in stressful situations. Folkman, Lazarus, DeLongis, et al. (1986) defined eight types of coping processes. Broadly speaking, coping is viewed as having two major functions: the management of a problem (problem-focused coping) and the regulation of emotion (emotion-focused coping). Problem-focused coping involves such strategies as re-defining the problem, generating and choosing solutions, and implementing direct action to manage the stressful event. Emotion-focused coping
strategies are directed towards managing the negative emotions resulting from stress, not with the management of the problem itself. Common emotion-focused strategies include avoidance, wishful thinking, and blaming oneself.

Stone and Neale (1984) also identified eight types of coping including, distraction, situation redefinition, direct action, catharsis, acceptance, seeking social support, relaxation, and religion. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub (1989) developed thirteen scales, five measuring different aspects of problem-focused coping, and five measuring emotion-focused coping, and three non-specific measures. In an earlier attempt to categorise coping, McCrae (1982) defined twenty-eight types of coping. Similarly, Pearlin and Schooler (1978) identified seventeen types of coping responses, some of which were limited to specific roles such as family, marriage, parenting, and work. Ayers, Irwin, West and Roosa (1996) results suggest that earlier two-factor models do not accurately represent the range of coping efforts. They propose a four-factor model consisting of active, distraction, avoidant and support-seeking factors to provide a better taxonomy of situational and dispositional coping.

2.2.5 Coping Efficacy

The question as to which types of coping are most effective, with whom and under what circumstances, has also received considerable attention. Although the transactional model does not consider particular coping strategies to be innately adaptive or maladaptive, the sheer volume of investigations demonstrating that some coping strategies are consistently associated with superior outcomes has led researchers to conclude that certain specific coping strategies are more adaptive.
One of the most robust findings in the literature concerns the evidence that a reliance on problem-focused strategies has beneficial effects on psychological well-being (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter et al. 1986; Folkman, Lazarus and Gruen et al. 1986). In contrast, there is considerable evidence in the empirical literature that a reliance on emotion-focused strategies is associated with poor psychological health and psychological distress. The use of strategies such as denial, escapism, avoidance and minimisation has been associated with a range of negative outcomes such as depression, low self-esteem and psychological distress (Aldwin and Ravenson, 1987; Cronkite and Moos, 1984; Folkman and Lazarus, 1986; Smith Patterson and Grant, 1990; Terry, 1991).

A number of studies examining student coping have confirmed similar types of patterns in coping efficacy. In a well-designed, longitudinal investigation of predictors for psychological well-being, health, motivation and academic performance of 672 college first-year students, Aspinwall and Taylor (1992) found that the beneficial effects of optimism, control and self-esteem on adjustment were mediated by the non-use of avoidance coping (an emotion-focused strategy) and greater use of active coping.

In another study, comparing coping by first-year with latter-year female students to an upcoming exam, Toray and Cooley (1998) found that first-year students reported using more distancing and escape avoidance strategies, whereas latter-year students reported using higher levels of problem-focused coping. The authors suggest that the higher use of avoidant coping strategies may be associated with lower use of social support during stressful periods.
Similarly, a study by Edwards and Trimble (1992) investigated both trait anxiety and coping dimensions as predictors of state anxiety and exam performance at university. When coping was measured as a style (personality difference), avoidance-oriented coping style predicted aggregated course grade. However, when coping was measured as a situational-specific strategy, task-oriented coping predicted better overall course grade. In contrast, emotion-focused coping predicted state anxiety during exams and was negatively correlated with exam grade. However, only task-oriented coping was a significant predictor of overall grades. Social evaluation trait anxiety and both task-oriented and emotion-oriented coping responses accounted for a quarter of the variance in course grades.

In a further study on examination stress, Zeidner (1995) also established that problem-focused coping was positively related to students’ exam results. Like a previous study by Folkman and Lazarus (1986), Ziedner examined different time periods during exams. As expected problem-focused coping was used more prior to exams and emotion-focused coping and social support were used more often after the exam. Worry was inversely related to exam performance. These findings indicate that exam anxiety seems to influence the coping strategy people select, particularly emotion-focused strategies, and these in turn influence affective outcomes. Zeidner suggests an additive model with coping strategies and resources having main, rather than interactive effects on adaptive outcomes. Further, personality is seen as influencing the coping strategies people use and these strategies in turn influence subsequent affective outcomes.

Looking at different types of stressors, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found that emotions in circumstances of loss, such as illness or death, coping strategies were
directed more towards regulating emotions, whereas in practical and interpersonal situations appraised as involving threat or challenge, coping strategies were directed more towards problem-solving. In a further study it was proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that the use of emotion-focused or problem-focused coping depended on the appraisal that the individual made of the situation. So if a situation was appraised as benign then the model predicted that no coping was required. However, if a situation was appraised as threatening or challenging, it was likely that problem-focused coping would be used to solve or ward off the problem. In situations involving harm or loss, palliative coping was more likely to be used to decrease or relieve the negative emotions evoked by the stressor.

Several studies have presented evidence that emotion-focused coping items in standardised coping questionnaires and measures of distress are often confounded. Stanton, Danoff-Burg, Cameron and Ellis (1994) showed that some emotion approach coping items (e.g., “get angry and really blow up” and “become very tense”) are significantly more correlated with measures of distress compared to other emotion-focused coping items (e.g., “taking time to express my emotions” and “work on understanding my feelings”). Similarly, Endler and Parker (1990) found correlations of .55 between their emotion-focused coping scale with depression and .56 for anxiety.

More recently, different strategies are thought to have different value at different points of the coping process. For example, affective regulation may be helpful in reducing emotional distress, allowing for the use of problem-solving approaches (Carver and Scheier, 1994; Herman-Stahl, 1995).
Coping efficacy has tended to be examined in limited ways in the research. Oakland and Ostell (1996) provide a critique of quantitative research examining coping efficacy, which typically gather information about the type of and frequency at which a particular coping strategy is used. Oakland and Ostell (1996, p.11) state “the problem with simply correlating the frequency or the use of a particular strategy with an outcome measure is that it assumes that using the strategy will have uniform effects regardless of other aspects of the situation and the person.” Further, knowing that someone used problem-solving strategies is not meaningful without a broader context, such as, the quality of the coping strategy, the efficacy of the coping efforts, the effects on others and other people’s responses. Although there is vast amount of research evidence supporting the view that problem-solving efforts are associated with beneficial outcomes, Oakland and Ostell point out that, coping researchers often fail to ask a more fundamental question, “Did the problem-solving effort work?” As a result, the complex interaction of the use of coping strategies with perceptions of their effectiveness is often overlooked.

2.2.6 Gender Differences in Coping

As discussed in Chapter 1, significant gender differences exist for academic performance. This research aims to investigate whether these differences in academic performance are related to gender differences in coping.

There is a substantial number of studies examining whether gender has a mediating effect on coping processes and the results have largely been inconsistent. A substantial number of studies have confirmed that men report using more problem-focused coping than women (Brems and Johnson, 1989; Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Stone and Neale, 1984; Viney and Westbrook, 1982). However, other research found that women
reported using more problem-focused coping than men (Billings and Moos 1981; Gass and Chang 1989; and Heppner et al. 1983).

Although men and women both employ emotion-focused coping, women do so with greater frequency (Billings and Moos, 1981, 1984; Fondacaro and Moos, 1987; Ptacek, Smith and Zanas, 1992; Pearlin and Schooler, 1987; Stone and Neale, 1984; Tanck and Robbins, 1978; Viney and Westbrook, 1982). Other studies have failed to find such a pattern. For example, Carver et al. (1989) and Tanck and Robbins (1979) found that men more often turned to drugs and alcohol as a means of coping, methods often defined as emotion-focused coping.

A number of studies have found that women are more likely to seek social support than men (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989; Heppner, Reeder and Larson, 1983; Ptacek, Smith and Zanas, 1992; Rosario et al., 1988; Stone and Neale, 1984; Vaux, 1985; Vitaliano et al., 1985). Several studies have failed to find any gender differences in coping at all (Firth-Cozen and Morrison, 1989; Hamilton and Fagot, 1988; Keller, 1988). Hamilton and Fagot (1988) found that although women students reported more overall stress, no gender differences were found for the frequency of stressful events or for the proportion of problem-solving behaviour.

Where gender differences have been found two theories, socialisation theory and structural theory, have been posited to explain these differences. According to socialisation theory men and women are socialised to deal with stressful situations in different ways. It is hypothesised that due to sex-role stereotypes and generalised role-expectations held in our society, men are socialised to a greater extent to deal instrumentally with stress, whereas women tend to be socialised to express emotion, to
use emotion-focused coping strategies and to seek support from others (Mainiero, 1986; Perlin and Schooler, 1978; Rosario, Shinn, Morch and Huckabee, 1988; Stokes and Wilson, 1984). According to socialisation theory, even in similar stressful situations, men will tend to favour using problem-focused coping and women will tend to use emotion-focused coping or seeking social support.

Other researchers have explained gender differences in relation to the structural differences of situations. Folkman and Lazarus (1980) and Billing and Moos (1981) have suggested that particular classes of situations, for example work, demand particular methods of coping. Gender differences in coping, may be attributable to the differences in the kinds of stressful situations that men and women typically encounter. It is argued that gender differences in coping may be more of a function of men and women encountering dissimilar types of events. In accordance with this view, Billings and Moos (1981) and Folkman and Lazarus (1980) found in a middle-aged community sample, that women experience more stressors associated with health and family, whereas men reported more stressors associated with work and finances. No gender differences were found in relation to emotion-focused strategies for work, health or family problems. However, men were more likely than women to use more problem-focused strategies in relation to work problems (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978), whereas women were more likely to use problem-solving strategies (e.g. negotiation) within marriage and parenting contexts (Menaghan, 1982; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978).

2.3. Characteristics of Stressors

Event Controllability. Specific characteristics of stressors, such as controllability, timing, and severity have also been investigated. The effectiveness of different coping
strategies has been hypothesised to be dependent on the controllability of the situation (Folkman, Schaefer and Lazarus, 1979). A goodness-of-fit model was devised which proposed that coping would be effective to the extent that it matches the controllability of the situation.

The type of stressor and controllability have been found to be overlapping though not identical constructs (McCrae, 1984). Challenges were generally judged to be more controllable and losses were generally judged to be more uncontrollable, however. Threats varied more widely in ratings of controllability.

The results of research testing event controllability and effectiveness of coping have been mixed. Some studies have found that for controllable events, problem-focused coping was more effective given that something could be done to alleviate the stress, whereas a reliance on emotion-focused coping was associated with higher levels of negative affect and symptoms. Conversely, in situations perceived as uncontrollable, problem-focused coping strategies should be maladaptive given that problem-solving could not change the situation and was likely to produce feelings of frustration or despair (Forsythe and Compas, 1987; Vitaliano, Dewolfe, Maiuro, Rousso and Katon (1990); Cronkite and Moos, 1984). Several studies have found that there was no relationship between perceptions of controllability of stressor and the likelihood of using problem-solving (Felton and Ravenson, 1987; Folkman, et al., 1987; Lazarus, 1980; Stone and Neale, 1984;Thoits , 1991). Furthermore, the effects of emotion-focused coping did not vary according to event controllability (Conway and Terry, 1992).
Masel, Terry and Gribble (1995) testing the goodness-of-fit model, examined the effects of coping effectiveness on student adjustment over three time periods. Their results confirmed that problem management and problem appraisal (problem-focused coping) was more adaptive to stress than self denigration and escapist strategies (emotion-focused coping). However, there were no significant effects on adjustment from seeking social support. Contrary to the goodness-of-fit hypothesis, regardless of the level of controllability of the stressor, problem- focused coping had beneficial effects. Furthermore, emotion-focused coping had detrimental effects on adjustment, regardless of the level of controllability or stage of the encounter. High levels of initial depression predicted subsequent reliance on emotion-focused strategies and seeking social support.

This preoccupation by coping researchers with the controllability of stressors reveals several problem areas. First, as research conditions become more precisely controlled, there is a concurrent narrowing of focus and loss of complexity. Second, there is an implicit assumption that stressors occur as singular events, that may or may not be controllable. Take, for example, the death of a spouse (a loss), which is generally considered to be an uncontrollable stressor, emotion-focused strategies are thought to be more efficacious. Which parts of the stressor is uncontrollable? Certainly, bringing one’s spouse back could be appraised as uncontrollable. What about coping with the grief reactions of one’s children? As we start to extend the coping period and take into account the interrelated stressors, we can see why the results reported above are so mixed. What about the practical and financial stressors that occur when one’s partner has died? Further still, coping in the first few weeks after the funeral may be very different from coping two years down the track, which leads to the next issue of the timing of coping responses.
Severity. The research examining the severity of stressors parallels the findings discussed above. Active problem-solving and minimising strategies are more characteristic of less stressful situations (McCrae, 1992). Low severity is associated with rational action, isolation of affect, humour and assessing blame. High severity typically evokes more passive forms of coping, as severely stressful situation may exceed an individual’s capacity to cope with it.

Timing. One of the significant implications of taking a transactional perspective is that the meaning of coping responses will shift across situations and time (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). In a landmark study, Folkman and Lazarus (1985) demonstrated that both stress and coping are dynamic and unfolding processes, rather than being a static, unitary event. Students experienced significant changes in emotion and coping across three different stages of mid-term examinations - the anticipation stage prior to exams; the waiting stage after exams; and after exam results were posted. Some of these original insights by Folkman and Lazarus about the complexity of coping processes have tended to become lost in subsequent coping research. It was observed that students experience seemingly contradictory emotions and states of mind across all stages of the stressful encounter. For example, students experienced both threat emotions and challenge emotions during the anticipation stage, especially when faced with ambiguity regarding the multi-faceted nature of the exam and its meanings.

Complexity in coping processes was also observed with students using a combination of most of the available forms of coping, both problem-focused and emotion-focused across all three time periods. However, problem-focused coping and emphasising the positive were more prominent during the earlier phases and distancing
was more prominent during the later stages. Coping accounted for a significant component of variance in reported emotions, over and above the type of grade that the student received, supporting the view that it is not just the outcome of the exam itself, but also its meaning and the type of coping which is used that affects emotional responses. Using step-wise regression analysis, the overall grade on exams accounted for a major proportion of the variance in benefit of emotions. In contrast, self-blame strategy accounted 39% of the variance in harm emotions, followed by exam grade accounting for an additional 13%.

Ironically, largely due to the use of standardised coping questionnaires such as those developed by Folkman and Lazarus in cross-sectional studies, the effects of timing surrounding coping has become obscured. Coyne and Gottlieb (1996) provide reminders that as stressful episodes unfold, the same thoughts and behaviors may contain different meanings. For example, early in the semester, a student who “avoided being with people in general” might mean they have not been attending university. Later in the stress process, say, prior to examinations, avoiding being with others may refer to a deliberate, constructive effort to study without distraction and that they are refusing social commitments that would interfere with exam preparation. However, during the post-examination period it may refer to withdrawal from interpersonal relationships because they are too distressed to face friends because of poor exam results.

Furthermore, the same coping response may produce different effects at different intervals. As such, the short-term and long-term effects may differ with the same coping response. For example, short-term relief may be gained from using alcohol, but what may be used successfully as a quick-fix can produce long-term negative effects.
However, as discussed later in this chapter, the focus on acute and often single stressors, has meant the examination of the issue of timing has been narrowly focused.

**Chronicity.** How students cope with chronic stressors is of major interest to the current research, as much of the coping research has previously focused on acute stressors or discrete stressful events. As Wheaton (1997) has pointed out, chronic stressors do not necessarily start as an event, but may develop slowly and insidiously as a continuing problematic condition in our social environment and roles. While students experience acute stressors, such as exam stress or performance anxiety, many of the stressors identified in Chapter One, such as financial and relationship difficulties and workload management, potentially constitute chronic stressors. The recent literature has attempted to clarify and conceptualise chronic stress. However, the pattern of coping may not be so straightforward as with acute stressors because, by definition, chronic stress has a much longer time frame and probably involves more complex multiple stressors than acute life events.

Although the stress literature has examined chronic stress extensively, the same cannot be said of coping research. Coping models have largely failed to distinguish between acute and chronic stress. Aldwin and Brustrum (1997) conclude that it is an open question as to whether models developed for coping with acute stressors are adequate for understanding coping with chronic stress. They suggest that further investigations need to be undertaken to understand how individuals learn to manage chronic stress successfully and to identify the personal and environmental factors that aid them in the development of those strategies. In addition, further research may identify the potential positive effects of managing chronic stress, through which the
successful management of chronic hardships may result in increased mastery and self-esteem (Aldwin and Brustrum, 1997).

Our understanding of coping with chronic stress has come largely from sociological models developed by Pearlin and Schooler (1978). They coined the term “chronic role-strain” to characterise the types of stressors they felt were the most harmful, that is, those involving difficulty in discharging the most basic roles such as marriage, parenting, work and household management. They conceptualised coping strategies as role specific and tailored to role demands, such that the strategies used to balance the household budget would differ greatly from strategies used to deal with conflict with a supervisor at work. Furthermore, the same strategies may have different effects across different roles.

More recently, Wheaton (1997) argues that although chronic stressors are most visible in the literature related to work or marital stressors, it extends beyond role situations. She identifies four sources of chronic stress as being: (1) stressors due to role occupancy, as in the classic work on role strains; (2) stressors due to role in-occupancy, such as not having a job when you want one; (3) role-defining stressors which do not result from role engagement but precipitate it, such as, becoming a single parent; (4) and ambient stressors that are not role bound but are socially diffuse, such as crowded living situation, time pressure, and social complexity. Wheaton goes on to identify nine basic themes, which recur as fundamental forms of chronic stress: threats, demands, structural constraints, complexity, uncertainty, conflict, restriction of choice, under-reward, and resource deprivation.
The area of chronic stress that has received the most attention involves studies related to coping with chronic illness. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter in the section pertaining to multiple stressors, these studies have generally adopted a narrow focus. The significant exception to this would be the work of Folkman and Moskowitz (2000) in their longitudinal study of coping in the context of HIV/AIDS. The quantitative and qualitative depth of their research is impressive, and their systematic analysis of the role of positive emotions and positive meaningful events is broadening the conceptualisation of coping. However, the bulk of the research on chronic illness falls into a more standard coping paradigm. Aldwin and Brustrom (1997) concluded in their review of the literature on coping with chronic stress, that “emotion-focused strategies are consistently associated with negative outcomes (e.g., depression), active, problem-focused strategies such as information seeking usually predict positive outcomes. However, the association between coping and its consequences may be modified by contextual factors such as the duration or stage of an illness.” (p. 86)

It is hypothesised by Aldwin and Brustrom (1997) that coping with chronic stress requires three types of coping resources:

First, one must be able to turn coping strategies into management skills. With respect to chronic stressors, it is necessary to use anticipatory coping to minimize (sic) or prevent problems from occurring... The second resource that needs to be developed is pre-planned strategies for coping with the acute incidents that are likely to occur... The third type of resource involves the regulation of meaning of events within the context of chronic stress. This regulation may involve downplaying the
occurrence or importance of negative aspects. Not becoming upset by
uncontrollable events may be more efficacious than having to use
emotion-focused coping after becoming upset. This may be aided by
focusing more on the positive aspects. (p.97-98)

The first two coping resources are related to proactive problem-focus management
and the third concerns emotional regulation. However, the management of relationships
is missing from this conceptualisation of coping with chronic stress. The relevance of
these to student coping will be discussed below and in more detail further in this
chapter.

In one of the few studies examining chronic student stress, Hamilton and Fagot
(1988) found that with frequently occurring events that are not experienced as stressful,
problem-solving was typically used by students. However, the stressors studied seem to
differ considerably in the level of seriousness, as well as their chronicity. Chronic
stressors included situations such as: insufficient sleep, transportation problems,
disruptive noise, room-mate problems, lack of time, political events, dormitory food,
lack of money, falling behind in class, injury or sickness, problems with an instructor,
familial conflicts, problems with class, romantic conflicts, arguments or
misunderstandings with friends, concern with academic performance, exam anxiety and
weather.

Further, those events that were reported with low to medium frequency were also
experienced as most stressful, and these more stressful situations evoked low levels of
problem-solving. In all these cases, the stressor involved negative interpersonal
interactions such as problems with a room-mate, instructors, romantic partners etc. As
the focus of their study was to establish gender differences in problem-focused coping, Hamilton and Fagot do not elaborate on how students coped with these interpersonal conflicts but speculate that interpersonal conflicts may be solved more easily by self-soothing strategies such as asking advice from friends. Later, in this chapter, interpersonal stressors will be identified as an important focus for this current research.

An interesting study by Westman and Shirom (1995), although not specifically interested in chronic stress, broadens out the range of stressors studied. Students were given six stressful situations they would commonly experience: a) failing an important exam; b) facing too many written and reading assignments; c) having to fulfill familial obligation and university assignments at the same time; d) having to maneuver between work demands and university requirements; e) having to make career decisions; f) facing an approaching deadline for an unfinished paper. Some of these stressors are less complex and more acute, for example, b) and f). However, c) and d) involve more complex multiple stressors. Using an open-ended question format, they were able to define coping in broader terms, where repertoire and flexibility in coping were strongly correlated. In addition, the size of the repertoire was positively correlated with situational adequacy, defined as the “optimal” strategy to use for the situation. Older females with higher educational status possessed the most flexible coping behaviour. The main effects indicated that being male and having a higher educational qualification predicted higher use of direct active problem-solving strategies. However, this study used a limited sample of post-graduate students.

2.4 Multiple Stressors

Much research has focused on the effects of single stressful events on adjustment and the relationship between different stressors is another neglected area of study. For
example, coping with university examinations has received much attention. However, clinical experience in university counselling services and the student attrition research discussed in Chapter One indicate that stressors commonly occur in multiples. For coping research to be of clinical utility to practitioners in the field, further frameworks need to be developed for understanding how people cope with complexity in role demands and stressors.

As Lepore and Evans (1996) note, very little is known about how coping with one stressor affects people's ability to cope with another stressor. They point out that many investigators conceptualise stressors as discrete, even random occurrences with additive effects. The empirical research has categorised stressors according to various general categories (e.g. major life events, daily stressors, ambient stressors, role-strains etc.). Lepore and Evans argue that often these stressors are not singular events, rather they comprise of a wide range of unique combinations of interrelated stressors of varying magnitude and durations. For example, conflict with parents may lead a university student to leave home, which in turn worsens financial problems.

Even in studies of coping with chronic illness, Aldwin and Bruch (1997) note that most studies typically only examine one or two of the major adaptive tasks. Moos and Schaeffer (1984) developed a model of the major adaptive tasks that individuals face in coping with chronic stress involving specifically illness related tasks (coping with symptoms, pain and disability; coping with treatment and hospital environment) and the more general tasks necessary for the patient's well being (competence and mastery; maintaining good relations with family and friends; and preparing for disability or death). Nevertheless, chronic illness is more often conceptualised as a single stressor, even though there may be a range of accompanying stressors, such as
being unable to work, financial pressures and practical difficulties, not to mention changes in relationships.

Pearlin (1991) proposes that variability in outcomes for coping may be a result of unobserved stressors which are contributing to outcomes. He hypothesised that one reason:

relationships between a given stressor and an outcome may be modest is because for some the stressor may be the sole stressor they are experiencing, and for others a host of secondary stressors may have come to be organised around the primary stressor. The variability in outcome may thus partly reflect variability in the scope and intensity of other stressors that are impinging on individuals but that are not being observed or assessed. (p.263-264)

In her review of the literature on social support, Thoits (1995) also points to the need for further examination of the joint consequences of stressful events and strains. Some trends are emerging which suggest that it is important to examine strain sequences, and the consequences of particular negative life events and strains. She believes that a further examination of carry-over effects across role domains, persons, and stages of life are important for three reasons:

First, they begin to capture some of the complexities of stress impacts that are familiar to us from personal experience but have been long neglected theoretically and empirically. Second, these studies begin to focus research attention on the consequences of particular sequences of
experiences, both on a daily basis and over the much longer term (e.g. the life course)...Third, studies of longer-term consequences reintroduce the interesting possibility that although negative life events and strains may be damaging in the short term, they may in the longer term prove beneficial. (p.57)

Multiple stressors can be interrelated in three types of possible patterns (Lepore and Evans, 1996). First, people might experience focal stressors such as a cataclysm or major life event and secondary stressors cascade off the major stressor. For example, major life events can increase the frequency of daily stressors (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer and Lazarus, 1981) and can also generate role-related stressors, such as work and family stressors, which might be detrimental to general well-being. Second, some people may be more prone to multiple stressors due to their social role or personal characteristics. For example, role stressors can spill over from one domain into another (Eckenrode and Gore, 1990). Third, some stressors such as ambient stressors such as noise and crowding have a tendency to covary (Lepore, 1994).

**Costs of coping with multiple stressors.** It has been suggested that little attention has been paid to the costs and benefits of coping (Steed, 1998). Some researchers have proposed that there are adaptive costs associated with coping processes used to remove stressors because they interfere with a person’s capacity or motivation to cope with subsequent stressors. The theoretical position in relation to the effects of multiple stressors on adjustment goes in two alternative directions (Lepore and Evans, 1996). One position argues that coping with one stressor might inoculate people by helping them to develop coping strategies, resources and resilience that somehow enhances their ability to cope with another stressor. This research on the positive aspects of
coping on adjustment will be discussed later in this chapter. The alternative direction suggests that expenditure of coping resources with one stressor can deplete a person’s resources or make them less adept at coping with another stressor.

Multiple stressors can be affected by both primary and secondary appraisals (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Individuals experiencing a stressor might view it to be more threatening or their coping resources to be less adequate when a stressor occurs concurrently with another one (Brown and Harris 1978). Cumulative stressors might also change a person’s appraisal of their coping capacities. To the extent that coping resources are appraised as insufficient, subjective stress should be elevated and motivation to respond actively to a stressor could be decreased, perhaps leading to helplessness (Lepore and Evans, 1996). The emphasis in constraint and depletion models discussed below is that actual coping resources, options, and strategies have changed as a result of exposure to multiple stressors. Lepore and Evans (1996) have proposed six types of costs associated with coping with multiple stressors which are summarised as follows:

1. Reappraisals. With multiple stressors, threat appraisals may be exaggerated and coping capacity may be underestimated, which can diminish the incentive to cope with another stressor.

2. Behavioural constraints. Here the coping response to one stressor is essentially incompatible with the coping response to another stressor. A common example of response competitions is that differing demands may require a student to be in two different places such as work and university at the same time.
3. Residual arousal and fatigue. Coping with one stressor may alter a person’s physiological and psychological state by increasing arousal and fatigue, potentially compromising a person’s capacity to respond to a second stressor.

4. Stereotypic coping refers to the tendency of people to persist in the use of a coping strategy indiscriminately, even, in the face of diverse stressors. A mismatch between the demands of the stressors and coping responses may amplify the negative effects of the stressor. It is possible that what may appear adaptive in the short term may have long-term costs. A general coping style of avoiding or denying anxiety producing stimuli might be sometimes helpful, for example in avoiding ruminating about a lost relationship. However, if avoidance becomes generalised, the person might miss the opportunity to resolve or prevent a major problem, such as dealing with academic challenges.

5. Resource depletion. Coping with multiple stressors can deplete coping resources such as environmental and social resources (e.g. supportive social ties), material resources (e.g. money), and individual or dispositional resources (e.g. self esteem) and biological resources (e.g. resistance to infections). Depletion of a resource could increase the effects of another stressor, and exacerbate chronic stress.

6. Helplessness. The learned helplessness model proposes that for some individuals, following exposure to uncontrollable stressors, their subsequent learning and motivation is affected. Helplessness can lead to passive and emotion-focused coping with stressors that may be better resolved through the use of active or instrumental coping responses. As such the individual responding helplessly might
be exposed to stressors needlessly or for an extended duration because they have not taken any action to reduce the exposure.

Identifying patterns associated with chronic stress exacerbation and academic decline will be of relevance to better understanding the processes related to student attrition. Before going on to discuss the benefits of coping, two other concepts, that of proactive coping and social support, need to be explored as they are hypothesised to be important factors related to adaptive coping with chronic and multiple stressors.

2.5. Proactive coping

To date, far more is known about the impact of maladaptive coping strategies and their effects on negative outcomes than the impact of adaptive coping strategies on positive outcomes (Steedman, 1998). This focus on maladaptive coping mechanisms has resulted in an overemphasis on coping with stressful situations. Understanding how people avoid or offset potential stressors is emerging as one of the exciting new developments in stress and coping research. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) propose that by focusing on stressful events as the starting point of coping research, proactive coping has been largely undetected, and therefore gone unstudied. The proactive coping model could be potentially useful in the study of student adjustment because knowing how students avoid, head off or reduce potentially stressful situations in the first place, may provide the basis for preventative for interventions or actions.

Aspinwall and Taylor (1997, p.417) define proactive coping as “efforts undertaken in advance of a potentially stressful event to prevent it or to modify its form before it occurs.” Proactive coping differs from anticipatory coping which “involves the preparation for the stressful consequences of an upcoming event whose occurrence is
likely or certain.” Proactive coping involves a series of feedback loops, where resource accumulation, attention appraisal, and regulation of negative emotional arousal are conceptualised as interrelated tasks. Aspinwall and Taylor propose a five stage model of proactive coping involving:

1. Resource accumulation involves the building of resources and skills in advance of any specific anticipated stressor. These may include the mustering of time, money, planning, organisational skills and social support.

2. Attention-recognition refers to the ability to see potential stressful events coming. It involves the ability to screen the environment for danger and to be sensitive to internal cues suggesting that threats may arise.

3. Initial appraisal efforts involves preliminary assessments of the current situation (“What is this?”) and the potential status of the stressor (“What is this likely to become?”). Other assessments include questions such as, “Should I be worried about this?” and “Is this something I should keep an eye on?” Such appraisals may increase attention to a potential stressor and may give rise to initial coping efforts.

4. Preliminary (initial) coping efforts are activities undertaken to prevent or minimise a recognised or suspected stressor. Coping efforts are conceptualised by Aspinwall and Taylor, as almost always active, involving cognitive strategies such as planning, and behavioural strategies such as seeking information from others. Avoidant strategies and positive reappraisal are viewed as detrimental to proactive coping.
5. Eliciting and using feedback centers around how the potentially stressful event is developing. Relevant questions concern: "Has it advanced, changed form, or improved?" It involves an assessment as to how effective preliminary efforts have been on the stressful event: "Was I successful in staving it off?" and assessing whether the event requires additional coping efforts "Is there something more I can do, or should I wait to see if it's a problem?"

In many stress and coping models, resources are regarded as moderators, such that, less stress is experienced by people with more time, money and friends. However, coping resources are conceptualised as playing a different role in proactive coping. Rather than playing a moderating role, resources play a critical role in whether a stressor is experienced at all, what form it will take, and how fully developed it is at the time one must deal with it.
Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) further propose that chronic and acute stress are integrally related, that:

freedom from chronic stress acts as a proactive resource, enabling people to engage in the task of anticipating or recognizing (sic) stressful events before they occur. In an environment characterized (sic) by chronic stress, proactive efforts are unlikely and often impossible, with acute stressors reaching a serious stage before they are dealt with at all. When chronic burden reduces the degree to which proactive coping can take place, the likelihood of acute stressors will be exacerbated, thereby increasing the amount of chronic stress that an individual experiences. (p.429-430)

Social support is also conceptualised differently in the proactive coping model, where the benefits of social support are hypothesised to be less about receiving emotional support and palliative coping and more about providing information. At the recognition stage of proactive coping, social support helps the individual to appraise stressful events. At the stage of preliminary appraisal, social support involves using others to provide assistance to undertake effective preliminary coping strategies and to have other people’s assistance in interpreting feedback gained from preliminary coping efforts.

A further research question arises out of the proactive coping model. What role does proactive coping play in the management of chronic stress and academic performance?
2.6 The Interpersonal Context of Coping

In this section, different conceptualisations of social relationships will be outlined. As stressors become longer term and more complex, the role of social relationships may be pivotal to coping successfully with multiple stressors.

It seems the conceptualisation of interpersonal relationships and coping has been slow to develop. Almost a decade ago, Pearlin (1991) noted coping has been “treated as being exclusively in the realm of individual behavior”. Pearlin further argues:

However, because coping resides in the actions of individuals, this does not mean that these actions take place in a social vacuum. Though, by definition coping is a construct ultimately anchored in individual actions, it is often in response to stressors that arise in social situations where other people are also involved with the stressor, either because they have helped to create it or because they, too, are attempting to cope with it. In both instances, the coping actions of one person will be constrained, encouraged, or channeled (sic) by the expectations and actions of others.

As a result, the success of one’s coping response will be determined not only by the nature of that response but also by the actions and reactions of others who are involved with the stressor. Consequently, if, in our research, we seek to identify good and bad coping, our quest may be only partially rewarded, at most. The reason is that a given set of coping responses may be efficacious in the context of one role set and less than that in another having a different set of actors imposing a different set of constraints and reinforcements. (p.270)
Riger (1993, p.280) also concludes, “a great deal of research in psychology rests on the assumption that the healthy individual is one who is self-contained, independent and self-reliant, capable of asserting himself and influencing his environment.”

More recently, Dunahoo, Hobfall, Monnier, Hulsizer and Johnson (1998) and Monnier, Hobfall, Dunahoo, Hulsizer and Johnson (1998) also criticise coping research as privileging individualistic modes of coping, such as problem-focused coping and personal agency over more relational aspects of coping. In addition, emotion-focused coping such as withdrawal, avoidance and cognitive coping promoting inner mental processes further emphasise individualistic conceptions of coping (Dunahoo et al., 1998).

There is increasing recognition that interpersonal factors may influence virtually every aspect of the stress and coping process, including the occurrence and appraisal of stressful events, the selection and efficacy of coping strategies and the impact of stress on well-being (Eckenrode, 1991; O’Brien and DeLongis, 1996; O’Brien and DeLongis, 1997). Furthermore, it could also be argued that nearly all chronic stress and coping takes place largely within an interpersonal context (Coyne and Downey, 1991; 1997). The more complex and the more chronic the problem becomes, the more others become important in either maintaining or relieving chronic problems. The development of coping strategies, as well as their efficacy, cannot be fully understood without a comprehension of the role that significant others play in the shared management of chronic stress.
Clearly, coping does not occur in a contextual vacuum, however, there has been little research examining the interactional context of stress and coping processes. O’Brien and DeLongis (1997) make the point that:

> when the individuals’ perceptions and coping processes are considered in a social vacuum, we may unwittingly create an illusion that people generally adapt to chronic stress in an autonomous, solitary fashion, and we may be more likely to view adaptational problems as primarily a function of personality, faulty perceptions, or a lack of personal initiative. (p.162)

Not only has coping research focused primarily on individualistic coping efforts, there has been an overwhelming bias towards measuring outcomes for the well-being of the individual while ignoring the well-being of others in the social context (O’Brien and DeLongis, 1997). Problem-focused coping could potentially be viewed as antisocial in contexts where such efforts negatively affect both others and sabotage potential support (Dunahoo et al., 1998).

Social relationships can be viewed in three ways: first, as a source of stress (conflicts, losses, loneliness); second, as a coping resource, which can moderate the impact of chronic stressors by mitigating or exacerbating people’s responses to them; and third, as a form of coping which is aimed at influencing or changing the social environment. Each of these will be discussed in the following sections below.
**Source of Stress.** There is a growing body of literature suggesting that interpersonal stressors have particularly deleterious effect on well-being (O’Brien and DeLongis, 1997). Some of the relationship stressors which have been studied include: having a family member with a chronic illness or disability; the death of a child; step-family adaptations; and chronic relationship problems. Interpersonal stressors have been shown to be related to significant levels of distress. For example, Bolger et al. (1989) found that marital conflict or tensions with friends or coworkers were important predictors of personal distress, accounting for more than 80% of the explained variance in mood. Some studies have found that interpersonal stress and conflict with family and others in the social network may play a significant role in the etiology and maintenance of depression and other emotional difficulties amongst those already experiencing chronic stress. One such study found family members who have assumed the long term care of a relative with Alzheimer’s disease have poorer psychological and immunological functioning than matched controls who do not have such chronic stress in their lives (Gottlieb and Gignac, 1996).

In moderator models of stress, interpersonal processes such as social strains, which have been discussed above, and social support, which will be discussed in the next section, are conceptualised as modifying chronic stress. Lepore (1997) offers a clear explanation:

The impact of stressors on health outcomes is presumed to be moderated by, or dependent on, positive or negative transactions occurring in people’s social relationships. In their simplest form, moderator models predict that positive, or supportive, social relationships will attenuate stress reactions and that negative, or strained social relationships will
exacerbate stress reactions... An implicit assumption of moderator models is that stressors and conditioning social variable are independent factors. The notion here is that social contextual processes that moderate stress reactions are not affected by stressors; perhaps they are antecedent conditions preceding stress exposure or are highly stable or immutable characteristics of social environments. The moderating effect is demonstrated by a significant interaction between social support and stress or between social strains and stress on some health outcome. (p.141)

However, as Lepore explains, the relationship between stress and the interpersonal context may not be so straight-forward:

Strained social relationships can be a direct source of stress or a contributor to chronic stress processes by prolonging or intensifying negative reactions to other stressors. Coping with chronic stress can diminish a person's capacity to cope with social strains and vice versa. Thus, when social strains occur in the context of other stressors, stress reactions can be amplified (i.e., can be greater than the unique effects of the independent stressors.) (p.149)

This issue will be taken up later in this chapter when reductionist models of coping will be critiqued.

**Resource.** The stress buffering model of social support has received widespread attention in the past two decades. A number of studies have found that social support
(through emotional support, comfort or practical assistance) mitigates the negative effects of stressors on physical and psychological health outcomes. One typical study by Valentiner, Holahan and Moos (1994) investigated the role that social support (defined as parental support) played in influencing the choice of coping strategy by university students under stressful circumstances. Key findings established that initial parental support was associated with subsequent changes in psychological adjustment both directly and indirectly through adaptive coping strategies. With controllable events, family support predicted adaptive coping, which in turn predicted changes in adjustment. However, with uncontrollable events, family support related directly to changes in adjustment.

Similarly, Aspinwall and Taylor (1992) found that higher levels of the variables of positive mood, desire for control, optimism, seeking support and being female were reliable determinants of receipt of and satisfaction with social support and, therefore, of better adjustment. Although negative mood was also a strong predictor of greater seeking of social support, it did not result in greater receipt of or satisfaction with social support. However, as shall be seen in the following discussion, such studies have promoted a view of social support processes in uni-directional terms and focused on individual outcomes.

More broadly, the results for the stress buffering model have been inconsistent, with Lepore (1997) stating that, “an abundance of research and analysis has yielded no consensus on the status of the buffering model, with reviewers concluding that the evidence is dubious, mixed, or inadequate.” (p.142)
Several hypotheses have been developed to explain the failure to find consistent results for the stress buffering model, with one of the more interesting ideas coming from Lepore (1997). He hypothesises that the stress buffering potential of social support may be influenced by the chronicity of the stressor. In the context of chronic stressors people may have difficulties in obtaining adequate social support. Furthermore, some stressful events can erode social support resources which, in turn, can have a negative influence on mental and physical health. Lepore's research provides emerging evidence that people facing chronic stress, such as living in overcrowded housing, may experience declines in the quality and amount of social support they receive.

These views are paralleled by Peggy Thoits, one of the recent pioneers in social support research. Social support has generally been viewed as instrumental, informational and/or emotional assistance that are given to the individual by significant others, such as family, friends and co-workers. However, social support is not unidirectional and the costs and benefits of support giving and social relationships warrant further investigation (Thoits, 1995).

**Relationship-focused coping.** The final area to be covered in this section on the interpersonal context concerns recent developments in a transactional-relational model of stress and coping (Dunahoo et al. 1998; O'Brien and DeLongis 1996).

Adding to earlier problem-focused and emotion-focused coping definitions, O'Brien and DeLongis (1997) propose a third dimension, relationship-focused coping, which refers to coping efforts aimed at maintaining and protecting social relationships during times of stress. They hypothesise that successful coping may include protecting social relationships especially when stressors occur in social relationships. They argue, that a
previous individualistic focus may obscure our understanding of interpersonal
processes, such as negotiation, collaboration, accommodation, and affective sharing.
These processes may be central to managing chronic stress in interpersonal contexts.

Their research included the more social dimensions of coping: the need to preserve
social ties; and the sacrifice of personal needs for the well being of the family or group.
They investigated an active-passive dimension and a prosocial-antisocial dimension.
Men and women did not differ in assertive action. However, when active, women tend
to be more prosocial both in seeking social support and social joining (building
conalditions to address a problem). In contrast, when active, men often behaved
aggressively and even antisocially (attacking others to meet their goals). Active
prosocial coping was related to greater mastery and lower psychological distress in both
men or women. These findings are similar to previous work by Hobfall et. al (1994)
who found that men and women who used active, prosocial forms of coping were found
to be highest in mastery, to receive more social support and to have lower depression
and anxiety. Those who used antisocial coping were more likely to have higher levels
of depression and anger. Passive, asocial copers were also found to have poorer
outcomes.

A review of interpersonal processes raises a further research question. What role
does active prosocial coping play in the successful adaptation to university? Further,
prosocial coping may have explanatory value in understanding support deterioration
and support maintenance with long-term, multiple stressors.
2.7 Benefits of Coping

This section examines the recent formulations on the positive benefits of coping, which have extended theories of coping to newer ideas of resilience and thriving. This research may provide a useful model for conceptualising student coping. Identifying coping processes which are associated with student thriving and resilience can provide models of adaptive coping and successful academic performance.

Until relatively recently, the research into stress and coping has primarily focused on the negative sequelae of stressful events. A focus on symptomatology has meant that most studies of coping rely on symptom scales or clinical diagnoses as a measure of outcome. The relative presence or absence of symptoms as an outcome measure for successful/unsuccessful coping has provided a truncated measures of well-being (Thoits, 1995).

Stress and coping researchers have observed that individuals can also learn and grow from negative experiences, even those that cannot be reversed or escaped. In a longitudinal study of college students, Park et al. (1996) documented increases in optimism and positive affectivity as beneficial outcomes from undergoing stressful life events.

Notions of thriving and resilience are somewhat overlapping as thriving developed out of a foundation of research on resilience. Earlier formulations of resilience essentially viewed it in homeostatic terms, in which the organism recovers from adversity, re-establishing previous functioning or equilibrium (O’Leary, 1998). More recently, four possible responses have been identified (O’Leary and Ickovics, 1995).
The first possibility is a continued downward slide. The initial detrimental effect is compounded and the individual eventually succumbs (to depression, academic failure, illness). In the second possibility, termed the survival route, the individual survives but is diminished or impaired in some respect. Recovery is the third possibility, where the individual returns to their pre-adversity level of functioning, which can be either a rapid or a gradual return. The fourth possibility involves a thriving or resilient response which does not merely return to previous level of functioning but may exceed their original levels of psychosocial functioning. This new conception of thriving purports that it involves more than homeostasis. As a result of being exposed to adversity, individuals who thrive, whether physically or psychologically, show a decreased reactivity to subsequent stressors, faster recovery from subsequent stressors, or a consistently higher level of functioning (Carver, 1998).

Three beneficial effects of coping with multiple stressors have been identified by Lepore and Evans (1997) and are summarized as follows:

1. Resiliency. Mastery over stressors may inoculate people, that is, it makes them more resilient in the face of subsequent stressors. Lepore and Evans (1997) hypothesise that resilience is more likely to develop in the face of intermittent and sequential stressors, rather than continuous or concurrent stressors. They argue, that sequential stressors allow the opportunity to use coping strategies effectively, resulting in the person having a more generalized sense of competency, mastery and sense of control.

2. Resource mobilisation. Some of the psychological features of thriving have been identified as acquiring new skills and knowledge as a result of the disruptive or
traumatic event; increased levels of confidence and sense of mastery; and
strengthened personal relations (Carver, 1998). Similarly, Lepore and Evans
identify a heightened sense of competence, control, and a more flexible coping
repertoire. External resources may be mobilised too, whereby following some
stressors, people might experience an increase in social support, which could be
helpful if confronted by a subsequent stressor.

3. Reappraisal. Here the perceived threat of a stressor is decreased or perceived
coping capacity is increased when the stressor co-occurs with another stressor. For
example, the perceived threat or magnitude of stressor can pale in comparison to a
more serious or major stressor.

2.8 Deviation Amplification and Countering

Aldwin and Sutton (1996) attempt to describe a model by which people derive
positive and negative benefits from stress. They draw on the work of Maruyama (1963),
who proposed two types of change processes - deviation amplification and deviation
countering - to describe adaptive and maladaptive coping spirals. Traditionally, coping
is defined in terms of deviation countering mechanisms, that is, coping is used to
decrease negative affect or to manage a problem. Deviation amplification processes
typically involve positive feedback loops, which either result in positive or negative
spirals. Aldwin and Sutton (1996) propose that certain stressor characteristics make
them more likely to result in amplifying processes. Situations which have a gradual
onset, less severe consequences, and are restricted to one domain are hypothesised to be
more amenable to deviation countering processes. Furthermore, whether or not the
deviation amplification is positive or negative depends on access to coping resources.
Personality processes such as mastery and self-esteem are conceptualised as forming a
part of initial coping resources.
Figure 2.1 below illustrates Aldwin and Sutton’s (1996) negative and positive deviation amplification cycles. The left part of the diagram represents an adaptive spiral. It is proposed that individuals with high levels of mastery may be more likely to use problem-focused coping, which leads to better outcomes and increased situational mastery. Situational mastery may generalise to more global feelings of mastery, which further increases coping resources and resilience to future stress. The right hand side of the diagram represents a negative adaptive cycle. Here individuals who are initially low in mastery may cope poorly with a stressor by using, for example, escapism, which is generally associated with poorer outcomes. This may result in lower levels of situation specific mastery, and then generalise to lower levels of global mastery and in turn increase vulnerability to future stressors.

Figure 2.1 Positive and Negative Adaptive Cycles

(Adapted from Aldwin and Sutton, 1996, p. 843)
However, this model proposed by Aldwin and Sutton (1996) suffers from the shortcomings of interactionism, that is, the person (trait and situational mastery) and the environment (resources) affect coping. In the next section, we will discuss the reductionist, interactionist and transactionist approaches to coping research. Interestingly, it is Aldwin herself who provides the prime critique of the dominant research paradigm in coping (Aldwin, 1994).

2.9 Developing a Broader Context

The study of the specific component parts of coping has provided significant details, however, it has been done at the cost of understanding the broader social context for the meaning of and efficacy of coping efforts. Coping research has been influenced by a paradigm shift in psychosocial research, in which there is a move away from viewing stress, coping and outcomes in reductionist terms to a transactionist understanding (Aldwin, 1994). The survey, earlier in this chapter of the various approaches, indicates a steadily growing complexity in the conceptualisation of coping as more and more sources of influence are taken into account. As has been argued in previous sections, researchers have sought to understand some of the inconsistent research results in coping by broadening conceptions of coping and examining contextual factors.

In her book, *Stress, Coping, and Development*, Carolyn Aldwin (1994) compares three models of coping which provide a meta-view for thinking about coping research. In the reductionist model, coping is viewed as simple responses to stressful environmental stimuli. Thus, a reductionist personality approach assumes that the person affects coping. Similarly, a reductionist situation based approach assumes that situation affects coping.
Reductionism

Environment → Person → Coping

(Aldwin, 1994, p.7)

In the interactionist model, which is the dominant model used by researchers today, coping is hypothesised to be affected by both the person, and the situation.

Interactionism

Environment → Person

Coping

(Aldwin, 1994, p.7)

However, in the transactionist approach, the person, the situation and coping mutually affect one another in a process that evolves over time. Aldwin proposes that “this approach requires a larger, or more contextual, view of the situation and the specifics of the coping behavior may change in response to its effects on the situation.” (p85-86)
Transactionism

(Aldwin, 1994, p.7)

An implication of taking a transactionist perspective to coping is that it implies the processes between stress and coping, the environment and the person, are equally as important. Aldwin argues that in most stress and coping research, the environment has been viewed primarily in interactionist terms, where it is seen as a stimulus or source of stress, or less often as providing resources for coping (e.g., social support). The previous section on interpersonal processes has provided evidence to support Aldwin’s view of environmental influences. Aldwin (1994) states:

A transactionist view suggests that the environment has a much more extensive role than simply its function as a stimulus or a resource...

Further, in most theories, coping is assumed to have some effect on the problem, but studies generally focus only on its effect on the individual’s well-being. From the transactionist point of view, more attention needs to be paid to the effect of coping on the environment, whether its effects on the immediate problem or on others in the situation. (p.8)
Furthermore, Aldwin (1994) goes on to argue that the standard transactionist point of view examines transactions, which occur only within the context of a single stressful episode:

Coping outcomes not only influence appraisal processes within the stress context, but may have effects on both the person and the environment. For example, how a person copes with a particular stressful situation may add to his or her coping repertoire or may alter a person’s outlook on the controllability or uncontrollability of the environment (e.g., locus of control or explanatory style). Further, how an individual copes with a problem may alter the environment, not only whether a particular problem is solved, but also whether and how the problem arises for other individuals... Thus, the implications of a transactionist viewpoint extend beyond the individual stressful context to wider developmental and social concerns. (p.8)

Similarly, Lazarus (1990) recognized some of the intrinsic problems contained in the interactionist perspective.

The stress relationship is not static but is constantly changing as a result of the continual interplay between the person and the environment. For example, in problem-focused coping, the actual terms of the relationship are changed, which in turn affects the appraisal. In emotion-focused coping, what is attended to may be changed, its meaning is changed as when the person denies or distances the threat, which in turn also affects the appraisal. In effect, stress is a multivariate process involving inputs,
outputs and the mediating activities of appraisal and coping; there is constant feedback from ongoing events, based on changes in the person-environment relationship, how it is coped with and therefore, appraised.

(p.4)

Such views mark a shift from simple input-output analysis, which overwhelmingly dominates the field of coping research, to more fluid systems analysis, where components influence each other in time and across the changing contexts of adaptation. However, Aldwin’s and Lazarus’ view does not reflect the dominant approach in coping research. Even Aldwin’s paper from relatively recent times on deviation amplification discussed previously, reflects an interactionist perspective. Such conditions as conceived by the transactionist perspective are difficult to control experimentally within a positivist research paradigm. The conceptualisation of stress, appraisal, and coping processes as continually changing, present enormous difficulties for the measurement of stress and coping. How are we going to capture the changing relationship between person and environment? Some of the implications and difficulties of this view for stress and coping research methodologies will be discussed in the next chapter. As Coyne and Whiffen (1995) have noted, unfortunately there are no statistical or logical ways of circumventing naturally occurring patterns of associations among person and situation variables, the severity of stressful episodes, and levels of initial distress.

2.10 The Present Research

This present research comprises of three separate studies aimed at identifying the coping patterns of university students who are performing at different academic levels. Study One will examine a broad range of stressors and coping by a diverse student
population, using a standardised coping questionnaire: the Ways of Coping Revised.
This will set the stage for the following two studies, in which Study Two will
investigate coping by poor performing students and Study Three will explore coping by
high performing students.

Recent years have seen a growing sophistication in the conceptualisation of coping.
However, the research into students and coping is primarily located within reductionist
frameworks. The review of the coping literature raises some questions warranting
further research.

Although numerous, long term and complex types of stressors have been identified
in the student stress research (discussed in detail in Chapter One), the coping research
has tended to focus on single and mostly acute stressors, providing a somewhat
distorted picture of coping. How do high and low performers cope with multiple
stressors? How do students cope with the demands of different roles and social
contexts in their lives?

Do high and low performing students cope with stressors in different ways? As
stressors become more long-term and chronic, how does coping change over time?
Does the same pattern exist for chronic stressors as for acute stressors, where active
coping is more efficacious than emotion-focused strategies? Significant gender
differences have been identified for academic performance. Do gender differences in
coping account for any of these differences in performance?

Although relationship stressors have been identified causing significant distress,
minimal conceptualisation has occurred as to how students cope with these relationship
conflicts. Further, social support has been examined in a limited way, where it is
conceptualised primarily as a resource or as a form of palliative coping. What role does
social support play with long term and multiple stressors? What are processes
associated with maintaining social support? What processes contribute to support
deterioration with chronic stressors? What role does proactive and relationship- focused
coping play in coping with multiple and chronic stressors?

Finally, how is stress, coping and academic performance related? Is it the case that
high performers experience fewer stressors, or does coping play a role in moderating
stress? What are the patterns of deviation amplification and deviation countering cycles
associated with stress, coping and academic performance?
Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, some of the broad methodological issues and controversies in coping research will be explored. Changing conceptualisations of coping discussed in the previous chapter have obviously impacted on the measurement of coping, which has been replete with controversial debates about the exact constructs that are being measured and the efficacy of the measurement tools utilised. Numerous methods for measuring and assessing coping have been developed (Porter and Stone, 1996; Steed, 1998), which include standardised coping, personality or defense mechanism inventories, interviewing protocols and observational techniques.

The present research utilises three different methods: the Ways of Coping Revised (WOCR)- a standardised coping checklist (Folkman and Lazarus, 1986); a semi-structured interview; and a contents analysis of written documents. In this chapter, the strengths and weaknesses of these methods will be evaluated and the triangulation of multi-method approaches will be discussed.

3.1 Coping Checklists

Different conceptualisations of coping have led to the development of various standardised questionnaires. Coping has been assessed either as a trait (e.g., Byrne, 1961), as defense mechanisms (e.g., Joffe and Naditch, 1977) or as situation-specific measures (Folkman and Lazarus, 1986).
In the past twenty years, the most widely used approach for studying coping has been the situation specific / methods-foci approach (Edwards and Baglioni, 1993), which has been used to investigate transactional theories of coping. These situation specific, self report coping questionnaires are designed to elicit the thoughts and actions that individuals used to cope with a given stressful situation along with its emotional concomitants. The situation specific/methods-foci approach would be best represented by the Ways of Coping Checklist (WOCR), which was originally developed by Lazarus and his colleagues (Aldwin, Folkman, Schaefer, Coyne and Lazarus, 1980) and later revised by Folkman and Lazarus (1985). The WOCR became the gold standard of coping measurement in research designs (Snyder, 1999). Other investigators have developed their own coping schemes (Billings and Moos, 1984; McCrae, 1984) but for the large part they are modifications of the WOCR.

The WOCR (Lazarus and Folkman, 1985) consists of 67 items that describe a broad range of cognitive and behavioural coping responses which people might utilise to manage internal and/or external demands in stressful situations. Respondents describe their coping response to a problem situation by indicating how often they used a coping strategy in relation to a problem or stressful situation. The rating scale ranges from : 0= not used/not applicable; 1= used somewhat; 2= used quite a bit; 3= used a great deal. An endorsement of an item means that the thought or action actually occurred in relation to the problem situation during the period of reporting. Ratings for the 67 items are factor analysed so that more distinct coping strategies can be identified. The factors
emerging always represent both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies. Folkman and Lazarus’ (1986) factor analysis produced the following eight factors:

1. Planful Problem Solving which represents efforts at managing the problem with items such as “Came up with a couple of different solutions to the problem.”

2. Confrontive Coping which is another problem-focused strategy used to bargain or compromise to get something positive from the situation.

3. Self Control or exercising caution represents holding back actions which might do more harm than good represented by items such as “tried not to burn my bridges but leave things open somewhat.”

4. Escape-Avoidance is an emotion-focused factor which is related to wishful thinking, fantasising, or escaping into excessive use of drugs, alcohol or sleep.

5. Accepting Responsibility is a strategy which is directed at the self rather than the problem and is represented in items such as “realised that I had brought the problem on myself”.

6. Positive Reappraisal or seeking new meaning is viewed as an emotion focused strategy and involves discovering new faith, turning to religion or changing or growing as a person.

7. Distancing seeks to minimise the problem; it is the conscious coping effort to avoid dwelling on the problem and seen in items such as “tried to forget the whole thing” or “went on as if nothing had happened”.

8. Social support is viewed as involving both problem solving (getting advice and information) and emotion-focused (in getting emotional support and understanding to alleviate distress) strategies.
The WOCR permits respondents to characterise their thoughts and behavior with some degree of complexity because a wide range of coping activities are included. It is also applicable to a variety of arenas, such as coping with disease, job related stress or coping with loss. The WOCR has enabled the efficient assessment of a wide variety of coping strategies without any a priori assumption about the usefulness of particular coping strategies. Some of the advantages of Coping Checklists include: their ease of utility; little training is required for its administration; they can be used with large samples; and they include both problem and emotion-focused items. However, limitations have also been identified in the use of coping checklists, which involve questions about the psychometric properties of the instrument; ambiguity in the meaning of responses endorsed; and that pen and paper tests poorly represent the more complex transactional processes of coping.

There has been extensive discussion as to the construct validity of the WOCR. Factor analyses of data from a number of different samples has indicated that there is an unstable factor structure ranging from three to nine factors (Aldwin et al., 1980; Atkinson and Violata, 1993; Collins, Baum and Singer, 1983; Edwards and Baglioni, 1993; Edwards and O’Neill, 1998; Folkman and Lazarus, 1986; Macrae, 1984; Vitaliano, Russo, Carr, Maiuro and Becker, 1985). This unstable factor structure is partly attributable to a confounding of different coping methods in the WOCR and the intercorrelations between subscales is often high and the internal consistency of the subscales is often only moderate (Endler and Parker, 1990; Edwards and Baglioni, 1993).
There is a lack of consensus concerning the appropriateness of applying traditional psychometric criteria to coping scales (Coyne and Gottlieb, 1996). Some authors have argued that coping scales are more analogous to the techniques of behavioural observation than to traditional personality measures (Aldwin, 1994; Folkman, 1992; Kennedy-Moore, 1992). Defending coping questionnaires, Aldwin (1994) argues that coping scales borrow from qualitative research methods, which involves asking people: what they did; how they behaved; what they thought; or how they handled their emotions. In contrast, good personality measures are supposed to tap stable characteristics of the individual and these traits should have high test/retest reliability. Therefore, concludes Aldwin, it is invalid to hold process measures that are used in field settings to the same psychometric criteria as personality measures. Furthermore, a process model of coping assumes variability and change, and the unreliability in pen and paper instruments may reflect a process of change in strategies. For example, in preparing for an examination a student may seek social support by seeking information about an academic problem but avoid being with people in general so as to concentrate on revision for exams. Similarly, Coyne and Gottlieb (1996) caution against efforts to simulate laboratory conditions by applying sampling or statistical techniques to naturalistic data as it is likely to result in the mismeasure of coping, along with a misunderstanding of its complex role in fostering human adaptation.

Although these widely used quantitative methods of measuring coping have broadened our understanding of coping, Coyne and Gottlieb (1996, p.968) argue that the problems identified so far with coping checklists can be “solved not by
developing better checklists, but rather by relying less exclusively on such a limited methodology.” Lazarus (2000), while defending the continued use of standardised coping questionnaires, adds the qualification:

that questionnaires should be thought of as an initial rather than final step towards understanding and that they do not allow psychologists to go below the surface to identify goals and situational intentions, especially those of which the individual is unaware. Nevertheless, they permit the study of large samples and the quantification of coping processes, which under some circumstances is useful and important. (p.666).

Although Study 1 was completed prior to Lazarus’ (2000) defense of coping checklists, the rationale was similar. Using the WOCR with a large sample of students gave an initial overview of their distribution of coping strategies and a general sense of the relationship of coping with different types of stressors with academic performance. It provided the background from which the detailed dynamics of coping for low and high performing students could be examined in Studies 2 and 3.

3.2 Qualitative Methodologies

The following discussion on the benefits of using alternative methodologies will set the context for Studies 2 and 3 in this thesis. Although quantitative coping measures have some advantages, it is difficult to assess in-depth the dynamic,
ever-changing nature of the coping process using standardised pencil and paper tests. Some of these limitations to self-report checklists and questionnaires can be overcome by alternative methodologies which combine both quantitative and qualitative data (Ostell and Oakland, 1996) through such approaches as semi-structured interviews and the analysis of written accounts.

An alternative method for assessing coping has been the use of diaries and written recall, from which a content analysis of the text is conducted. Documentary evidence has long been used as a rich source of data in general social science research. Obviously, the advantages outlined below on interview methodology also apply to the analysis of written texts describing stressful experiences and coping efforts. This was the method utilised in Study 2, where a contents analysis of Exclusion Appeals letters was conducted to identify stressors and coping strategies used by poor performers. Study 3 utilised both an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to examine coping by high performing students.

As shown in the study of life events (Brown and Harris, 1978), semi-structured interviews can be used to elicit the information needed to clarify the context of coping and the personal significance of what has transpired in the lives of respondents. Many of the now widely accepted arguments for the advantages of semi-structured interviews over checklists for the assessment of stress apply equally well to the assessment of coping.

Semi-structured interviews allow open-ended questions to be asked about why a particular strategy was chosen, whether or not a strategy was effective and what
effects this had on psychological reactions and on the situation. This allows the examination of the complex, changing coping processes often involving multiple permutations of situational and personal variables which are conceptualised as central to the transactional model. In addition, factors such as: assessing coping efficacy; adequacy of external resources; and how coping generates additional problems can be studied. Different coping behaviors or thoughts can be used in different ways, with different intentions and with different degrees of efficacy (Oakland and Ostell, 1996). Exploring rather than obscuring such differences provides a meaningful and relevant understanding of coping.

Concluding from their data of interviews with head teachers, Oakland and Ostell (1996) write:

The qualitative data illustrate the tremendous diversity and complexity of coping behaviors and the dynamic nature of a process in which coping actions are often used reiteratively or on a trial-and-error basis according to a complex and ever-changing interaction of personal and situational factors. In some cases, actions are immediately effective, in others, strategies are initially effective but then cease to be so. Sometimes wide varieties of strategies employed over long periods of time prove totally ineffectual leaving the problem unchanged or worsened. At no time is coping a static, unitary event. (p.13)
3.2.1 Rich Descriptive Narratives

Semi-structured interviews provide rich, complicated descriptions of coping strategies that are often more psychometrically messy than simple characterisations of coping. By allowing respondents to provide their own descriptive narratives of stress and coping experiences, our understanding of coping processes can be enhanced.

There is evidence to indicate that coping is not a rational and deliberate process as the narrative imposed by coping models and standardised questionnaires suggests (Coyne and Gottlieb, 1996):

Coping assessment require respondents to adopt a particular theory-saturated form of narrative in thinking about and reporting on the stress and the coping processes in their lives. According to this imposed narrative, people encounter a stressful episode in their lives, make appraisals of what is at stake and their personal resources, and based on this scenario, select coping strategies and experience particular emotions as a result. Implicit in all of this are the assumptions that people take stock of what they can do, they have goals and plans for achieving these goals, and that they select and organise what they do in terms of these goals. (p.973)

The reality is that coping with a stressful situation is seldom such a straightforward linear process. Coyne and Gottlieb argue:
Often respondents have muddled through difficult times without ever making an appraisal of what is at stake, what their resources are, and exactly what they are trying to do. They may never have arrived at an overarching primary (e.g., What is at stake?) or secondary (e.g., What are my resources?) appraisal until they had to supply one for the coping questionnaire. Sometimes a stressor becomes the immediate focus of coping efforts, but at other times, it is ignored because the goal is simply to persist in an activity that is made more difficult by the stressor. Persons may become deeply involved in coping with what will later be construed as a stressful episode without initially constructing it as such. (p.973)

3.2.2 Meaning

The actual meanings of responses made by respondents, especially when contextual information is not available about intention and purpose, can be difficult to interpret. For example, a single coping item in the WOCR, such as, “Talked with others about the problem” could feasibly involve a variety of foci, whereby it involves information seeking, which helps with direct problem solving. It could also provide emotional support by allaying fears and building stronger relationships and social networks. Thus, a single act may be classified as involving all three of problem solving, emotion and relationship-focused coping, but coping items in standardised questionnaires do not permit such complex interpretations.

Furthermore, from the transactional perspective, the same coping response can have different meanings across different situations and at different times. As
stressful episodes unfold, the same coping efforts may shift meaning (Coyne and Gottlieb, 1996). For example, early in a stress process, a student endorsing the WOCR item “avoided being with people in general” might mean they are not attending university or they are avoiding contact with lecturers and other students. However, when writing an assignment it might refer to a deliberate, constructive effort to think through the key issues without distraction. Prior to exams, it might mean they are declining social commitments that would interfere with their plan to revise their study. Following exams it might refer to a time of much needed relaxation, where the student feels they have done all they can and there is nothing more to do. In such a transactional view of coping, concrete thoughts and behaviours may shift in function as they migrate from one coping category to another. Qualitative methods help us to capture this complexity and the changing dynamic processes associated with coping.

3.3 Context of Multiple and Long-Term Stressors

In Chapter 2, there was considerable discussion about the narrow focus of coping research on single, acute stressors. A further difficulty with data gained from coping checklists is that they are often treated as if they were gained from laboratory studies in which participants were assigned to uniform and highly controlled experimental situations. Coyne and Gottlieb (1996, p.967) make the point that “stressful situations on which respondents report are not truly independent of the larger patterning of person and contextual variables.”

The incidents people report as being the most stressful event in their recent lives, as well as how these events unfolded and what options were available for
coping with them is determined partly by stressors they have experienced in the past, and by their history of previous coping attempts. "Past coping may influence the perception of stressful episodes now being encountered; and the range of coping responses employed may reflect how these episodes fit into the rest of the individual's current circumstances and past history." (Coyne and Gottlieb, 1996, p.967)

Qualitative methods allow for a broader range of data to be gathered about previous coping attempts, the chronicity of stressors, as well as, the range of concurrent stressors students are managing, and how these may interact.

3.4 Coping Efficacy

The final advantage of using semi-structured interview methodology concerns the developing of a better understanding of the efficacy of a chosen strategy. When particular coping strategies (e.g., Escape-Avoidance) have been linked to particular outcomes (e.g., depression), there has been a tendency to label them as effective or ineffective. Knowing that someone made a plan of action to solve a problem does not indicate what the plan consisted of and whether or not that strategy was successful. Furthermore, what were the consequences of carrying out the plan? As Oakland and Ostell (1996) argue, the study of coping needs to extend beyond the type of strategy and how often it is used and how these factors relate to personal and situational outcomes (as is typical of coping checklists). It is coping efficacy which can have profound effects on psychological stress reactions, subsequent coping behaviors, and ultimately, on personal and situational
outcomes. Indeed, Oakland and Ostell’s qualitative data show, in a way that quantitative measures do not, that coping efforts can generate additional problems.

Several advantages have been identified for the use of qualitative methodologies, in terms of better representing the complex, changing processes of coping and to provide a better understanding for the broader meaning and efficacy of those coping responses. However, qualitative methods are time consuming and labour intensive at both the data gathering and analysis stage of the research.

3.5 Combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies

The advantages of quantitative and qualitative methodologies discussed above suggest that there is much to be gained by using a combination of approaches. However, their combination is not straightforward because the two approaches represent different epistemological systems (Leonard, 1995). The vast majority of quantitative, coping studies uncritically adopt the assumptions of logical positivism. It assumes that there are underlying laws governing human behaviour and that those laws will be revealed by the use of valid, objective methods and the testing of hypotheses. The more valid the method the more accurately the truth will be revealed. Within the logical-positivist framework however there are researchers who emphasise internal validity and those who emphasise external validity.

Those who emphasise internal validity argue that the social context only confounds the identification of universal laws. Their aim is to develop methods that reduce the influence of extraneous variables and participant reactance. Within this
paradigm the ideal is the controlled experiment. However, there is recognition that measurement of intra-psychic phenomenon such as stress and coping, depend on self-report techniques (quasi-experiment). Such researchers would focus on the quality of the development of a coping checklist and the uniformity of procedures by which responses were obtained. The vast majority of quantitative coping studies uncritically adopt the assumptions of logical-positivism and a quasi-experimental paradigm (Steed, 1998).

Those emphasising external validity want to know if researchers' constructs are widely used by people in different walks of life. The social context is not, therefore, a source of extraneous variables but an important aspect of the research. Although, in theory, they stress that all methods have their strengths and weaknesses, most researchers in this group would argue against the use of experiments on the grounds that the conditions under which data are collected are so divorced from people's usual environment that the information is largely irrelevant and useless. It is the group concerned with external validity who have been more interested in qualitative and multi-method research. They argue that, since all methods are prone to error, it is best to only use information that is obtained by more than one method (e.g., Brewer and Hunter, 1989). This is largely the position taken by the majority of coping researchers undertaking multi-method research.

In contrast to the first two approaches, researchers coming from a constructivist perspective highlight the role of the participant as an active agent in the construction of meaning from any given task. It is expected that, because each
technique has different task demands, each will elicit different responses from participants. In theory this perspective does not give greater value to any particular technique. All techniques will interact with the topic of inquiry to form different pictures. In practice constructionists, like those concerned with external validity, would avoid experiments because of the problems with generalisation. However, in the context of constructivism, these doubts should not be labelled as doubts about their external validity since the term validity implies that there is an absolute truth that could be found with a perfectly valid measure. Although constructivists do not have a problem with multi-method research, many constructivists are highly critical of the dominance of quantitative methods which have historically been almost synonymous with logical-positivism. They would therefore be unlikely to combine quantitative and qualitative methods (Lather, 1991). Recent coping and thriving studies utilising alternative methodologies are increasingly taking such a constructivist position (e.g., Higgins and Leibowitz, 1999).

The adoption of multi-methods from either the external validity or constructivist approaches requires a move from the search for the “best” method to a recognition that different methods give different information. The identification of quantitative measures with logical-positivism depends on a particular interpretation of them. If coping checklists are recognised as an adaptation of qualitative methods (Aldwin, 1994) and used in a more limited way (Coyne and Gottlieb, 1996) they may be used alongside other methods. Further, the exploration of shared meanings and the social context for coping indicates a constructivist epistemological position is taken in this current research.
Three different types of methodologies were utilised in this research. In conjunction with the standardised Ways of Coping Revised questionnaire and self-report measures of stress, documentary data was collected in the form of exclusion Appeal letters, along with semi-structured interviews. Triangulation of these different research methods can optimize opportunities to develop new insights and conceptualization of coping (Punch, 1998).

Taking a triangulation approach to multi-method research is not very common in coping research as the field has been dominated by the positivist and reductionist paradigms. However, the triangulation approach frees us from “narrow minded empiricism” (Schwarzer and Schwarzer, 1996), potentially opening up new avenues of reconceptualising the complexity of coping by extending its application to a broader range of stressors.

In the following three chapters, three separate studies examining coping and academic performance will be reported. Chapter 4 reports a quantitative study examining the relationship amongst coping strategies, stress measures and academic performance. Chapter 5 examines the stressors and coping strategies used by excluded students, and Chapter 6 investigates coping by high performing students.
Chapter 4

Study 1: Student Stress, Ways of Coping and Academic Performance

4.1 Aims and Research Questions

This is the first of three studies examining the relationships between stressors reported by students, the types of coping used and academic performance. As discussed in detail in Chapter 1, student stress has been linked to not only poor health and adjustment outcomes, but also to poor academic performance and student attrition. The literature on student coping and academic adjustment was reviewed in Chapter 2, and a significant body of research evidence was presented supporting the links between the use of specific coping strategies, adjustment to stress and prediction of academic outcomes.

Study 1 will identify coping patterns for a broad range of university students from different demographic groups. Previous coping studies have a tendency to use a narrow sample of university students, such as residential college students (who are more likely to be younger, full-time students) or first year psychology students. This study aims to include students from a broad range of demographic groups, who represent the diversity of student populations today. As discussed in Chapter 1, certain demographic groups, in particular, males, part time and commencing students are at higher risk of student attrition and, therefore, of particular interest in this study. Identifying different coping patterns amongst demographic groups may enable coping skills interventions to be targeted more specifically at high risk demographic groups.
Although previous coping studies have used students in their sample, they are frequently chosen for their accessibility and convenience, rather than being subjects of intrinsic interest to the researcher. The research studies in this thesis have an underlying aim of informing student services personnel and practitioners working with students by providing conceptual maps to further facilitate and enhance students' psychosocial adjustment and coping.

Of interest is the examination of students' ability to cope with a broad range of stressors relevant to their life contexts. As has been discussed previously in Chapter 2, coping with student stress has frequently been defined in narrow terms, such as coping with examinations. Even when chronic stressors have been studied, they tend to focus on narrowly defined situations, such as having too much reading material to cover. Such stressors are far less complex and probably require less complex coping responses. This thesis aims to further extend our understanding of the ways students cope with complexity, multiple roles, and diverse multiple stressors. This first study will set the stage for examining the broader social context for student coping.

The primary aim of this present study is to examine the extent to which coping strategies have a predictive value for academic performance by moderating the effects of stressors. Two measures of academic performance are used in this study. Grade Point Average (GPA) is an objective outcome measure of academic performance, whereas Study Demands is a subjective measure of students' experience of academic demands. The relationship between these two measures and student retention may not be straightforward. Some high performing students may experience high Study Demands and go onto complete their degree. The converse may also be true, where high
performers may experience low Study Demands but may leave university for non-academic reasons.

Study 1 will also set the stage for the following two studies, which will investigate more specifically, the coping strategies used by high and low performing students in relation to multiple and long-term stressors.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Participants

The participants for this research were students studying at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. In total, 588 students completed the questionnaire, however, 67 questionnaires were eliminated due to non-completion of a number of items, leaving 521 students in the study.

Demographic data were collected concerning the participants including: gender; age; faculty in which they were studying; number of years they had studied at university; enrolment status (full-time or part-time); Grade Point Average; and whether they were English speaking or non-English speaking at home.

- **Gender.** The gender breakdown of this group was 308 females (59.1%) and 213 males (40.9%). The overall undergraduate population at QUT comprised of 53.7% female students and 46.3% male students indicating that the sample in this study had a higher proportion of female students.
- **Faculty.** 503 students nominated the faculty in which they were enrolled (Missing N=18). Students from a number of classes within the Faculties of Business, Built Environment and Engineering and Arts and Social Sciences were approached to
participate in the study. It was anticipated that these three disciplines would give a good cross section of subject disciplines, as well as ensure a better gender balance of participants, as Arts is female dominated, Engineering is male dominated and Business has a balance of males and females enrolled. A small number of students from other faculties also studied these subjects.

- **Age.** The ages of the students ranged from 17 years to 59 years. For the purposes of this study, students' ages were divided into three age ranges. The first group comprised 163 School Leavers aged 17 and 18 years (31.3%). The second group comprised 136 Young Adults aged 19 to 21 years (26.1%). The final group comprises 139 Mature Age students aged 22-59 years (26.7%) with 15.9% (N=83) of students failing to nominate their age.

- **Year of Study.** The majority of students, 409 (78.5%) were enrolled in the first year of their course. The remaining 112 students (21.5%) were grouped together to include those who were studying in the latter years of their course.

- **Study Mode.** 423 students (81.2 %) were engaged in full-time study while 97 students (18.6 %) were studying part-time (Missing N=1). In the overall undergraduate population at QUT, 72% comprised full-time students and 28% were part-time students indicating that the sample in this study had a higher proportion of full-time students.

- **English Speaking.** 461 (88.5%) students came from English speaking backgrounds and 60 (11.5%) students did not speak English at home. This obviously does not represent all students from other ethnic backgrounds as students from a non-English speaking background may speak English at home. In the overall undergraduate population at QUT 3.06% of students came from non-English speaking students as defined by DETYA and 6.1% were fee-paying overseas students (a large proportion of whom come from non-English speaking backgrounds.)
4.2.2 Materials

The questionnaire consisted of four types of questions; (1) the demographic questions described under Participants; (2) academic performance; (3) types of stressors; (4) coping strategies (See Appendix A for the full questionnaire). The questionnaire had been pilot-tested with students, where a poor response rate and feedback that the questionnaire was too lengthy led to it being modified and shortened.

4.2.3 Academic Performance

GPA. Academic performance is considered in two ways, GPA and Study Demands. First, it is measured objectively through student reported GPA, which is graded on five levels ranging from: 0 = Fail average; 1 = Borderline Fail average ; 2 = Pass average; 3 = Credit average; 4 = Distinction and High Distinction average.

Study Demands. Second, academic performance is assessed using a subjective measure of students’ perceptions of their study demands. A 4 point Likert scale is used, where students rated their study demands from 1 through to 4, where 1 indicates Extremely stressful; 2 indicates Very stressful; 3 indicates Somewhat stressful; and finally, 4 indicates Little or no stress was experienced.

4.2.4 Stressor Ratings

Students were asked to make self-report ratings of the levels of stress experienced in seven areas of common concern to students. These were developed from a previous pilot study of probationary students (Vivekananda, 1996), the results of which are reported in Chapter 1. These stressors are related to students’ academic, social and personal adjustment to university and are identified in Table 4.2.4 below.
Table 4.2.4 List of Stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Variable name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>Finances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career goals or career prospects</td>
<td>Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressures and expectations from myself</td>
<td>Internal Pressures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting into uni</td>
<td>Fitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with lecturers and students</td>
<td>Lecturers/Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibilities and commitments outside of uni</td>
<td>External Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional/relationship worries</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students rated their stress from 1 through to 4, where: 1 indicates that the stressor was Extremely stressful; 2 indicates Very stressful; 3 indicates Somewhat stressful; and finally, 4 indicates Little or no stress was experienced. (See Appendix A for full questionnaire)

4.2.5 Ways of Coping

The Ways of Coping Questionnaire Revised (WOCR) developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1988) was administered in this research study. This questionnaire consists of 66 item self-report inventory measuring eight types of coping strategies subscales: Confrontive Coping; Distancing; Self-Controlling; Social Support; Accepting Responsibility; Escape-Avoidance; Planful Problem Solving; Positive Reappraisal (See Appendix A for full questionnaire). Each coping subscale contains several items. Sixteen of the sixty six items are unscaled. The WOCQ utilises a four point Likert type scale ranging from a rating of: 1 indicates the strategy is Used a great deal; 2 indicates Used quite a bit; 3 indicates Used somewhat; and 4 indicates Does not apply or not used.
Table 4.2.5  Description of Subscales from Ways of Coping Questionnaire

(Folkman and Lazarus, 1988)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping Subscales</th>
<th>Description of Coping Scales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontative Coping</td>
<td>to alter the situation and suggests some degree of hostility and risk-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distancing (6 items)</td>
<td>describes cognitive efforts to detach oneself and to minimise the significance of the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Controlling (7 items)</td>
<td>describes efforts to regulate one’s feelings and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Social</td>
<td>describes efforts to seek informational support, tangible support and emotional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support (6 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Responsibility</td>
<td>acknowledges one’s own role in the problem with a concomitant theme of trying to put things right.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-Avoidance</td>
<td>describes wishful thinking and behavioral efforts to escape or avoid the problem. Items on this scale contrast with those on the Distancing scale, which suggest detachment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planful Problem</td>
<td>describes deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation, coupled with an analytic approach to solving the problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solving (6 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reappraisal</td>
<td>describes efforts to create positive meaning by focusing on personal growth. It also has a religious dimension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.6 Procedure

The study fulfilled the requirements of the University of Western Sydney’s Research Ethics Committee and was given Ethics Approval. Students were surveyed at the beginning of second semester. It was anticipated that by this time in the academic year students would have the opportunity to experience the difficulties of university study and have a more realistic understanding of the stressors that might be affecting them (Shores and Vivekananda, 1997).

The questionnaire was administered in class time with the approval of lecturers in the Faculties of Arts, Business and Built Environment and Engineering. Students were given the assurance that participation was voluntary, and that non-participation would
not affect grades. Students were further assured that all responses would be treated confidentially, and that only group data would be reported.

4.2.7 Analysis

For the analysis of results three families of independent variables were considered: demographic variables, stressors, and coping strategies. GPA and Study Demands were the dependent variables. The following analyses were conducted on the data:

1. Description of Stressors, Coping strategies, GPA and Study Demands variables.
   - Descriptive statistics for stressors and intercorrelations between stressors.
   - Descriptive statistics for the coping strategies.
   - The distributions for GPA and Study Demands.

2. Bivariate Relationships between Independent Variables and GPA.
   - The relationship between Demographic variables and GPA.
   - Correlations for Stressors and GPA.
   - Correlations for Coping strategies and GPA.

3. Bivariate Relationship between Independent Variables and Study Demands.
   - Demographic variables and Study Demands
   - Correlations for Stressors and Study Demands
   - Correlations for Coping strategies and Study Demands

4. Comparison of Two Models of the Relationship between Stressors, GPA and Coping. In order to establish the extent to which coping moderates stressors and has a predictive value for GPA, two models were tested.
• Model 1 tested for the relationship between GPA, and Stressors, adjusting for demographic variables.

• In Model 2 the Coping variables, in order of their bivariate relationship to GPA, were fitted into Model 1.

5. Comparison of Two Models of the Relationship between Stressors, Study Demands and Coping. In order to establish the extent to which coping moderates Stressors and predicts how Study Demands are experienced, two further models were tested.

• Model 3 tested for the relationship amongst Study Demands, and Stressors, adjusting for demographic variables.

• In Model 4 the Coping variables, in order of their bivariate relationship to Study demands, were fitted into Model 3.

4.3 Results

The results are presented in five sections, one for each of the analyses listed above. A significance level of .01 was used, however, marginally significant results between .01 and .05 were mentioned.

4.3.1 Description of Stressors, Coping strategies, GPA and Study Demands variables

4.3.1.1 Description of Stressors

The analysis examined a separate Stress Score (SS) for each stressor and a Total Stress Score (TSS) was also calculated by adding the separate Stressor Scores.
The following stressors are ordered according to the level of stressfulness experienced by students (Table 4.3.1). A higher percentage of students rated their level of stress as extremely high or very high in the areas of: Internal Pressures and External Responsibilities. This indicates that students experience stress across very different domains in their life - intra-psychic stress from pressures and expectations from themselves, as well as managing their roles and responsibilities external to their university studies. Of moderate levels of stress were Finances, Emotional/relationship worries and Career goals and prospects. Those stressors that were rated as least stressful were Health, Fitting into university, relationships with Lecturers/Students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressors</th>
<th>Mean N=521</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Extremely Stressful Rating (%)</th>
<th>Very Stressful Rating (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Stressful Rating (%)</th>
<th>Little or No Stress Rating (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal Pressures</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Responsibilities</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>54.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer/Students</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ratings of stress ranged from 1 (Extremely Stressful) to 4 (Little or No Stress), such that low means indicate high levels of stress.

**4.3.1.2 Intercorrelations for Stressors**

An examination of the intercorrelations between stressors in Table 4.3.1.2 indicates that all the stressors are intercorrelated with each other at a highly significant level. This intercorrelation of stressors suggests that stressors are not discrete types of events, and that stress in one area of a student’s life, tends to be associated with increased stress in others, indicating a case for examining multiple stressors. Also, it may indicate that
high stress students may experience a number of problems at the same time, while low stress students experience few or no difficulties.

**Table 4.3.1.2 Inter correlations for Stressors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Finances</th>
<th>Career</th>
<th>Internal Pressures</th>
<th>Fitting</th>
<th>Lecturer/Students</th>
<th>External Responsibilities</th>
<th>Health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Pressures</td>
<td>.142 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting</td>
<td>.172 **</td>
<td>.304 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer/Students</td>
<td>.104 *</td>
<td>.157 **</td>
<td>.247 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Responsibilities</td>
<td>.120 **</td>
<td>.147 **</td>
<td>.194 **</td>
<td>.469 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.320 **</td>
<td>.161 **</td>
<td>.317 **</td>
<td>.231 **</td>
<td>.145 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>.206 **</td>
<td>.121 **</td>
<td>.266 **</td>
<td>.151 **</td>
<td>.111 *</td>
<td>.348 **</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.165 **</td>
<td>.106 *</td>
<td>.266 **</td>
<td>.235 **</td>
<td>.248 **</td>
<td>.361 **</td>
<td>.294 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

4.3.1.3 Descriptive Statistics for Coping Strategies

Table 4.3.1.3 provides the means and standard deviations for each of the eight coping strategies.

**Table 4.3.1.3 Means for Each Coping Strategy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategy</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reappraisal</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ratings for Coping ranged from 1 (Used a great deal) to 4 (Does not apply or not used), such that low means indicate higher levels of usage and vice versa. It can be seen in Table 4.3.2.1 that Problem Solving coping was reported as most frequently used, while Confrontation coping was the least frequently used coping strategy.
4.3.1.4 Distribution for GPA and Mean for Study Demands

The distribution for GPA is presented in Table 4.3.1.4 below. The mean GPA is 2.2 (0= Fail; 1= Borderline Fail; 2= Pass; 3= Credit; 4=Distinction and High Distinction) and the SD .99.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline fail</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinction and above</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>521</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3.1.5 Mean and Distribution for Study Demands

The mean and distribution for Study Demands are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Performance</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Extremely Stressful Rating (%)</th>
<th>Very Stressful Rating (%)</th>
<th>Somewhat Stressful Rating (%)</th>
<th>Little or No Stress Rating (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study Demands</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is significant but weak correlation of -.148 between Study Demands and GPA, indicating that lower GPA students experienced greater Study demands and vice versa.

4.3.2 Bivariate Relationships between Independent Variables and GPA

4.3.2.1 The Relationship between Demographic Variables and GPA

A series of five univariate Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether significant differences in GPA existed for the five demographic variables and the results are summarised in Table 4.3.2.1 (Full results in Appendix B)
Table 4.3.2.1  Summary of Analyses of Variance for the Relationships between GPA and Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Groups</th>
<th>P Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.028 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Mode</td>
<td>.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Study</td>
<td>.002 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level  
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

Significant relationships with GPA occurred for the following three demographic variables: Age, Year of study and English speaking. The nature of the relationships are as follows:

- **Age and GPA.** Mature Age students gained a higher GPA than Young Adults or School Leavers. [F(2,435)= 3.616; Mature Age students M= 2.35, SD = 1.11, N= 139); Young Adults M= 2.03, SD= 136, N= 136; School Leavers M= 2.20, SD= 0.91, N= 163].

- **English Speaking and GPA.** Students from English speaking backgrounds gained significantly higher GPA than their non-English speaking background counterparts. [F(1,519)= 16.453; non-English Speaking M= 1.72, SD= .1.11, N= 60; English Speaking M= 2.26, SD=.96, N= 461]

- **Year of Study and GPA.** First year students gained significantly higher GPA than latter year students. [F(1,519)= 10.007; First Year students M= 2.27, SD= 0.95, N= 409; Latter Year students M= 1.94, SD= 0.99, N= 112] . It is possible that latter year students are repeating first year subjects which they have previously failed.
4.3.2.2 Correlations for Stressors and GPA

Correlations were conducted to examine the relationship between GPA and the seven Stressors. In Table 4.3.4.2 it can be seen that GPA has a marginally significant but negative correlation with Lecturers/Students and Health, indicating that students having higher stress from poor relationships with lecturers and other students and students experiencing high stress from poor health are more likely to gain lower GPA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2 tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>-.048</td>
<td>.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>-.081</td>
<td>.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Pressures</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting</td>
<td>-.049</td>
<td>.266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer/Students</td>
<td>-.093</td>
<td>.033 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Responsibilities</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>.017 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>.069</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at .05 level

4.3.2.3 Correlations for Coping Strategies and GPA

To examine the relationship between the eight coping strategies and GPA, further correlations were conducted and the results are summarized in Table 4.3.4.3 below. It can be seen in Table 4.3.4.3 that the Coping strategies of Responsibility and Social Support are positively correlated with GPA. Problem Solving is correlated with GPA at a borderline significance level at .051. Distancing is negatively correlated with GPA.
Table 4.3.2.3. Correlations Between the Coping Strategies and GPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping Strategy</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2 tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>-.071</td>
<td>.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>-.153</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-Avoidance</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reappraisal</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>.012 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.004 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
*  Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

4.3.3 Bivariate Relationship Between Independent Variables and Study Demands

4.3.3.1 Demographic Variables and Study Demands

A series of five ANOVA was conducted to examine whether significant differences in Study Demands existed for the five demographic variables and the results are summarized in Table 4.3.3.1 (Full results in Appendix C)

Table 4.3.3.1 Summary of ANOVA for the Relationships between Study Demands and Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>.409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.014 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Mode</td>
<td>.029 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Study</td>
<td>.849</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
*  Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
Significant relationships occurred for the demographic variables of Gender and Study Mode as follows:

- Gender and Study Demands. Female students were more stressed by Study Demands than Male students. \[F(1,519)= 6.139; \text{Female students } M= 2.19, \text{SD} = 0.83, \text{N} = 308; \text{Male students } M= 2.38, \text{SD} = 0.91, \text{N} = 213].

- Study Mode and Study Demands. Part-time students experienced higher levels of stress from Study Demands than Fulltime students. \[F(1,518)= 4.769; \text{Part-time } M= 2.09, \text{SD} = .85, \text{N} = 97; \text{Full-time } M= 2.30, \text{SD} = 0.86, \text{N} = 423].

### 4.3.3.2 Correlations for Stressors and Study Demands

It can be seen in Table 4.3.3.2 that all Stressors are positively correlated with Study Demands with External Responsibilities having the strongest relationship.

#### Table 4.3.3.2 Correlations for Stressors and Study Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressors</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2 tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>.282</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>.294</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Pressures</td>
<td>.378</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting</td>
<td>.280</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer/Students</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Responsibilities</td>
<td>.496</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>.315</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>.251</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

### 4.3.3.3 Correlations for Coping Strategies and Study Demands

Correlations were conducted to examine the relationship between the eight coping strategies and Study Demands and the results are summarized in Table 4.3.3.3 below.

It can be seen in Table 4.3.3.3 that five Coping strategies, Confrontation, Control,
Distance, Escape-Avoidance, and Responsibility, are positively correlated with Study Demands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping Strategies</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2 tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>.141</td>
<td>.001 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.195</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.001 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-Avoidance</td>
<td>.303</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Reappraisal</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>.264</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>.069</td>
<td>.118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
4.3.4 The Relationships between Stressors, Demographic Variables and GPA

A linear model analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of the different stressors to GPA, adjusting for the demographic variables. As a preliminary step the demographic variables were entered together with the two-way interactions, to identify which demographics and interactions between demographics, were significantly related to GPA. English, Year of Study, Gender, the interaction between English and Year of Study and the interaction between Gender and Study Mode were highly significant and were therefore included in the model with the stressors. It is worth commenting that although first year students scored higher GPAs than second year students in the overall sample, however, second year non-English speaking students scored higher GPA’s than first year non-English speaking students.

The independent variables were entered into the model in an order corresponding to the strength of their bivariate relationship to GPA. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 4.3.4.1 below. It can be seen from the Table 4.3.4.1 that four demographic variables, English Speaking, Year of Study, Gender, and the interaction between English Speaking by Year of Study remain significantly related to GPA. Health remains the only stressor in the model predicting GPA. In other words, female, first year, English speaking students, second year non-English speaking students and having good health are all strongly associated with predicting higher GPA. Model 1 accounts for 12.7% of the variance in GPA.
Table 4.3.4.1.

Model 1: The Relationships between Stressors, Demographic Variables and GPA

Dependent Variable: GPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>53.309</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.808</td>
<td>4.374</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>6.468</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.468</td>
<td>7.430</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>12.787</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.787</td>
<td>14.688</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Study</td>
<td>7.886</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7.886</td>
<td>9.059</td>
<td>.003 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>11.598</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.598</td>
<td>13.322</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English by Year of Study</td>
<td>3.695</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.695</td>
<td>4.244</td>
<td>.040 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender by Study Mode</td>
<td>3.449</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.725</td>
<td>1.981</td>
<td>.139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5.073</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.073</td>
<td>5.827</td>
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<td>.734</td>
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R Squared = .127 (Adjusted R Squared = .098)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

4.3.4.2 Model 2 The Effect of Coping on the Relationships between Stressors, Demographic Variables and GPA

Model 2 analysed the extent to which coping strategies changed the relationship between stressors and GPA. The coping strategies were fitted into Model 1 in order of their bivariate relationship to GPA and the results are shown in Table 4.3.4.2. The two coping strategies that have the strongest predictive power on GPA are Social Support, and Responsibility. Problem Solving and Distance were marginally significant. Problem Solving and Social Support are positively correlated with GPA and responsibility and Distancing are negatively correlated with GPA. Two demographic
variables English Speaking and Year of Study remain strongly and significantly related to GPA. Gender and English Speaking by Year of Study are marginally significant indicating that female students and second year non-English speaking students also gained higher GPA. In other words, first year and English speaking students used significantly higher levels, and female students and second year non-English-speaking students used marginally significant levels of higher Social Support and Problem Solving coping strategies and lower levels of Distancing and Responsibility coping strategies. Model 2 accounted for 20.3% of the variance in GPA.

Table 4.3.4.2 Tests of Between-Subjects Effects Dependent Variable: GPA

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<td>7.843</td>
<td>9.683</td>
<td>.002 **</td>
</tr>
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<td>6.103</td>
<td>7.535</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4.051</td>
<td>5.002</td>
<td>.026 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape-Avoidance</td>
<td>5.231E-02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.231E-02</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>.369</td>
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<td>.456</td>
<td>.500</td>
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<td>Positive Reappraisal</td>
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<td>.795</td>
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<td>.322</td>
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<td>16.218</td>
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<td>7.572</td>
<td>9.349</td>
<td>.002 **</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Fitting</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>.375</td>
<td>.463</td>
<td>.497</td>
</tr>
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<td>Finances</td>
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<td>1.926</td>
<td>2.378</td>
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<td>Internal Pressures</td>
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<td>2.583</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Responsibilities</td>
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<td>8.373E-05</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.992</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>419</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
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<td>418</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

a R Squared = .203 (Adjusted R Squared = .163)

** Significant at the 0.01 level
* Significant at the 0.05 level
4.3.4.3 Final Reduced Model for GPA

A final model for GPA was developed of those variables related to GPA and the results are presented in Table 4.3.4.3. It can be seen that the stressor of Health and the demographic of Gender becomes even more strongly predictive of GPA in this final model. The final Model for GPA demonstrated that a higher use of Social Support, and Problem Solving strategies, and the lower use of Responsibility (self blame) have a moderate predictive power for high GPA. In the univariate analysis Distancing was most strongly related to GPA but when entered in to the model with the other coping strategies, the effect of Distancing disappears. Having good health, being female, English speaking, first year students and second year non-English speaking students and the higher use of active coping strategies of Problem Solving and Social Support and the lower use of emotion-focused strategy of Responsibility predicted successful academic performance.

Table 4.3.4.3 The Effects of Coping on Stressors, Demographics and GPA

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects
Dependent Variable: GPA

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<th>Sig.</th>
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<td>8.617</td>
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<td>35.129</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.000 **</td>
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<td>5.267</td>
<td>6.439</td>
<td>.012 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>English Speaking</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>18.966</td>
<td>23.184</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of Study</td>
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<td>10.315</td>
<td>12.609</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>6.149</td>
<td>7.516</td>
<td>.006 **</td>
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<td>English by year of Study</td>
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a R Squared = .170 (Adjusted R Squared = .154)
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
4.3.5 The Relationship Between Stressors, Demographics and Study Demands

4.3.5.1. Model 3: The Effect of Stressors on Study Demands

Model 3 examined the effects of various stressors on the subjective experience of academic performance (Study Demands), adjusting for demographic variables. As in Model 1 the significant demographics and two-way interactions between them were identified first. Independent variables were entered into the model in an order corresponding to the strength of their bivariate relationship to Study Demands. The results of this analysis are shown below in Table 4.3.5.1 and it can be seen that the effects of all the demographic groups on Study Demands disappear. However, a number of stressors - External Responsibilities, Internal Pressures, Health, Career, are all strongly related to increased Study Demands and Finances and Fitting are marginally significant. Model 3 accounts for 35.7% of the variance in Study Demands. It should be remembered that Study Demands and GPA are negatively correlated, with the experience of high Study Demands being associated with lower GPA.
Table 4.3.5.1. Model 3: The Effect of Stressors on Study Demands

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Study Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<td>.410</td>
<td>.522</td>
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<td>13.378</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6.891</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>6.810</td>
<td>13.846</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2.548</td>
<td>5.180</td>
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a. R Squared = .357 (Adjusted R Squared = .343)
** Significant at the 0.01 level
* Significant at the 0.05 level

4.3.5.2 Model 4: The Effect of Coping on Stressors and Study Demands

When the coping strategies are entered into the model, three stressors, External Responsibilities, Health, Career remain significantly related to Study Demands and Internal Pressures is marginally related. The coping strategy Escape-Avoidance has the strongest predictive power in terms of Study demands and Responsibility (self-blame) makes a marginally significant contribution to the model. Model 4 predicts 37% of the variance in Study Demands. It is understandable that students who have high levels of stress from external responsibilities, health and career worries and pressures and
expectations from themselves should also experience academic performance as particularly demanding. Model 4 suggests that they will exacerbate the situation if they try to use the emotion-focused coping strategies of Escape or Responsibility (self-blame). Not only do these strategies directly contribute to higher Study Demands but they also may aggravate the effects of their health problems and stress from responsibilities external to university.

Table 4.3.5.2 Model 4: The Effects of Coping on Stressors and Study Demands

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Study Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<td>.477</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.135</td>
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<td>.135</td>
<td>.285</td>
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<td>1.072</td>
<td>2.267</td>
<td>.133</td>
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<td>Fitting</td>
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<td>1.814</td>
<td>3.838</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>301.800</td>
<td>418</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

a R Squared = .370 (Adjusted R Squared = .345)
** Significant at the 0.01 level
* Significant at the 0.05 level
4.3.5.3 Final Reduced Model for Study Demands

A final model for Study Demands was developed from those variables related to Study Demands and the results can be seen in Table 4.3.6.3. It can be seen that the stressors of Internal Pressures and Health become even more strongly predictive of Study Demands in this final model. The coping strategy of Escape-Avoidance remains as the only coping strategy predictive of Study Demands. In other words, students experiencing stress from External Responsibilities, Internal Pressures, Career and Health concerns are more likely to experience higher Study Demands when they use Escape-Avoidance strategies.

Table 4.3.5.3

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Study Demands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
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<th>Mean Square</th>
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<th>Sig.</th>
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<td>42.150</td>
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<td>.969</td>
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<td>58.926</td>
<td>.000 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Pressures</td>
<td>4.182</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.182</td>
<td>8.643</td>
<td>.003 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>4.381</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.381</td>
<td>9.054</td>
<td>.003 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>5.154</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.154</td>
<td>10.651</td>
<td>.001 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>199.829</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>.484</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2366.000</td>
<td>419</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Total</td>
<td>301.800</td>
<td>418</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a R Squared = .338 (Adjusted R Squared = .330)
** Significant at the 0.01 level
* Significant at the 0.05 level
4.4 Discussion

A brief discussion of the results of Study 1 will take place in this section, and a fuller discussion of the broader significance of all three studies occurs in Chapter 7.

It is evident that students experience multiple stressors across a broad range of contexts. The three stressors which were experienced as most frequently stressful concerned stress from pressures and expectations coming from oneself, family and work responsibilities, indicating that students experience stress from a wide range of domains and social contexts. Furthermore, all stressors are positively intercorrelated, indicating that when students experience stress it tends to be generalised across several realms in their lives. Stressors in one social context have a strong possibility of contaminating and increasing stress in other social contexts of students’ lives. Students do not seem to compartmentalise their stress into discrete events or into separate areas of their life. However, coping research has largely focused on single stressors, and has tended to assume that stressors exist independently of one another. It can be seen that high levels of Study Demands are correlated with stress from work and family responsibilities, health, career concerns. However, in relation to objective measures of academic performance, only one stressor Health remains in the model predicting GPA.

Two patterns of coping are found to be predictive of academic performance. The final Model for GPA demonstrated that a higher use of Social Support, and Problem Solving strategies, and the lower use of Responsibility (self blame) have a moderate predictive power for high GPA. In the univariate analysis Distancing was most strongly related to GPA but when entered in to the model with the other coping strategies, the effect of Distancing disappears. The reverse is true for lower GPA, where lower use of Social Support and Problem Solving, along with higher levels of Responsibility (self-
blame) are associated with low academic performance. Model 2 shows that coping has a positive effect on GPA by modifying stressors. Moreover, coping seems to have an independent effect on GPA, regardless of the levels of stress students are experiencing. Broadly speaking, the findings from Study 1 are consistent with the many research studies in which problem-focused coping is associated with better adjustment outcomes, whereas emotion-focused coping tends to lead to poorer outcomes. However, in Studies 2 and 3 it will be argued that these findings provide a narrow and distorted picture of coping and a broader context for understanding the efficacy of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping will be investigated.

Previous findings related to social support have been more equivocal. High levels of support seeking are not always associated with positive outcomes and some studies have found that social support seeking is associated with higher levels of emotional distress. Aspinwall and Taylor (1992) found similar levels of social support seeking amongst high and low performers, however, high performers expressed more satisfaction with the support they received. This strongly suggests that not only it is important to seek social support but one has to be happy with the type of social support which is given. Consistent with the national trend female students gained higher GPA than male students. Better performance by female students is associated with higher levels of problem solving and social support strategies, along with lower levels of emotion-focused strategies. This is consistent with previous literature where females report utilising higher levels of social support strategies (Endler and Parker, 1990; Hobfall and Vaux, 1993). Student Services at universities generally report higher levels of usage by females for academic support and counselling (Griffith University, 1998; Queensland University of Technology, 2000).
The pattern of social support seeking amongst high and low performers warrants further investigation. What enables some to seek social support and others not? What forms of social support seeking are associated with better academic performance? What leads to higher levels of satisfaction with the social support received? How do students maintain their social support systems? These questions will be further investigated in Studies 2 and 3.

The finding that Responsibility is associated with lower GPA needs to be explained. Responsibility in the WOCR questionnaire can be more accurately described as self-blame as it is characterised by such items as: "Criticise or lecture myself", "Realize I brought the problem on myself". Folkman and Lazarus (1985) found that higher levels of emotional distress was correlated with responsibility and wishful thinking. It seems that blaming oneself when stress is high is more likely to make students feel worse about their situation.

Distancing appears as the strongest variable in univariate analysis. Its effects disappears in Model 2. Distancing and Responsibility are intercorrelated, therefore both do not appear in Model 2. It is unclear as to how Distancing and self-blame may be related. Do students who feel overwhelmed by self-blame and distress, then make a counter-coping strategy by Distancing themselves from their worries? Are different groups of students more likely to use either Distancing or Responsibility strategies? These questions as to the relationship between and sequence of coping strategies warrant further exploration in Study 2.

The Final Model for Study Demands establishes a different pattern of coping related to academic performance. This model focused on the subjective experience of Study
Demands which is found to be negatively correlated with GPA. This pattern indicates that multiple stressors, in particular, External Responsibilities, Health, Career and Internal Pressures, increase the risk of difficulties with academic demands. Furthermore, the use of an emotion-focused coping strategy, Escape-Avoidance, has the strongest predictive power in terms of increased Study Demands.

Of particular importance is the finding which identifies several demographic groups as academically at risk. Students who are male, first year non-English speaking, and latter year students are all associated with lower academic performance. It has been suggested by Dunahoo et al., (1998, p.138) that men are often depicted as more instrumental and less likely to call upon social support. This reflects underlying cultural expectations, where “masculine behavior is termed rugged individualism and is based on the belief that it is ideal to act alone, without the help of others, and with little or no emotion.”

Non-English speaking students utilise a very different pattern of coping from English speaking students. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds placed a higher value on duties and responsibilities to the family (Gonzales, 2001). It is unclear what proportion of these students are International students.

As with all cross-sectional correlational studies some limitations need to be acknowledged. The cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow the evaluation of causal relationships. This study is also limited by the use of self-report questionnaire data with a lack of behavioural validation. As has been discussed previously, standardised questionnaires impose a theory saturated narrative on coping processes.
The variables GPA and Study Demands are significantly though weakly correlated. This suggests that some students may experience high Study Demands but nevertheless score high GPA. Alternatively, some students may experience low Study Demands but score low GPA. Further, more of the variance is accounted for in subjective measures of academic performance. This is understandable as stressors are positively correlated with Study Demands at a moderately strong level. In relation to objective measures of academic performance, it is likely other factors such as study skills and cognitive ability may also be directly related to GPA.

Study 1 indicates the need for an in depth analysis of the patterns that are suggested by these results. As such, Study 2 further examines a possible negative cycle where Escape-Avoidance strategies, in relation to multiple stressors, exacerbate Study Demands. Study 3, which is presented in Chapter 6, will further investigate the coping strategies of students who experience multiple stressors but are academically successful. Study 3 examines the role that problem solving and social support play in enhancing high performance. The broader discussion of the combined results of the three studies is in Chapter 7.
Chapter 5

Study 2: Coping by Excluded Students

5.1 Introduction

As has been discussed in Chapter 1, the issue of student persistence and departure is of considerable interest and significance to higher education institutions. Each year, in universities around Australia, many thousands of students are excluded from their courses for poor performance. Excluded students fall under the category of “involuntary withdrawals” because the decision is initiated by the institution rather than by the student. Not all students who withdraw from university do so due to poor performance. Some will leave voluntarily, while others are called “stopouts” as they intend to resume their studies at a later date or at a different institution.

5.1.1 Aims and Research Questions

In Chapter 2, two gaps in the existing coping literature were identified. The first gap concerns the focus on single, rather than multiple stressors. Second, the study of coping with acute rather than chronic stressors has been favoured. This second study involves a content analysis of Exclusion Appeal letters as they were expected to provide rich contextual data about the problems and stressors affecting poor performing students. More broadly, a qualitative investigation will enable information to be gathered about the social context in which individual coping of poor performers takes place. Furthermore, Exclusion Appeal letters can provide an opportunity to examine how students cope across multiple roles and how coping taking place in one role context affects coping in a different role. It has been argued in Chapter 2 that
coping strategies cannot be fully assessed without taking into account the context in which they are used.

As discussed extensively in Chapter 3, a number of authors have highlighted some of the weaknesses inherent in quantitative approaches, such as standardised coping checklists. Alternative approaches which combine both quantitative and qualitative data have been proposed to overcome some of these shortcomings. By utilising alternative methodologies, in terms of text analysis, we can broaden our understanding of the processes that are associated with poor performance. An analysis of Exclusion Appeal letters allows for the examination of more long-term, multiple stressors affecting students, as this is generally the basis under which students make their appeals. The types of coping strategies utilised by poor performers, as well as the range, sequence, effectiveness and the consequences of particular coping strategies were examined.

Study 2 provides rich contextual data for a more in-depth understanding of the findings from Study 1, related to stressors, patterns of coping and their relationship to poor performance. In Study 1, it was found that coping had a direct effect on GPA regardless of the stress students were experiencing. Lower use of Social Support and Problem Solving coping strategies and higher levels of emotion-focused strategies (Distancing and Responsibility) directly predict low GPA. Furthermore, coping modified Health as a stressor. In terms of subjective measures of academic performance, a negative cycle was identified, where high Study Demands was correlated with the multiple stressors: External Responsibilities, Internal Pressures, Health and Career concerns. Study Demands are exacerbated by the use of Escape Avoidance coping.
A further area of research interest concerns the use of proactive coping by poor performers, as students are required by the university to identify strategies that they will utilise to improve their future academic performance. As discussed in Chapter 2, proactive coping may play an important part in minimising or averting chronic stress.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Participants

At the Queensland University of Technology, in second semester, 1995 a total of 630 students were excluded from their courses for a low GPA, failure of a practical, or twice failing the same subject. Of these excluded students, 182 wrote Exclusion Appeal letters that were received by the University. Three exclusions were based on an administrative error by the University, leaving 179 letters to be included in this study.

The majority, 130 letters (72.6%) of the Exclusion Appeal letters were received from male students and 49 (27.3%) letters were from female students. These proportions are consistent with the figures for students at academic risk at QUT, where 67% of poor performers are males, while 33% are females. In the overall undergraduate population males comprise 48.4% of student enrolments, while females make up 51.5%, indicating that males are overrepresented amongst poor performers.

A total of 630 students were excluded from their course, so those appealing against their exclusion formed a small part 28.7% (N=182) of the overall group of involuntary withdrawals. The results of Exclusion Appeals indicated that 119 students had their Appeal upheld, while 61 students had their Appeal rejected. It should be noted that all
excluded students are placed on one semester of probation prior to exclusion, in order to give poor performing students an opportunity to take action to alter their academic performance.

5.2.2 Materials

Students are able to make written submissions to appeal against their exclusion on the grounds of: procedural incorrectness; severity of penalty; and mitigating circumstances which have affected their performance. Appeal letters are written to an Exclusions Appeals Committee comprised of representatives of each Faculty, and University Administration. The prime purpose of Appeal letters is to allow students to explain the circumstances affecting their performance, to provide evidence that their circumstances have changed and to persuade the university to reverse its decision to exclude the student from their studies. Exclusion Appeal Committees require some kind of documentary evidence to substantiate the students’ case. The outcome of an appeal involves two possible consequences: the Appeal is upheld (and the student is able to resume their study) or the Appeal is dismissed, whereby the student is excluded from their studies for an indefinite period.

5.2.3 Procedure

Copies of Exclusion Appeal letters were obtained from Student Administration, with identifying data (names and addresses) deleted, for the purposes of conducting a content analysis of the letters. Non-identifying data was collected concerning gender, the types of problems both personal and academic encountered by students, and the types of coping strategies low performers reported utilising.
Written permission was given by the Registrar for the researcher to have access to Exclusion Appeals letters. At the time of the study QUT’s research ethics policy did not require joint institutional ethics approval, so permission from the QUT Ethics Committee was not required. Ethics approval was sought from the Institution where the researcher was enrolled and was given by the University of Western Sydney, Nepean’s Research Ethics Committee.

5.2.4 Analysis

An inductive approach to analysing the data was employed in order to draw meaning from the text. Three processes recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) were used for analysing Exclusion Appeal letters: 1) data reduction 2) data display and 3) drawing and verifying conclusions.

As there was a large volume of data to manage from 179 letters, in the initial stages of data reduction, the exclusion letters were simply edited, segmented and summarized. Six major problem types experienced by excluded students emerged from this analysis. In the middle stages of data reduction, coping strategies were coded using Folkman and Lazarus eight factors identified in the Ways of Coping Revised questionnaire. This enabled comparison of similarities and differences to be made with the stressors and coping strategies identified in Studies 1 and 3. As students did not identify some of the WOCR coping factors, strategies were further collapsed into three broad categories: problem-focused coping, emotion focused-coping, and relationship-focused coping. Data displays with tables using SPSS helped to organise, compress, and assemble information. Memoing, and other associated activities were utilised to identify major themes, clusters and patterns. In the later stages, more theoretical conceptualising and abstraction helped to reduce the data
further. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified, their relationship to broader theoretical perspectives and the other two studies in this thesis will appear in Chapter 7.

The textual analysis of Exclusion Appeal letters needs to take into consideration the social production and social organisation of the documents being examined (Punch, 1998).

All documentary sources are the result of human activity, produced on the basis of certain ideas, theories or commonly accepted, taken for granted principles, and these are always located within the constraints of particular social, historical or administrative conditions and structures. Words and their meaning depend on where they are used, by whom and to whom. Thus, as discourse analysis points out meaning varies according to the social and institutional setting. (p231)

It is relevant to note that Exclusion Appeal letters are written for the purpose of seeking readmission into a course. As such, letters are written in the context of “excuse giving”, where presumably they are written to present the writer in the best light possible. Therefore, excluded students may highlight the threat appraisal and perceived uncontrollability of stressors. In addition, some excuses are more socially acceptable. For example, work commitments or a divorce provided as reasons for poor performance may be viewed more favourably by an Exclusion Appeals Committee, than an appeal stating the student was stoned at the beach with his/her friends.
5.3 Results

5.3.1.1 Overview of Stressors

In this section a detailed overview of the types of stressors experienced by excluded students will be presented. The analysis of Exclusion Appeal letters revealed six types of non-academic stressors identified by excluded students as affecting their academic performance, which are summarized in Table 5.3.1.1

The most frequently reported stressor concerned Relationship problems with partners, parents or children, followed by Financial, Medical, Job related problems, Practical problems and Adjustment problems being the least reported. In addition to study stressors, students nominated coping with an average of 1.7 non-academic problems. As all students reported study as a problem, the mean number of stressors per student is 2.7.

**Table 5.3.1.1 The Types of Non-Academic Stressors Affecting Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressors</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>53.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following sections, the nature and quality of these stressors will be examined in detail including some direct quotes of the nature of stressors experienced.

5.3.1.2 Relationships

More than half (53%) of excluded students reported experiencing difficulties in their personal relationships. Relationship problems included conflictual interactions
with peers, parents, children and partners. Dealing with unexpected family crises or the burden of caretaking responsibilities for children, siblings and parents which often resulted in chronic role strain or role conflict was also discussed extensively. The loss or absence of significant relationships also caused distress, anxiety and depression.

**Conflict.** In some cases, students were not directly involved as participants in a conflictual situation but were nevertheless affected by ongoing animosity within the family.

The relationship my family shares has never been a smooth one. For a long time, my father and his side of the family, especially his mother, have been in constant disharmony and conflict. When my grandmother came to live with us, from day one, her relationship with my mother and father consisted of bitter arguments, which were very upsetting for all family members. Many of these arguments indirectly influenced my sister and I, as it was very hard to study when these arguments were occurring.

Other students were involved in chronically conflictual relationships with significant others in their life.

I experience a significant degree of personal stress due to strained relationships with my parents, employer and girlfriend. This difficulty was a matter of considerable distraction and unfortunately I let it affect my commitment and performance levels.
Having either too much or not enough independence was viewed as being difficult for some students. Some students experienced stress and conflict over their continued dependence on their parents and felt restricted by parental expectations. A number of students from non-English speaking backgrounds wrote about cultural conflict with their parents about lifestyle, career and relationship choices.

I arrived in Australia with my family from Vietnam 6 years ago. My parents are crashed (sic) in between the Australian culture and the Vietnamese culture. They are still living in an old fashioned way. Since I am the oldest in the family, my parents expect many responsibilities of me.

**Family crisis.** Some students were involved in supporting their family through a crisis such as family illness, their parents losing a job, legal problems, or parental divorce.

My brother suffered from a mental illness which caused him to behave erratically. He received several treatments. His continuing illness made it hard for him to visit hospital to receive further treatment, so he stopped visiting the hospital. Since that, I was occasionally disturbed by him, because when he became not normal, (he heard voices, talked to himself, played music very loudly, and watched television until midnight or sometimes even until the next morning). This kind of situation which he caused was keeping my mother and I insecure especially at night times.
Care-taking Responsibilities. Increased family responsibilities such as the birth of a new baby; lack of partner or family support with childcare; caring for a sick relative or child; or supporting parents also caused significant stress. The following student described how these relationship stressors affected them:

I am under a great amount of pressure to help and care for my parents who are in their 60's. I am the only child in the family and we do not have any relatives or close friends who can help. It is more difficult for me also because of my Vietnamese background. I feel that I have a great responsibility towards my parents because of my background, culture, and being the only child. I feel I have to help and be there for my parents.

This student provided her mother with emotional and practical support when her business underwent difficulties.

At the end of the fifth week I returned home to visit my mother to find her totally exhausted mentally and physically. I found that the business was failing and that my mother had cut staff to save on wages and consequently her own working hours had increased to 15 hrs a day. My brother now suffering the result of her work pressure was rebelling and the situation at home was more unbearable than those at work. My mother began relying on my presence as not only a fully trained worker but for emotional support.
Loss. Losses of relationships were also reported, involving the death of immediate or close family members, friends and even pets. Relationship separations, divorces and break ups featured as a significant stressor. This student describes the impact of the death of his grandparents and a suicidal girlfriend:

During the latter half of 1993 both my grandparents died within a couple of months of each other before I had time to say goodbye…My family crisis continued in 1994 when my parents officially divorced (having separated the previous year) after 22 years of marriage. This obviously greatly added to my stress and uncertainty, as did my younger brother when later that year he dropped out of university and moved in with the “wrong” type of crowd and found himself in trouble with the law…[T]he morning of the exams my girlfriend was seriously suicidal due to extreme personal problems.

A number of students discussed the emotional impact on them of relationship break ups.

The reason for my inability to study was the failure of my long-term relationship of five years. We had plans to get married at the end of this year but things went wrong when we moved to Brisbane where she began to change and left me. I was deeply hurt by memories of her and I was unable to concentrate.

Loneliness. Loneliness from a lack of a significant relationship and social isolation also affected some students’ performance. This student expressed her feelings of inadequacy, social isolation and fears of abandonment:
Before I would have said one reason would be that I didn’t have a boyfriend or a pet I could love. I was not really inspired to work hard because I had no one to work for so they could be proud of me. It was just me and I don’t really count. I was a bit lonely too. I would look around and wonder what others are doing, how they go about their projects and think they do it better than me. Now I’ve found someone I guess I want to do better so they won’t leave me as well.

5.3.1.3 Finances

Financial problems were nominated by 19% of excluded students. Many mentioned being ineligible for Austudy and being required to find part-time or full time paid work, whilst others found it hard to make ends meet surviving on Austudy.

Because I live away from home I feel obliged to support myself without asking my mother for money. It has been a great strain financially to get where I am now. I continually have bills coming in fortnightly, e.g. rent, telephone, gas, electricity, car maintenance and college requirements. I was previously receiving Austudy but that just was not enough to cover a fraction of the bills which required payment.

Some students mentioned having to pay off debts often for such items as cars, over payment of benefits from social security, Austudy or upfront university fees. Not surprisingly, a shortage of finances affected students’ ability to pay for transport, petrol, books and equipment for university.
However, at the beginning of semester, my sister lost her job unexpectedly. My sister is my joint partner in a personal loan, which we took out in order to support ourselves.

Job loss or trying to find employment was identified as a chronic stressor.

My family ran into financial difficulties. I tried to find part-time work but I was unsuccessful. I also discovered I was unable to keep up with my course due to the upheaval in my environment and family life.

5.3.1.4 Medical

Medical problems of a physical or psychiatric nature were the third most frequently stated reason for academic failure (15.8%). These problems ranged from complaints of a generalised lack of well-being through such symptoms as headaches, insomnia, pain and chronic fatigue.

I was always feeling sick and having insomnia. Because of my inability to sleep at night I was unable to concentrate during classes and feel sleepy during the day.

Temporarily disabling conditions or mild types of problems included complaints such as upper respiratory infections, glandular fever, asthma, migraines, broken bones, appendicitis, tonsillitis, joint pains.

First of all I had a severe case of the flu during the end of last semester. This made me feel extremely ill and tired and as a result I was unable
to complete my assignments to my desired result and was unable to adequately prepare for my examinations.

Others reported moderately debilitating medical problems.

Over the past three years I have suffered from continual serious back and neck problems. Over the past year due to long lectures and periods of study while at home these problems with my back and neck have intensified. The stress of final exams also added to and amplified my pain and inability to study to my full potential. The increased stress and pressure I experienced during exams also led to the development of several migraines which I have suffered from occasionally over my secondary schooling.

Permanent disabilities included conditions such as phenylketonuria, profound hearing loss and life threatening illness such as cancer. Only three students reported serious medical problems or chronic disabilities.

I was found to have a malignant brain tumour involving areas of the brain which control speech and movement. After surgery to remove part of the tumour and radiation treatment of the rest, I have suffered problems with transferring thoughts into written word or speech. Memory is another area that has been affected by the surgery, particularly short-term memory. This causes problems when studying or doing set weekly work. Occasionally, I find it difficult to recall the main idea of the paragraph even though I have only just read it. Minor
epileptic fits have resulted from the surgery. These fits while they do not cause unconsciousness, do disrupt concentration when they occur during lectures/tutorials or study.

Psychiatric diagnoses involved conditions such as depression, anxiety disorder, and attention deficit disorder which were reported by a small number of students.

One of the major contributing factors to my less than adequate academic performance over the past year, is that of suffering from reactive depression.

5.3.1.5 Job

A similar percentage of excluded students (15.4%) found paid work interfering with their university studies. While financial difficulties may have been one of the motivating factors causing students to spend too much time at work, this category primarily involved the responsibilities and demands of their paid job interfering with study.

Increase of workload in jobs was due to factors such as: other employees leaving; changes in workplace structure; being understaffed; gaining a promotion; starting and learning the requirements of a new job or new project. Many cited conscientiousness and a sense of responsibility to their employer, sometimes career ambition or fear of losing their job as a motivating factor for taking on an extra workload. There were a few students who were required to undertake travel for work purposes causing them to miss classes for extended periods of time. There was the occasional mention of
conflict with an employer, which resulted in protracted negotiations. A few students cited the responsibility and problems of running their own businesses.

**Overload.** Work overload and increased responsibilities were typical of many students who described work related problems as affecting their studies.

I was working on average 35 hours per week, while at the same time undertaking full time studies. My academic programme included day and evening lectures on Mondays, and evening lectures on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. I was also working at the "flea markets" on Sunday mornings. The above work load left me feeling exhausted most of the time.

A promotion added to the work pressure of this student.

I also felt that I had to endure these work conditions if I was to prove successful in the industry. When I finally decided to leave I was offered a promotion. This was too a good career opportunity to pass up, so I decided to stay. This promotion showed me there were career opportunities and my hard work was paying off. It meant more responsibilities but shorter hours. For this reason I believed that I was able to handle the pressures better.

The pressures of running a business are described by this student.
As further things went wrong in my business I dissolved the partnership in August, however, I had to get part-time work to pay off the debts incurred by my former business partner.

**Workplace Conflict.** Conflict with supervisors over pay or poor work conditions was also stressful.

In July I had a disagreement over pay with my supervisor, who incorrectly believed that I was ineligible to a sizable amount of money, and withheld it from my pay. As a result the union became involved and the money was forwarded to me but they were unable to protect my job.

Workplace harassment affected this student.

Unfortunately I was the victim of workplace harassment and given an extremely rough time by the firm I was with. During my employment I was shown total disrespect and I was left with a bad impression of my job.

**5.3.1.6 Practical**

Of excluded students, 11.9% cited practical or ambient environmental problems, such as lack of proper study environment or stable living environment due to overcrowding or noise from conflicting flat-mates. Hours spent travelling to university or to work took time away from study. Car accidents or cars breaking down increased financial, legal and transport difficulties.
In June it was necessary for me to move again as I was living with a sister and brother who fought constantly, which made the atmosphere in the house unbearable. I found it hard to study as I was uncomfortable about living with them and stressed out about the situation.

Long periods of time (2-4 hours a day) spent travelling to and from university reduced time for study.

The second factor was moving house and relocating at the Gold Coast, which took considerable time and effort. The move has also significantly increased my travelling time.

Car accidents or stolen cars caused financial, transport, medical or legal problems for some students.

One of the factors which I feel impacted on my studies was my involvement in two car accidents. Although no one was injured in the accidents I was left to pay for vehicle damage which amounted to over $2,800.

Legal problems were also experienced by a few students.
I had a summon (sic) from the court because of the car accident. I was really worry (sic) about it, because I was afraid the court is (sic) going to take my driver’s license and fine me a large amount of money.

5.3.1.7 Adjustment

The least reported problem (7.1%) involved adjustment difficulties related to the transition to university, as well as making cultural and social adjustments.

The transition from school to university was tremendous as I was lost and unable to settle into the uni lifestyle.

Others had difficulties looking after themselves for the first time in their life. Some students experienced adjustment difficulties from having moved away from a rural home environment for the first time.

The move to Brisbane was not easy as I come from a close family. During the first couple of months I suffered emotionally as I had never lived away from home before and also due to the fact that I had no immediate family around me.

International students identified adjusting to the expectations of a tertiary Australian education system and feelings of homesickness as particularly stressful.

Being an international student, I have been away from my home and family for a long period of time. There were many emotional difficulties associating with this effect. I always suffered homesick
(sic) and loneliness as I had no family members to discuss my problems in Australia.

Some students experienced difficulty in making the transition from high school, TAFE or work to university study. Many of these students underestimated the academic demands and efforts required to pass at a university level.

As a mature-age student, I’ve found the transformation back to studying a lot harder than other students straight from school. I left a position in the work force not being prepared for the workload expected of me (also probably a little over confident that I could handle it straight from the workforce). One of the biggest transformations/sacrifices in becoming a student again has been leaving a well paid position to living on next to nothing. My whole life style for the last year has completely changed, which has been hard to cope with.

**Loss of motivation.** While many students indicated that they had lost motivation during their course, a few identified that they had lacked interest in their course subject, or lacking a direction in studies and their life.

I was relieved to get into uni but did not expect uni life to be so strenuous and totally different where there is an emphasis on freedom and independence.
Social commitments. This category also involved being engaged in such activities as student association work, a large of amount of sporting activity especially at a representative level, which required travel and a few mentioned socialising with friends or drinking in the student bar.

For the past 10 months I have been playing Rugby League. This required me to train three nights a week and to play on Sunday. Playing rugby league helps me financially.

5.3.1.8 Chronic Social Stressors

Many of the chronic social stressors identified by Lepore (1997) and Wheaton (1997) in the coping literature are present in this analysis of stressors reported in Exclusion Appeal letters. These can be summarized in the following ways:

- Coping with complex demands from different social roles (marital, parental, work, student). Stress arising from interpersonal conflicts, demands, threats, uncertainty, disappointments, responsibilities, obligations and expectations was the most commonly reported chronic social stressor affecting excluded students.

- Stressful life events from normative life events (such as, starting university, relocating from another town or country) or irrevocable life events (such as, the death of a loved one) or traumatic life events (such as, divorce).

- Structural constraints, restriction of choice and resource deprivation were very apparent in the limitations imposed by practical, financial, and health problems.
• Loneliness as a result of few or no social relationships or lacking meaningful and fulfilling social relationships was experienced by a few students.

• Social stimulus overload from an excess of social stimulation; frequent unwanted or undesirable social interactions; or high social density were also apparent in Appeal letters. This particularly affected students who felt they did not have a suitable environment, free from interruptions, where they could study.

5.3.1.9 Gender Differences

Chi Square analysis indicated there were no significant gender difference in the types of problem experienced by excluded students (For full results see Appendix Problem Type by Gender).

5.3.2 Coping Strategies for Different Problem Types

In this section, the type, range, and sequence of coping strategies is identified in relation to particular problem types.

Coping skills were categorised using eight types of coping responses (refer to Study 1) developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1986). These are: Confrontation, Control, Distancing, Escape-Avoidance, Positive Reappraisal, Problem Solving, Responsibility, and Social Support (more than one strategy was able to be used for each problem). In addition, a “No Coping” category was introduced to indicate that the student either did not report what they did in relation to the problem or they took a more passive stance of “doing nothing.” The content analysis of exclusion appeal letters revealed the following patterns of coping skills for each problem type.
5.3.2.1 Relationship Problems

In nearly 44% of cases, students did not report any coping response with relationship problems, suggesting a more passive approach was taken by a sizable number of students. The implications of taking a passive approach will be discussed later. Where coping strategies were stated, relationship problems showed a much more varied coping pattern compared with other problem areas. Problem-focused strategies (Problem Solving, Confrontation) consisted of 36.3% of responses, whereas emotion focused strategies (Control, Distance, Escape Avoidance, and Responsibility) accounted for 16.2% of students of coping responses. Relationship-focused coping (Social support) was hardly reported at all, 3.7% of responses, indicating that poor performers perceived and utilised low levels of social support in their social context.

Table 5.3.2.1 Coping Strategies Used for Relationship Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With relationship problems that were seen as responsibilities to the family, students were likely to utilise problem solving strategies. The most common problem solving effort involved taking on more responsibilities.

I live with my mother, who is 75 years old. Last year in April she had a fall and she suffered a fractured arm. From this day on I had to do
everything for her, because she could not even dress herself. I had to take her to the doctor a couple of times a week. The physiotherapy cost was high and I had to find a job to cover the costs. I am working as a cleaner in the morning, five times a week, and sometimes I was already tired when I arrived at university. If I had a morning class (usually every day), I had to make everything ready for the day, before I went to work. That meant I had to get up at least 4 o’clock in the morning to get her ready.

As well as using problem-focused coping in relation to the financial strains, this student provided emotional and social support to his parents.

My father was the subject of an inquiry, which caused great stress and hardship on family now single income. My brother and sister moved out into a less stressful environment. I still live at home as I have large financial responsibilities and attempt to provide company and support to my mother. This has put a great deal of stress on their marriage and the family has come close on more than one occasion to breaking down.

With relationship losses, students tended to use more emotion-focused coping. This student uses gambling as an Escape-Avoidance and Distancing strategy after a relationship breakup to alleviate his feelings of loneliness and helplessness, as well as, a means of gaining social support. In the long-term this strategy adds to his financial problems.
My gambling addiction started when I ran out places to hang around. I’ve been hanging around with my “friends” at the casino almost everyday. I am not a gambler but I was feeling lonely and helpless and nowhere to go. I became the enemy of those who know me and friends with those whom I just met. I was happy then as I buried my troubles in exciting moment (sic) at the casino. Whenever there is money sent to me by my family, I spend it all on “happiness”. As gambling became part of my painkiller, that’s when I started having financial problems. I’ve borrowed from friends and also lent money to my so-called friends whom then became a stranger. Things became worse as time pass, I was unable to study and unable to get work to pay back my debt.

This student reported passive coping in relation to his family crisis and used Escape-Avoidance strategies through an overuse of alcohol in an attempt to make himself feel better.

My failure is due to a number of factors. Family separation. Depression. Lack of commitment and determination. My family provided the level of stress to make life not worth living. Causing depression which led to alcohol. I spent too much time at the campus club. Drank far too much. Didn’t go to many classes. And submitted no assessment.

In relation to relationship problems low performers utilise problem-focused strategies for situations they perceive as controllable, such as caretaking responsibilities. Whereas they tend to utilise more emotion-focused strategies for
situations perceived as uncontrollable such as losses. What is interesting to note here is the low use of relationship-focused coping strategies (social support), along with a significantly high percentage (44%) remaining passive in the face of stress within their relationships. The implications of this coping approach in terms of social support maintenance and deterioration will be discussed later in this chapter.

5.3.2.2 Financial problems

Students’ letters show a similar pattern of coping for Financial and Work problems, where generally active coping was reported. Problem Solving strategies were used the vast majority of time (79.9%). In contrast to the strategies used for Relationship problems, emotion-focused strategies were not reported by any students in relation to financial problems and only 18.1% indicated taking a passive approach.

Table 5.3.2.2 Coping Used For Financial Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With Financial problems which resulted from debts or meeting living expenses, students used problem solving strategies by spending time looking for part-time or full-time work, increasing hours of paid work, taking out loans to pay debts, and approaching charities. This often exacerbated other stressors, such as increasing health problems or reducing their ability to meet study demands.

When she lost her job however, I took up the responsibility of paying off this loan by myself. With this burden and all of my other expenses, I had to increase my work hours to 25-35 hours per week. On top of my loan payments, my $700 car insurance was due. Although I had saved
up for this expense, it was necessary for me to use this money for my loan repayments. Once again, it was necessary to increase my work hours.

The following student’s problem solving efforts increased family conflict, leading her to use more confrontational coping.

As a result, I applied for the Austudy supplement which was $7000. I did this to help my parents with the bills. My parents were not happy about the loan and we would often argue about the situation.

This student’s problem solving efforts (mounting a case with Austudy) exacerbated his stress and expended his resources (time):

I was no longer eligible for Austudy because I was not enrolled full-time and had to pay back $2050. I was unable to fully dedicate myself to exam preparation as great deal of effort and time was put into mounting a case against Austudy decision. The time and stress this situation created greatly reduced my exam performance.

5.3.2.3 Medical Problems

The pattern for coping with Medical problems was a little different from previous problems, in that seeking help from a professional is defined as social support (Folkman and Lazarus, 1986). Just over a half of students consulted a medical practitioner or other health professional, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist. A surprisingly high percentage 42.6% do not report or do not use any type of coping in
relation to their medical problems, suggesting that large numbers of excluded students
took a passive approach to their health.

**Table 5.3.2.3 Coping Used for Medical Problems**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>51.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of students reported seeking the advice of GPs and a specialist. However, this student's more generalised physical symptoms of tiredness and fatigue seem to be related to lifestyle factors and stressors.

In the first semester I saw my family doctor over a dozen times. Unable to cure me or isolate the problem, my family doctor sent me to a specialist in the second semester. The specialist determined my problem to be allergic rhinitis and mild asthma. He gave me medication, which helped me as long as I did not overwork myself. Despite this medication, my health deteriorated, causing fatigue and tiredness to set in. This was due to the long hours at work, late hours at university, and a lack of rest and time for relaxation.

The following student did not report any particular coping strategy in relation to their chronic pain.

In addition to these problems I have a back condition, where I cannot remain seated for a long period of time. This causes the tension in my back to rise and as a result it can be very uncomfortable and sometimes
painful. When I sit down to study, I can only do so for a short period of time.

A few students reported long-term medical problems and chronic disabilities. They all mention seeking medical/psychological consultations for their problems. Although, their medical/psychological difficulties warranted significant accommodation in their university workload, they do not report seeking such assistance. This student’s neurological difficulties resulting from a brain tumour have a significant effect on his memory and concentration but he struggles with his academic workload without seeking assistance from the university. He would have been eligible for special consideration, extra time to complete assignments, or supplementary exams. His attempts to keep his problems to himself increased his worry creating “a great deal of stress which in turn increased the incidence of epileptic fits…”.

5.3.2.4 Work Problems

As with Financial problems, students tended to approach paid work almost invariably with active problem solving coping strategies (84.5%). Problem solving strategies often involved putting more time, effort and energy into dealing with paid work demands and stressors. Emotion-focused coping strategies such as Escape-Avoidance or Distancing were not reported by any students. Passive coping was reported by a small number of students (10.3%).

Table 5.3.2.4 Coping Used for Work Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping</th>
<th>(N)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping strategy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following students described typical kinds of problem solving strategies used to deal with work demands and pressures. These involved: putting in more effort; concentrating on what to do next; and changing something in order to solve the problem.

This involved working under extreme pressures. This involved working long hours (e.g. until 8 pm or 9 pm four or five nights a week). Consequently I missed many of my classes and/or tutorials. I was afraid of losing my job and often took work home with me.

Travel for his job resulted in this student missing significant parts of his course.

My workload was significantly increased when, with 10 days notice, I was asked to travel to Cairns from the period of the 7th October to the 22nd October with work.

This student reported an unsympathetic employer who was clearly unsupportive of him taking time off to study for exams.

My employers expected me to work as much as possible, which made it difficult to take time off to study. My work stress increased throughout the year as they would verbally abuse me if I was not able to work during the exam period and also at other times.

Problem solving by reducing paid work demands or hours was mentioned only by a very small minority of students. Such changes as taking up a less demanding fulltime
job; giving up part-time job; reducing work hours; or working only during holiday periods tended to occur very late in the coping period.

5.3.2.5 Practical Problems

A similar pattern was repeated for practical problems where problem solving skills were most widely used. However, the percentage of ‘no coping’ is nearly half of students’ responses.

Table 5.3.2.5 Coping Strategy Used For Practical Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Problem-focused and social support strategies were used by this student.

At the start of semester I had a car accident. I went to the Counselling Service and asked them if they could provide me with any legal advice. However, they could not provide me with it and neither could they tell me how to get legal advice. So I had to run here and there to get a solicitor to give me a legal advice which cost me a lot of money.

This student reported problem-focused coping in terms of moving house, however the timing of the move at exam time critically affected his studies.

The unit I was living in was getting too small. This created a lot of stress between my flatmates and myself, so we had to look for alternative accommodation. This took a long time because the real
estate agents didn’t help much. At one stage it took a week to get a
look at one place.

5.3.2.6 Adjustment Problems

Adjustment problems elicited a range of emotion-focused coping strategies such as
Distancing, Escape-Avoidance, and Control. However, the majority of students (60%) did not report any kind of coping.

Table 5.3.2.6 Coping Used For Adjustment Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This student used a range of emotion-focused strategies. Initially, Distancing
strategies are utilised where the student wrote, “I was disappointed with semester 1
results and realised I took subjects too lightly.” Later in the semester, Escape-
Avoidance was used:

I wasn’t sure if I should continue or defer studies. I attended uni for 5
weeks and realised I had made a big mistake. I found the work to be
mentally and physically draining but it was too late to cancel my
enrolment. I continued to attend but felt emotionally depressed and
unmotivated. I worried about failing and being excluded. I felt totally
stressed out and low on motivation, so began to skip lectures and
didn’t attend exams.
Several students described feeling distressed by transition issues, however, no coping strategies were reported. This school leaver described the disruption to his study by noisy flat-mates.

My family lives on the Sunshine Coast, I therefore moved to Brisbane to attend University. Unfortunately, I had difficulty adjusting to my new environment away from my family. My living environment in Brisbane was not healthy for a full time student who needs to concentrate on their studies. I was living in a unit with two older working males who did not consider my need to study and therefore caused continual disruption to my studying environment.

5.3.2.7 Coping with Study

Needless to say, all excluded students experienced difficulties with their academic work. The patterns of coping with study problems which emerged differs considerably from the coping patterns described for work and personal problems. Nearly half (45.3%) of students do not identify using any coping strategy - either because they had not actually used one or did not think to report using one. Emotion-focused strategies were the next most commonly used at 31.5%, which is consistent with previous studies, where passive and avoidant coping have been identified as related to low GPA and other poor academic outcomes. Active coping such as, problem solving strategies were used only 14.9% of times and Social Support made up only 8.1% of responses.
This pattern of coping with study is vastly different when compared with how students cope with work or financial problems, suggesting the social context, as well as the type of stressor play a significant part in how students cope.

Table 5.3.2.7 Coping Used For Study Problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping Skill</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No coping</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A few students used problem solving strategies by: reducing their study load; changing from full-time study to part-time study; withdrawing from one subject; deferring study to the following semester. A small number of students also reported that their problem solving strategies increased somewhat towards the end of semester. Some students attempted a last minute burst of effort prior to exams, however, such efforts usually escalated their stress, as reported by this student:

My poor performance in first semester were a result of leaving it too late to start studying. I felt I would easily make up for it in 2nd semester and continued to do long hours at work to prove myself. Three quarters through second semester, I started to concentrate on university and realised how far behind I was and how much I had forgotten from College. I was even worse prepared for 2nd semester exams, as I was trying to get familiar with first semester subjects in order to understand 2nd semester. I became stressed and concerned about failing. I became
more stressed from late night cramming and unable to then concentrate
in exams.

Others attempted to withdraw without penalty late in the semester when it incurred
a failure. However, timing of problem solving strategies is critical for effectiveness.
Seen within the broader context such problem solving coping efforts have an element
of Escape-Avoidance.

I tried to drop one or two subjects in mid October but told I couldn’t. I
was able to get four hours of work per week which proved to distract
my attention away from my studies. I have wasted a certain amount of
time in the past. At the end of semester I got full time work and was
unable to sit for exams.

Some students responded at the end of semester by Escaping through distraction
and avoidance.

It is very hard to organise your time when it seems to waste away. I’m
not a very time conscious person. I never seem to get the things I want
done, done. I used to be smart. I used to like studying because I was
interested in it. Then I let it slip.

This student’s attempt to problem solve his failure by increasing his academic
workload to 8-9 subjects per semester ended in disaster, further escalating his
academic stress as he lacked the appropriate pre-requisite knowledge in his subjects.
Another factor affecting my studies was the fact that a double degree course was much harder than I expected. When I entered second and third years of the course I found it extremely hard to keep up without having the basic knowledge of the course which I should have studied before hand. Because of my desire to catch up on the subjects I had previously failed, I felt more pressure in studying and I undertook more subjects than I could handle. My average course load was 8-9 subjects per semester. Added to the strain of undertaking such a demanding load, I was unwell during the exam period. Although I was granted deferred exams for some subjects, my results still suffered.

Students reported that personal problems, stress and demands outside of university had several effects on academic participation, such as attending lectures or tutorials on a regular basis. This decreased their academic and social adjustment to university by isolating them from lecturers, tutors and other students. External stressors also reduced preparation time for study, and revision for exams. Some did not meet academic requirements such as completing assignments or attending examinations.

Because of my full-time work commitments (40-50 hours per week) I am unable to attend day time lectures on most occasions. But as this is my last subject I have left to complete my degree, I felt I had no choice but to at least try. I now understand that I have other options available to me, like external studies or taking a substitute subject which I could take at night.
Some students minimised the threat of study demands by failing to seek the correct information (a form of passive coping) or ignoring important pieces of information: “I thought previous failures were irrelevant due to time limitations because they were over two years ago.” According to another student, “I withdrew from my exams mistakenly believing a withdrawal would not result in failure.”

These two students appear to be engaging in wishful thinking (emotion-focused coping), which reduces for them the seriousness of the academic problems facing them:

Although my academic record has not been good over the last 2 years, I did honestly feel that I had done better in the last semester. I have applied for review of grade. I didn’t know I was on probation. This was a surprise to me as I have never received an official notice from the university to this effect. I have not had any contact with course coordinator which I assure you would have occurred had I been aware of the urgency of the situation.

I missed an exam due to being incorrectly informed. I wanted to drop a subject but it was too late. I informed a lecturer who said not to concern myself with this problem.

A few students underestimated the difficulty of academic demands at university.

Being a mature-aged student I found the transformation back to studying harder than other student straight from school. I was not prepared for the workload expected of me (also probably a little over
confident that I could handle it coming straight from the workforce again as I had previously at TAFE).

5.3.2.8 No Coping

When the figures for “no coping” responses are examined an interesting pattern emerges. “No coping” responses indicate a passive coping approach. Responses were coded as “no coping” either when no coping response was identified by the student, or where students responded passively to a problem. For example, when work commitments clashed with university timetables, and the student does not do anything to change the situation and continues to consistently miss lectures, the Study stressor was coded with a “No Coping” response. The stressors which elicited the highest levels of “No Coping” responses are: Relationships (44%); Medical (42.6%); Adjustment (47.2%); Practical (60%); and Study (45.4%).

The qualitative data from Exclusion Appeals letters reveals that close to half of coping strategies involve passive behavioural responses such as doing nothing or ignoring a problem, which further reinforce and perpetuate a chronic stress cycle.

5.3.2.9 Comparison of Coping Across Stressors

Table 5.3.2.9 below summarises the percentage of problem-focused, emotion-focused, relationship-focused and no coping responses across problem types.
Table 5.3.2.9 Summary of Coping Across Stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Problem-Focused Coping</th>
<th>Emotion-Focused Coping</th>
<th>Relationship-Focused Coping</th>
<th>No Coping</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>79.9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these figures some broader coping patterns emerge about the way poor performing students approach the different stressors in their lives. As indicated by the Situational Coping model, different social contexts tend to elicit different types of coping responses. Contexts involving Financial, Work and Practical problems elicited high levels of problem-focused coping. Other than Work and Finances, which evoked active coping, all other problem categories had moderate to high levels of passive coping. Emotion-focused coping was reported for Relationship, Adjustment and Study problems. With the exception of Medical problems, low levels of relationship-focused coping in terms of social support were reported.

5.3.4.1 Coping With Multiple Stressors

In the next part of the chapter, the broader patterns and processes, including the efficacy and outcomes of coping with multiple stressors will be presented. To summarise the findings in the following section: First, the appraisal processes utilised by low performers when confronted by competing multiple stressors will be discussed. Two appraisal processes have been identified, the first is termed “compartmentalisation” and the second is termed “threat amplification” and they are related to two different coping pathways. Compartmentalisation aids problem-focused coping with the stresor, which is appraised as more important, threatening or
harmful. Compartmentalisation allows all the student’s efforts to be put into solving
the more threatening or important stressor. In this pathway, problem solving with
multiple stressors occurs sequentially, rather than in parallel. In the second pathway,
threat amplification appraisals lead these excluded students to view all stressors as
equally important, threatening and harmful. This is more likely to lead to the use of
emotion-focused coping or passive coping. Both pathways increase the likelihood
that reactive coping strategies will be needed for dealing with crises, thus exacerbating
and escalating a chronic stress cycle. In the last section, the social and interpersonal
processes experienced by poor performers will be discussed.

5.3.4.2 Primary Appraisal Through Compartmentalisation

The situational coping model (Lazarus and Folkman, 1986) proposes that appraisal
of stressors plays an important part in the coping process. Primary appraisal involves
assessing what is at stake in the encounter, resulting in stressors being appraised either
as benign, a threat, or a challenge. Secondary appraisal concerns assessing what can
be done about the stressor, which will be determined by the match between
environmental demand and personal and social resources. As much of the coping
research has focused on single stressors, relatively little research attention has been
paid to the appraisal of multiple stressors.

An examination of data from Exclusion Appeal letters suggests that
compartmentalisation occurs in two ways. First, low performers may fail to see the
relationship between two stressors and consequently treat multiple stressors as if they
existed independently of one another (for example, moving out of home without
adequate finances compartmentalises relationship conflict and financial difficulties).
Second, one stressor when compared with another stressor, may be appraised as more
threatening or challenging in comparison with the other. In order to cope with the
more threatening stressor, the second stressor is concurrently appraised as less
threatening or even benign. A tentative note about interpretation of appraisal
processes needs to be introduced here. Students do not always explicitly state their
primary appraisal processes. Sometimes it is necessary to infer from their feelings,
actions, or secondary appraisals, what might be their possible underlying primary
appraisal process.

Compartmentalisation is a common primary appraisal process used by low
performers to assess multiple stressors. It may be effective in reducing the overall
threat and harm appraisal of stressors, at least in the short-term. Compartmentalisation
seems to enhance problem-focused coping, at least in one arena of a student’s life. For
example, compartmentalisation may be a very useful approach for an acute stressor,
where blocking out financial worries while sitting for an exam can assist
concentration and performance. Alternatively, rushing a seriously ill child to hospital
instead of attending university lectures may be crucial in saving the child’s life.
However, the evidence from Exclusion Appeal letters indicates that in the long-term,
compartmentalisation of multiple stressors involving interpersonal, work, financial,
and study problems exacerbated a chronic stress cycle. Some examples where
compartmentalisation is used and its impact on subsequent coping will be discussed in
the following section.

It was common for paid work to be compartmentalised from study demands. One
student wrote, “it [study] was easier to neglect than work”. His problem solving
efforts were channelled into dealing with work demands. He worked many more hours
than he intended, initially believing the situation was temporary and he hoped that
“things would get better”. He was hopeful that a work promotion would improve his academic situation, instead, his work situation only worsened, along with a concurrent deterioration of his university studies.

I changed from full-time to part-time study and started full time work. When I first started I was informed that only the initial couple of months would be hectic in preparation for the opening of the casino. I was advised that I would be working set fortnightly rosters, working a maximum of 38 hours. So I did not think this would interfere with my studies. Due to unforeseen circumstances (staff shortage) I had to work 6 days a week doing 60-65 hours per week, on varying shifts. Also I was required to do further work at home - preparation of rosters, policies and procedures. As a result of my work situation it was impossible to attend all the lectures, tutorials and manage the workload as I would have preferred.

At this point you may be asking yourself, if your work situation was so bad why didn’t you leave? Well, I had thought of leaving several times, but I kept hoping that things would get better, as I was constantly informed that this was a temporary situation. I also felt that I had to endure these work conditions if I was to prove successful in this industry. When I finally decided to leave I was offered a promotion. This was too good a career opportunity to pass up, so I decided to stay. This promotion showed me there were career opportunities and my hard work was paying off - meant more responsibilities but shorter more fixed hours. For this reason I believed that I was able to handle
the pressures better. This was to quickly change as shortly after this promotion, a major managerial restructuring took place, when I decided to leave. In hindsight I made a major mistake thinking that under such conditions I would be able to juggle university. I realised too late that something would have to give and unfortunately it was my uni studies. This is not to say that university and education means less to me. It was just easier to neglect than work.

This student quoted below treated the various stressors in his life, as if they existed independently of one another: paying off his debts, his relationship conflicts, financial stressors and his academic work. Problem solving efforts in one context exacerbated other stressors. His coping efforts over several semesters will be examined.

This came about partly as a result of me being involved in a vehicle collision at the beginning of semester which caused my car to be written off and a debt of $7500 was owed to the other party involved in the accident. To pay off this debt I began to work 32 hours a week in an effort to repay the debt as quickly as possible. I began to miss lectures because of this additional work and the consequence of this resulted in my GPA falling below 3.00. During this time I moved out of the family home because of constant conflicts with my stepfather. My living expenses rose which caused more strain on my finances.

Similarly, in this third example, this student compartmentalised work, study and a relationship breakup. He was problem-focused in relation to finding a job and attempted late problem solving in relation to his study by withdrawing from a subject and attempted to put all his efforts in his remaining subject.
At the beginning of 1994, I started my degree. I withdrew from one subject and failed another. The combination of other studies and stress related to finding a job adversely affected my performance.

The following semester, in response to escalating emotional stress caused by a relationship breakup, he used problem solving strategies in relation to study by seeking leave of absence from university, while he tried to concentrate his efforts at work. With his relationship breakdown, he used emotion-focused strategies to try “to forget” his relationship.

In mid 1994 I terminated a three year relationship with a girl to whom I was 6 months away from the marriage date. This did cause great emotional stress on me which caused me to take a leave of absence. I had to concentrate hard on my new job and try to forget my relationship breakdown.

These strategies were not effective in reducing the student’s emotional stress and in the following semester he repeated the strategies he used in Semester 1, by withdrawing late from one subject and he was given a failure for this subject. The same strategy over different time frames can have different effects and meaning. Thus the great advantage of having contextual data to understand the meaning of different coping strategies. As a one-off coping strategy withdrawal could be viewed as a reasonable problem solving effort. As a long-term strategy over three semesters, it became an Escape-Avoidance strategy. His emotion-focused strategies to cope with his relationship breakup did not work for him either.
In 1995, I continued with one subject and withdrew the second subject. My withdrawal was posted 1 week before the census date. This was due to still recovering from my relationship breakdown.

In the following semester, he changed jobs and continued to use problem solving strategies at work. Moving further away from university placed more obstacles in the path of his study. New stressors arose when he lost his job, and financial problems worsened. He attempted to withdraw from university after the withdrawal date had closed, and he was again awarded a fail.

In semester 2, I was offered a new position in a new company. My time was occupied in learning all facets of the new job. I was extremely busy with this new career until company closed its doors. This caused great stress and financial hardship. Living on the Gold Coast made it hard to afford petrol, and text materials. I had applied for a leave of absence for the second semester.

This student compartmentalised her relationship difficulties, and focused all her coping efforts into restoring her relationship with her ex-fiancé. She used a mixture of emotion-focused (blaming herself, and wishful thinking), and problem-focused (earning money to visit her boyfriend). She appraised her study as relatively unimportant, withdrawing with failure. Finally, she used relationship-focused strategies (assertion, seeking advice and social support) to refocus her priorities.
The primary reason for my poor academic performance was a breakup with my fiancé after a four and a half year relationship. It left me feeling incredibly upset. Our relationship prior to the breakup was going along just fine, so it was a real shock. My fiancé just left - he said that he was going overseas for a year or so and that it was over! After almost five years together, all of a sudden it was over for no apparent reason. I spent most of my time after that trying to work out what I did wrong, and thinking “he’ll be back soon!” I was working many extra hours in an effort to save enough money to go overseas to see him. My studies became somewhat less important - my life revolved around how I was going to remedy the situation so I let my studies slip. I withdrew from two subjects but as this was done after the withdrawal date I was awarded a fail. My second semester performance was improving with time, as I was getting more used to life by myself. In mid-October, however, my ex-fiancé came back from overseas and back into my life. He asked me to marry him again, which was something that I had been praying for over the past few months. I was under a lot of pressure from him to accept his proposal, which went against the advice being given by my family. This went on for some time, until after much counselling from family and friends, I was strong enough and smart enough to end it forever. I broke up with him for the last time on the morning of my second exam.

5.3.4.3 Sequential versus Parallel Coping

In temporal terms, compartmentalisation of multiple stressors allowed poor performers to cope in a sequential fashion with multiple stressors. This facilitated problem solving efforts to be fully invested in dealing with one stressor at a time.
Although much of the previous coping literature reviewed in Chapter 2 has found that problem solving is associated with better outcomes, coping processes may be more complicated for long-term multiple stressors. Active coping, particularly sequential problem solving may be less effective in managing multiple problems. Furthermore, through compartmentalisation problem solving is much more likely to occur in isolation from other social contexts in students’ lives.

While this student was able to competently deal with significant work stressors, she compartmentalised work and study as independent stressors, thus dealing with them sequentially. In the longer term, she reported such coping had detrimental effects on her emotional and physical health.

I was aware of the need to prove myself within the firm particularly during a period of many changes to my working environment. I thoroughly enjoyed my work to the extent that I - perhaps foolishly - involved myself too extensively in the management, administration and client accounting work of the firm. This is the first time I studied part-time while working full time, I - again foolishly - allowed my feelings that my work should be my first priority to become almost obsessive to the point of being my only priority.

My employer - previously a sole practitioner - went into partnership. As a result I now took instructions from two people instead of one, and as we moved into larger premises, I found myself solving unseen problems including an extended fit out, working weekends and late at
nights, a new but fragile computer network that didn’t want to work and a landlord who wasn’t in a hurry to finalise the lease.

This added to the tension between the new partnership and I began to feel somewhat uncertain of the stability of my new position, even feeling the need to seek the possibility of employment with another firm. As a result of these pressures I became emotionally and physically run-down to the extent that I began having problems with my menstrual cycle which caused me to be ill for up to a week every month.

5.3.4.4 Reactive Coping

Compartmentalisation, sequential and isolated problem solving, also increased the likelihood that further crises occurred which required further reactive (as opposed to proactive) coping strategies, thus further depleting students’ coping resources. This student appeared to move from crisis to crisis with a series of reactive coping strategies.

Financial problems made it necessary to seek loans from both the Needy Student Assistance Scheme and the Queensland Housing Commission. In early November my de facto partner got a full time job and so social security allowance was cut off, however she wouldn’t be paid for a month. This meant that we requested and received a loan from my parents for $300. During the exams our cat was mauled and killed by a dog, this led to two veterinary bills. As my de facto hadn’t been paid yet we were forced to borrow more money from her parents.
to pay these bills. A month previous to this our dog escaped and was
struck by a car, killing her. This coupled with the loss of our cat
combined to upset both of us greatly and placed a tremendous strain on
our relationship. In November we were given notice of an amount of
$1207 that we had been overpaid by the Department of Social Security
which must be paid back. Luckily I had gained part-time employment.
At this stage, we were forced to move, due to the faulty fence, that had
led to the deaths of our pets, thus incurring expenses, and a higher rent.

5.3.4.5 Minimising Study as a Stressor

One of the effects of compartmentalising multiple stressors, is that in comparison
with more urgent or pressing Work, Practical, Relationship or Financial problems,
other stressors such as Health and Study are minimised. A number of poor performers
reported appraising study as a benign stressor, rather than as a threat or challenge
stressor. Underestimating the difficulty of the study task was one common method for
reducing the stressfulness of the study demands. The following comments indicated
that some poor performing students used a number of Distancing coping strategies
(cognitive efforts to detach oneself and to minimise the significance of the situation)
to underestimate the academic challenge. It should be noted that prior to exclusion,
students are placed on probation for at least one semester with a warning from the
university that if their academic performance continues to remain unsatisfactory,
failure to improve GPA will result in exclusion. However, some excluded students
claimed to be unaware of the serious consequences of continued poor performance.
Some students who were repeating previously failed subjects reported:
I didn’t spend enough time on two subjects because I had previously seen these subjects.

I thought because I had undertaken a large amount of the same course at another university, I could cope with the demands I had placed on myself. I now realise the load I had undertaken was unrealistic.

Several students reported underestimating the difficulty of their study task.

First year uni was a bit of a shock to the system and therefore not fully realising the demands that would be placed on me. Without realising it I neglected my studies.

As I had already studied at college, I thought first year university would be easy.

I didn’t realise that this was equivalent of a full-time load and I underestimated the commitment necessary to complete three subjects.

Some students took on an extra load, in order to finish their course in minimum completion time. Even though this student reported failing because he did not have the fundamentals of Maths and Science from high school, he increased his study workload.

I will admit that I did take on too many subjects at once but I was and still am anxious to be awarded my degree as a means of getting a more
profitable position and make life more comfortable for my family and myself.

Others underestimated the transition required for university study. Such cognitive distancing strategies had long-term consequences for escalating study demands.

I admit that I underestimated the challenge of succeeding at College after receiving all Honours at TAFE.

Several other students did not seem to be aware of any existing problems:

I didn’t know I was enrolled in the wrong subject till mid-semester.

I didn’t realise till the end of semester that my performance was slipping.

The exclusion notice came as a complete surprise.

After reading your letter I must admit I was somewhat a little surprised. I find it hard to believe that with only one year of study left I am being excluded.
5.3.4.6 Threat and Harm Amplification

Not all students coped in active ways as shown in the previous examples. The earlier summary of coping strategies indicated a number of poor performers used emotion-focused strategies or took a passive approach to various stressors. A second appraisal process, amplification of threat or harm, involved each new stressor amplifying the previous one. These students are typical of those who report becoming increasingly stressed, overwhelmed and helpless in the face of mounting stressors. As can be seen from the examples below, threat and harm amplification, along with passive coping, also escalated chronic stress.

This student described feeling “a great deal of emotional stress,” concentration difficulties, feeling tired, worried and stressed - all of which could be described as costs associated with coping with multiple stressors.

A relationship breakdown created a great deal of emotional stress, that led to an accident, which resulted in a fractured toe. It was in plaster for 3-4 weeks and I was unable to attend uni. I was unable to concentrate on the work at hand. The following semester it was due to ill health which went on and off the whole semester. This resulted in me missing lectures, reduced my ability to concentrate from being tired, worried and stressed.

Helplessness, anxiety and isolation is a major theme in this student’s letter.

I also had personal problems - in six months went through loss of my partner’s mother, his drunken rampages whilst dealing with his grief,
his unreliability to hold down a full-time job and eventually my separation from my partner. With no immediate family around me I was forced to try and cope by myself. The loss of my car due to a car accident created a financial burden and lack of transport caused me much anxiety.

This student described feeling depressed about her family’s financial problems, escaping to a friend’s house to find emotional support.

My family experienced serious problems. We were faced with financial difficulties and this in turn put immense strain on our relationship and communication. It wasn’t till the end of September our situation began to improve. From that time until my final exams I really tried to find an understanding of the semester’s work, unfortunately from my results it wasn’t good enough. During the semester I found it hard to concentrate not only because of an upset household but because of the constant low I felt. My studies began to slip because of this and also because I spent time away from home at a friends’ houses to get away from my own.

Constant pressures from familial expectations were associated with anxiety, depression, difficulties concentrating, memory difficulties, as well as physical symptoms for this student.

I find it very hard to study in a small house. There was not enough room for all of us. Therefore, throughout the weekdays and some weekends, I spend most of my spare time in the University’s library.
because I cannot study at home. No matter how hard I tried to study I
just have so many problems on my mind, things such as parents telling
me to do this or to do that, to make a good role in order to lead my
younger brothers and sisters and many more family responsibilities. I
cannot be responsible for so many things they expect out of me. I find
it very hard to cope with plus studying at the same time. The pressure
on me was so much. I often get a bad headache and in the meantime I
am also suffering from bad migraine. In every exam, before I even sat
for it I was so sure and confident that I know all my work. Somehow,
when I am in the exam room I can not concentrate because of too much
pressure always thinking of my problems then I get a terrible headache
and forgotten everything I had studied.

5.3.4.7 Costs of Coping with Multiple Stressors

Residual arousal and fatigue is one of negative consequences of coping with
multiple stressors (Lepore and Evans, 1996). The empirical research evidence
suggests that residual fatigue is most likely to occur following chronic stressors and
has the potential to interfere with how actively someone copes with acute stressors, at
least in the laboratory (Lepore and Evans, 1996). The residual fatigue model suggests,
that physiological and psychological changes caused by one stressor might reduce a
person’s physical capacity (e.g. stamina, strength) or cognitive abilities (e.g. memory,
perception, attention) to respond to another stressor. Cognitive and physiological
fatigue, as seen in the previous examples, can have implications in how someone
copes with multiple stressors. This was a frequently reported effect of coping with
multiple stressors in Exclusion Appeal letters. The following physical reactions,
emotional symptoms and behavioural patterns were identified in letters:
exhaustion most of the time
sleeping during the day
fatigue
tiredness
sleeping patterns disrupted
lack of concentration and motivation
depression
lethargy
feeling overloaded
feeling oppressed
high stress
mentally and physically drained
feeling lost
loss of self esteem
not knowing which direction to take
weight gain or weight loss

5.3.5.1 Social Processes And Chronic Stress

Given that more than half of excluded students identified relationship stressors as affecting their academic performance, a closer examination of their interpersonal context and social support processes is warranted. In this section, two interpersonal processes will be investigated: first, the deterioration of social support in chronic stressful situations and second, a tendency to approach interpersonal conflicts largely in a passive or avoidant way.

In Study 1 low performing students were found to use significantly lower levels of social support strategies than high performing students. Earlier in this chapter, these results were further supported by excluded students reporting using low levels of
social support strategies. A few poor performers described isolation from social support resources from having relocated, and the transitional difficulties associated with moving. The separation and divorce from a significant relationship can also lead to less access to social support resources.

Several patterns can be identified in the interpersonal context of poor performers, all of which affect their social support resources: viewing social support as a one-way process; taking a passive or avoidant approach to interpersonal conflicts; using emotion-focused strategies such as self-blame; taking a confrontational stance such as blaming others; taking an independent stance; and failing to ask for assistance.

5.3.5.2 Deterioration Of Social Support

There is some evidence presented by Lepore and Evans (1996) that coping with chronic multiple stressors deplete social support resources, such as environmental and social resources (e.g. supportive social ties), material resources (e.g. money), individual or dispositional resources (e.g. self esteem) and biological resources (e.g. resistance to infections). This model assumes that depletion of a resource could increase the effects of another stressor. In this section, the processes which are associated with social support deterioration will be examined.

The following example is typical of the patterns exhibited by several students who experienced interpersonal conflicts with their family and peers. This student was ambivalent and conflicted around normal developmental tasks concerning autonomy and connectedness and vacillated between being overly dependent and overly independent. She identified a sequence of strategies, where efforts to problem solve her financial problems through borrowing money from family and friends, not only
exacerbated her financial problems but increased conflict with her partner, parents and flat-mates.

I have had financial problems which led me to see the QUT financial advisor for a loan. This $180 only seemed to suffice for a short period of time and the worry of being financially short returned. Austudy had given me $40 a week which was a supplement loan and my parents gave me a little extra. But it wasn’t enough to cover all my expenses. One week I would use my rent money for the next week to cover my expenses for the current week and the next week I would borrow money to cover my rent money which I would have to pay back the next week leaving me short for rent again. It became a vicious cycle. I felt I could not ask my parents for money as I thought the money they did give me was all they could afford. On the occasion I did ask it would end in a row because they thought I was wasting the money and not managing it properly. Then I started asking my partner of three years for money and he provided what he could until it became a huge strain on him. My partner and I argued until he left me for time alone. I was devastated over this breakup. I was hospitalised in July due to a kidney infection and this took some time to recover.

With the increased alienation from her social support systems, the above student switched to emotion-focused coping to manage her relationship breakup. She also used self-control strategies to keep her failure at university a secret from her parents, thereby isolating her further. Eventually, her academic failure and secrecy from her family became a source of further stress, which reduced her ability to cope with her
teaching practical. When these self-control strategies were ineffective in regulating 
distress, she switched to Escape-Avoidance strategies such as “wanting a break”, 
withdrawing from her practical and moving out of her living situation.

I was also very worried to tell my parents that I had failed a subject in 
first semester. They assumed I was doing great. I knew that I would 
need to do another 6 months and I didn’t know how I was going to tell 
my parents. They’ve always expected a great deal out of me and the 
fact that I had been lying to them and that I wouldn’t be finishing my 
degree at the end of 1995 caused me a great deal of stress. I knew that 
1995 was nearing to an end and my parents were planning a graduation 
party for me as they did for my sisters. At the time of cancelling my 
enrolment, I wanted to defer for 6 months but because I’d passed the 
census date all my subjects would be listed as failed. I was doing my 
prac at the time and was having great difficulty in doing my best under 
all the stress I was in. Everything to me seemed a huge disaster. I had 
no money, I didn’t want to talk to my parents, my boyfriend had left, 
I’d been sick. I wasn’t going to complete my degree at the end of 1995 
and I felt as if I was on my own and dealing with everything myself. 
My flat-mates were hassling me for rent and bill money. I felt that if I 
had just one problem to deal with I would cope but because I had 
several major problems to deal with it seemed to me to be the end of 
the world. I felt I couldn’t deal with things anymore so I pulled out of 
my prac and cancelled my uni and moved in with my sister so that I 
could just have a break and get my life sorted out.
5.3.5.3 Passive Approaches

This student largely took a passive approach to his various relationship difficulties. A withdrawal of financial support from his parents and his co-tenants breaking their lease lead to spiraling financial and physical stress.

In first semester, I suffered from a traumatic separation from my long standing girlfriend. This made it emotionally impossible to muster an appropriate commitment to my studies. Second semester began with a deterioration of my family situation. My parents subsequently refused to pay for my tertiary studies; as such I was forced to withdraw from my college accommodation and pursue part time work to support myself. This was the first time in which I had ever been required to independently raise funds for bills, outstanding debts, lease-bond, living expenses and textbooks. To further my difficulties, one of my co-tenants broke our lease unexpectedly. This required me to adopt a dramatic increase in work hours which made it virtually impossible to attend all lectures and tutorials. The night shift hours disrupted my sleeping patterns drastically. Initially, I was able to study despite my necessity for sleeping during the day, however the further weight of illness eventually led me to my sleeping through my alarm clock on the day of my exam.
5.3.5.4 Escape-Avoidance

Moving out of home to escape from family conflict led this student to experience further conflict with flat-mates. He considered further escaping (leaving the country). Late in the coping period this student used Social Support resources (advice from a friend) who convinced him to face and deal with his problems.

This left me to believe that the best way to solve the problem was to move out of home. Unfortunately, this solution did not solve all of the problems. It seemed that I had moved from one problem area into another, certain members of the household caused difficulties for all members of the household who lived there. This and the underlying tension within my family made it impossible to keep my mind on one of the most important goals in my life.

By half way through semester two I was restless and unable to apply myself to university. I even began preparations for leaving the country in the hope of finding less traumatic surroundings in which to live. I discussed my options with a close friend and this person convinced me to try sorting out the problems which were obstructing and hindering me.

5.3.5.5 Self-Blame

In Study 1 it was found that the high use of Self-Blame strategies was associated with poor academic performance. Some students reported highly conflictual personal or work situations, which increased their self-blame, passivity and helplessness. The excerpt below is the most vivid example where interpersonal conflict and
unreasonable pressures had a significant effect on the mental health of the student. This student was threatened and punished with threats of physical violence, and experienced vindictive rumours and social ostracism. She utilised a range of emotion-focused strategies (crying and keeping her feelings buried) to manage her distress. She considered a Problem Solving strategy (moving out), but contextually it could be viewed more as an emotion-focused strategy (wishful thinking) as she failed to make adequate practical preparation for living independently. Her attempts to take assertive actions (breaking off the engagement) met with significant disapproval from her family.

I was an arranged engagement because my parents pushed me into it. At the time I thought that it was alright to follow my parent’s wishes. As the time passed I was able to find out more about the man I was to marry. We did not get along at all! However, I was too scared to tell my parents due to the fact that it will disappoint them. I was under a lot of pressure. I was caught between my parents (their wishes) and ultimately my happiness. I told my fiancé that I didn’t think it would work because I don’t love him. He was very angry and refused to accept my explanation. He would get very irrational and threaten to hit me if I brought up the subject again. This made me very upset and angry due to the fact that I have been constantly abused by my dad since I was 5 years old. All I could do was to keep my feelings buried inside me. I went through a tremendous pressure because I could not tell my parents or anyone. All I would do is cry about it.
There are many times my parents and I have disagreements and arguments. Somehow, I cannot stand up for myself and say what I want to say. In Vietnamese tradition it is considered bad mannered and rude to talk bad at a parent. Many times I packed my bags and wanted to leave, but my conscience stopped me. I thought of my family and felt extremely sad and sorry. I love my parents too much, so I cried and unpacked my bags.

I realised in Semester 2 that my studies were affected by my depression. I could not concentrate on my studies because I was constantly depressed and sad. My health was also affected. I had to go to the doctor to get sleeping pills to get me to sleep at times. I realised one day that I had to stop otherwise I would eventually kill myself.

I talked to my friends about the situation and one of them had a long talk with me to end it once and for all. Finally, in August I told my fiancé and my parents that I don’t want to get married because I did not love him. They did not want to accept my reason. My parents were so ashamed of me because I broke the engagement. My ex-fiancé was spreading rumours which were not true. His family accused me of sleeping around with other guys. All these accusations were untrue. My reputation was tarnished. With a cultural background like mine (Vietnamese) vicious rumours like this will mean that no Vietnamese guy will ever want to go out with me. At this stage of my life I was so sad and disappointed. I realised my exams were coming up and that I would fail if I did not concentrate. I tried so hard to get everything to go right but in the end my exams suffered.
5.3.5.7 Failure To Ask For Assistance

Other students reported failing to ask for assistance which may have been available to them. Self-Control strategies (an emotion-focused strategy), such as keeping their feelings hidden, were used because some students felt embarrassed about expressing their distress and upset. Others felt a need to prove their independence which prevented them from gaining other people’s assistance in solving problems.

This student from an Indigenous background was deeply affected by her grief reaction but does not reach out to her extensive support system, who provided supporting documentation when she was excluded from university.

Firstly I was hospitalised with a virus there were a number of deaths in both our family and in those of our friends. My grandmother whom I had been very close all my life and shared a special bond with passed away. Her passing on had a very devastating effect on me in that I lost interest in my studies and other interests. In that time I believed by carrying this grief myself I was handling it the right way however I now feel that if I sought medical advice or counselling, the grief would not have overcome my ability to carry on with my daily activities.

This student relied on the emotion-focused strategies of Self-Control and Distancing saying that he was “too proud” to show others his vulnerability. It meant that he did not discuss his situations of loss with lecturers or his family, thus missing out on gaining appropriate concessions from the university.
A couple of days before completing my final assessment I was informed that a friend from school had been killed in a hit and run. I had grown up with him, attending the same school and had played in the same team in a number of sports. I had difficulty in overcoming such a loss and when it came to completing the assignment I could not gather myself. The funeral fell on the same day as the first exam. I had intended to sit the exam but after the funeral found this impossible, so I missed it. I should have consulted the lecturer in both cases but did not know how to go about it and felt embarrassed that this had affected my studies in such a way, so once again I left it. I pretty much resigned myself to failing. I still had an exam the following Saturday and felt I could recover and perform well. Yet within two days I was to learn of another school mate's death. Although I went on to complete the exam and pass, it was far from my best performance. I did not know if I had done enough throughout the semester to get my GPA above 3, obviously not. Within this two weeks I had 140% of assessment due for three different subjects. With my immediate future in doubt I did not know who to turn to. Mum and Dad thought I was going fine, so I let them think that and was too proud to tell them that anything was wrong. Therefore, not telling anyone I let the charade continue.

Although several students had serious illnesses or disabilities they did not seek any assistance from lecturers or support services. Some kind of communication breakdown seems to have occurred. The student quoted below had a hearing impairment but did not persist in help seeking from a busy lecturer who did not get a reply to his e-mails. It was not clear if he has sought help from other avenues at the
university, as a chronic disability would have warranted extra help such as note takers,
extra time.

I suffer from a severe-profound hearing loss the ramifications of which are: inability to profit from attendance at lectures and tutorials. Hence most knowledge gained has been through the print media. As a consequence this hearing loss makes the absorption of information a much slower process. With the stress now placed on most members of the workforce, tutors and lecturers do not have time- most essential when dealing with a hearing impaired person. The project co-ordinator sent me an e-mail to explain why my project was not satisfactory. He asked me if I wanted to continue or to fail and mentioned that if I wanted to continue I had to work 4 weeks full time to bring up my project to standard. I replied by e-mail stating that I wanted to continue my project. So far I have not had a reply. I arranged an appointment with the co-ordinator to demonstrate my project so I could receive some feedback on my progress. Unfortunately I received the impression that he was in a hurry as he asked me whether my project would take long to demonstrate as he was late for a tutorial. I never did have a chance to demonstrate my project.

The second subject was far more difficult and time consuming than I anticipated. As mentioned before my hearing impairment affects the speed of my reading. Unfortunately, I still have not grasped fully this subject and hence unable to complete my second assignment before the deadline. All I needed was extra time and help.
5.3.5.8 Aggressive Coping

Some students experienced difficulties in understanding academic expectations and conflict about the required standard by lecturers, and difficulty accessing the help they needed. This student takes a more aggressive stance towards his lecturers blaming them for poor course choice, and his lack of application. He does not appear to have discussed his difficulties regarding his research topic with his lecturer to gain advice on what he should do. Missing two months of university probably did not help his research. Work and study all create stress for his marriage:

I had intended to do some law subjects which were not part of my undergraduate degree. I had wanted to do a certificate not a Graduate Diploma but was persuaded to do a full course. Mostly, I spend 90-100 hours a week at my job. Following my probation notice, due to my employer’s preferences I decided to concentrate on contract and law subjects. I had thought previous failures were irrelevant due to time limitations (over 2 years ago). My efforts and attitude reflecting that of some of the lecturers, though that is no excuse.

I chose a research topic but I was unable to proceed/complete it due to commercial in confidence- which reduced the availability of data, decisions and discussions to the depth required. I should have withdrawn or changed topics instead of persisting with a lost cause.

My marriage has been in some difficulties due to my working hours. I took a month off in Sept/Oct to travel with my family to improve matters. This resulted in putting more pressure on my studies whilst not improving the family situation.
Several negative relationship-focused coping patterns can be identified in poor performers. These involved taking a passive, unassertive, or aggressive approach to social relationships in times of stress. These low relationship-focused strategies meant that low performers did not use relationships to gather the information, feedback and advice needed for accurate appraisal of multiple feedback and information may be important in making accurate appraisal of stressors. Whether or not we accurately determine stressors as a threat, challenge or benign depends not only on cognitive processes, but also on socially determined processes. The implications of taking such passive and avoidant approaches to relationships and social support processes involved increased isolation, or increased hostilities. Where low performers report using social support strategies they are often used palliatively, that is, after problems have developed for the purposes of emotional soothing and support.

5.3.6.1 Future Plans and the Role Of Proactive Coping

In their Appeal Against Exclusion letters, students were specifically advised by the University to identify their current or future plans for coping with problems affecting their academic performance. Although, 118 students identified specific strategies for remedying their problems, nearly a third of students (N=60) did not identify any coping strategies or plans for resolving their situations. Unlike high performers in Study 3, who made high use of proactive coping, low performers were more likely make use of reactive coping, particularly in response to their study and interpersonal stressors. A reactive coping pattern is more likely to maintain and exacerbate chronic stress. This will be examined further in this chapter.
When anticipating future coping, poor performers were able to identify coping which is both active and relationship focused, a pattern much closer to higher performers’ pattern of coping identified in Study 1. Nearly 50% identified problem solving strategies and a third identified social support strategies. The fact that students were able to perceive and access increased social support in the future is interesting. Some students reported a change in the perception of social resources that were previously perceived as absent or perceived not to be relevant. Others took a more active role in constructing social support resources.

Table 5.3.6.1 Anticipated Proactive Coping Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategy</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Coping</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4 Discussion

In this section, a different deviation amplification model is proposed from the ones developed by Aldwin and Sutton (1996) and Aldwin and Brustrom (1997). Study 2 has examined how appraisal of multiple stressors, coping and academic decline are interrelated. Figure 5.4 below represents the key concepts which have been developed in the study of poor performers. Low performing students frequently reported multiple stressors as affecting their academic performance. They made appraisals which compartmentalised or amplified threat or harm appraisals of multiple stressors. The results indicated that while poor performing students used problem-focused coping with one stressor, usually work, practical or financial difficulties, they coped with other stressors by minimising them through the use of emotion-focused strategies (Distancing, Escape-Avoidance or Self-Blame).

Both compartmentalisation and amplification of multiple stressors meant that poor performers were more constrained in their coping options. Such patterns have been identified as rigid and situation stereotyped coping patterns.
Figure 5.1

Coping with Long-Term Multiple Stressors

By Low Performers

**MULTIPLE STRESSORS**

- **APPRAISAL**
  - Compartmentalisation

- **APPRAISAL**
  - Threat and harm amplification

- **LOW SOCIAL SUPPORT**
  - Uni-directional
  - Passive or avoidant
  - Palliative coping

- **STEREOTYPED COPING**
  - Self-blame, distancing, escape-avoidance, passive

- **STEREOTYPED COPING**
  - Isolated problem solving, sequential coping

- **COSTS OF COPING**
  - Escalating stress
  - Poor health
  - Deterioration in relationships
  - Low academic performance
  - Depletion of social support
The costs associated with such coping processes included spiralling stress, poor physical and psychological health, poor relationships with concurrent poor academic performance. This raises the possibility that what may appear adaptive in the short-term may have long term costs. Lepore and Evans propose that stereotypic coping can have negative consequences for people coping with multiple stressors. For example, they suggest that a general coping style of avoiding or denying anxiety producing stimuli might be sometimes helpful, for example, ruminating about a lost relationship. However, if avoidance becomes generalised, the person might miss the opportunity to resolve or prevent a major problem, such as seeking medical attention for chest pains.

The model presented for poor performers differs in some significant ways from Aldwin and Sutton’s model (1996) which was outlined in Chapter 2 and represented in Figure 2.1. They proposed that in a positive deviation amplification process, individuals with high levels of trait mastery are more likely to use problem-focused/instrumental coping leading to higher levels of situational mastery, which in turn increased coping resources. The results from Study 2 demonstrate that isolated problem solving (instrumental coping) is inefficacious with multiple stressors. Aldwin and Sutton’s model largely represents coping with acute stressors, as well as, having an overly individualistic focus in terms of trait mastery being central to effective coping. There is also an implicit assumption that chronic stress, even such stressors as chronic illness is a single stressor. Chronic illness can have multiple stressors associated with it. It may include not only physical or psychological disablement and loss but there can be increased financial difficulties, relationship conflicts and stressors, loss of roles, changes in paid employment etc.
In the later paper, Aldwin and Brustrom (1997) have adapted the deviation amplification model to coping with chronic stress. Their model emphasises the active and proactive aspects of coping with chronic stress. They hypothesise that coping with chronic stress requires three types of resources: firstly, turning coping strategies into management skills and the use of anticipatory coping to minimise or prevent problems; secondly, the use of pre-planned strategies for coping with acute stressors; and thirdly, the regulation of meaning, which involves downplaying the importance of the negative aspects of chronic stress. While this model provides for a broader range of strategies, individualistic action is paramount, while emotion-focused strategies (such as Self Control and Positive Reappraisal) are seen as suitable for “uncontrollable” stressors. However, Aldwin and Brustrum do not provide a relational context for coping with chronic stressors.

In Study 2, it was seen that relationship problems were the most common stressor experienced by low performers. Low levels of social support, passive and avoidant relationship focused strategies increased social support deterioration and escalated relationship isolation, conflict and hostility for poor performers. Managing the relationship dimensions of work, study and personal life may be central to coping with long-term stressors. These issues will be investigated in depth in Study 3.

In Chapter 7, I will discuss some of the broader implications from the findings in this study of Excluded students.
Chapter 6

Study 3: Stressors, Coping and High Performing Students

6.1 Introduction

In Study 3, the coping strategies used by high performing students in response to multiple stressors will be examined, in order to further extend our understanding of the patterns associated with successful academic performance identified in Study 1.

In Chapter 1, it was established that students commonly encounter multiple stressors in their daily lives. However, it is single stressors such as exam stress, that have received extensive attention (Abela and Heslin, 1989; Cooley and Klinger, 1989; Edwards and Trimble; 1992; Folkman and Lazarus, 1985). In Chapter 1, the numerous personal problems were identified by students as non-academic stressors contributing to academic failure and withdrawal from university. However, there is some indication that students who persisted in their course but had at times considered withdrawing, gave the same patterns of reasons for considering withdrawal as did discontinuing students (Hayes, 1977). The same may be true of the relationship between financial stressors and academic performance. Financial stressors were cited by excluded students as disrupting their academic performance in Study 2. However, the empirical research has failed to find a relationship between students’ income, hours of paid work and academic results (Benson, 1999). Nevertheless, students in this study subjectively believed that their financial position influenced their academic results, either positively or negatively. Similarly, McInnes and James (1999) found that income source and number of hours in paid work were not particularly related to the level of satisfaction with university. A
study by Burns, Scott and Cooney (1993) found that although single parent students had significantly lower levels of income than their married counterparts, they reported feeling less stressed by financial worries.

In Study 3, the appraisal of multiple stressors and the types of coping patterns utilised by high performers will be further assessed. In Study 1 results from the Ways of Coping Revised questionnaire showed that when high performing students faced non-academic stressors they were significantly more likely to use Problem Solving and Social Support strategies, but less likely to use Escape-Avoidance and Self-Blame strategies. In Study 2 two patterns of coping were found to exacerbate chronic stress in excluded students. The first pattern involved the compartmentalisation of multiple stressors which was associated with the use of problem-focused coping in isolated social contexts. The second pattern involved an amplification of threat appraisals which was associated with emotion-focused coping or passivity. In Study 3 the problem-solving efforts of high performers in relation to multiple social contexts will be compared to the coping patterns shown by low performing students.

In Studies 1 and 2 relationship stressors were identified as particularly stressful and disruptive in the lives of students, suggesting that the social and relational aspects of coping warrant further investigation. Recently, individualistic models of coping have been criticised by Dunahoo et al. (1998a; 1998b) who argue that direct action is more highly valued in research outcomes, while the social aspects of coping have remained largely invisible. This certainly is true in relation to the research on students, where individualistic measures such as control, self efficacy, self esteem, mastery orientation, and motivation are considered important individual attributes associated with successful
performance. However, such orientations may work against maintaining and protecting harmonious social relations, especially during chronic stress.

Furthermore, in Study 2 it was found that social support did in fact deteriorate with chronic stress and decreased access to social support was maintained by patterns of passivity and emotion-focused coping. A further aim of this research is to investigate the ways in which high performers are able to access, mobilise, utilise and maintain their social support systems over the long-term.

As has been already noted in Chapter 2, coping research has generally focused on psychopathology with little research done on the adaptive consequences of coping with multiple stressors (Lepore and Evans, 1996). A review of the literature on coping indicates that there has been considerable focus on dysfunctions such as illness, psychopathology, loss and bereavement, family and marital difficulties, work related stress or unemployment, care-giving stress, recovery from trauma and abuse, and natural disasters. Coping studies with tertiary students have examined factors such as suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and exam stress. However, not all negative life events have negative health or mental health consequences, at least over the long-term (Thoits, 1995). The notion of thriving and resilience may be of relevance in studying students who have been identified as equity students (socio-economically disadvantaged, females studying non-traditional courses, living in a rural area, Aboriginal, having a disability, non-English speaking) and students at higher risk of dropping out (males, part-time students and distance education students). Equity students have been identified as disadvantaged in tertiary study, as they often face more challenges in adapting to tertiary study and hence, are at greater risk of dropping out of university (Abbott-Chapman et al., 1992). A study of the coping processes used by high risk and equity students who have performed
well at university could further enhance our understanding of factors which enhance resilience and thriving in tertiary study. Are there instances in which coping with one stressor somehow enhances students’ ability to cope with another stressor?

In summary, this study examined coping by successful tertiary students in several ways:

- What kinds of stressors do high performers experience? Do successful students experience the same kinds of multiple stressors as poor performing students?
- How do high performers cope with chronic, multiple stressors? How effective are their coping efforts? In particular, how do high performing students approach relationship problems, along with study and other stressors?
- What proactive efforts do they utilise to minimise chronic stress?
- How do high performers acquire and mobilise their social support resources? How do they prevent social support from deteriorating over a long-term time period, as was the pattern with low performers in Study 2?
- Under what conditions do stressful events lead to positive outcomes?

6.2 Method

6.2.1 Subjects

Sampling for information-rich cases (Patton, 1990) was used, where students were selected who allowed for maximum variation and diverse characteristics. Twenty high performing students at several universities participated in this study. High performance was defined as having at least a credit average GPA though most students had much higher GPA. Students also possessed diversity in their role identities with most defining themselves in terms of multiple role identities. A range of equity students (low socio-economic background, first generation university student, women in non-traditional
course, disability, rural, Aboriginal, non-English speaking background) were also included. Fifteen of the interviewees were females, and five were males. There are several reasons for the gender imbalance in this sample. Firstly, in the overall student population there are more high performing female students. Secondly, it was difficult to find male students who held multiple roles and who were prepared to be interviewed for the research. Fourteen students were engaged in full-time courses, and six undertook part-time study. Four undertook some part of their study as distance education students. Nine students were school leavers or recent school leavers, while eleven were mature-age students. Six students had parental responsibilities and four had caring responsibilities for their parents. Two students undertook full-time paid work, while fifteen undertook part-time jobs along with their studies. The majority were local students with only one being an international student. Two students had chronic disabilities, a reading disability and a visual impairment.

Students were studying in a broad range of faculties: Arts, Communication/Public Relations, Architecture, Education, Science, Computing, Languages, Business, Medicine, Social Work, Physiotherapy, Arts/Law, Social Science.

Below is a participant summary to facilitate easier identification of interviewees:

**Andrew** * is a mature-aged Aboriginal student studying Architecture.

**Cate** returned to study a Bachelor of Behavioural Science after working for eight years as a hairdresser. She moved back home, copes with the diagnosis and treatment of her mother's cancer, and experienced the sudden death of a friend.

**Denis** * overcame his problems with dyslexia to study at university. He has studied both on campus and as a distance student.
Herbie is a full-time Arts student, works part-time and has family responsibilities caring for an ill father.

Ivan * is an international student from Singapore who discusses the challenges of studying Marketing in a foreign culture.

Jacqui is a student in her fifties studying Social Science part-time while working shift work. University is a great challenge to her self-confidence.

Jo returned to study after working for ten years as a legal secretary to study an Arts degree.

Joanne * is studying a Bachelor of Engineering (electrical/computer systems). She has a cadetship with a metal processing company and faces the challenges of a male-dominated profession, as well the personal changes of getting married while a student.

Julie is a school leaver who moved to Brisbane to live at College, while studying at the University of Queensland. She is a blind student, who acquired a new guide dog to facilitate her mobility at university.

Kylie * is a school-leaver studying Marketing and Japanese.

Lorraine changed from full time work to part time so that she can become a full time student in psychology. She talked about her increased dependence on parents.

Maria * is a mature-aged student studying physics, as well as being the mother of four children. Her marriage broke up while she was a student.

Marnie has studied both on-campus as well as via distance education. She coped with her suicidal boyfriend during her exams.

Megan * is a school-leaver, who moved away from her home in a small country town in Victoria to study Communications.

Muriel is a student in her fifties who is studying a Bachelor of Applied Science via distance education. She combined three part-time jobs along with her family responsibilities and coped with the death of her husband.
Natasha* missed out on a place in Medicine and undertakes study in Medical Science. She worked towards transferring into Medicine and coped with conflicts with her parents.

Rebecca is studying Psychology as a part-time student, as well as working part-time as a counsellor.

Rhonda is a part-time mature aged student, who combines studies with part-time work and family responsibilities.

Rob returned to study Human services in his thirties after working in real estate and construction. He combines part-time study, part-time work and caring for his youngest child while his wife is the full-time bread winner. He discusses issues around financial problems, self confidence and studying in a female-dominated course.

Ray* entered university to study a Bachelor of Commerce after studying at TAFE. He works full-time in the computing industry, while studying part-time. He is married with one son.

* denotes these students were interviewed for a previous publication (Vivekananda and Shores, 1996)

6.2.2 Instruments

As has already been argued in the Chapter 2 coping research utilising standardised coping questionnaires have some significant limitations. A number of researchers have suggested alternative methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews to overcome some of the limitations of coping questionnaires, as they allow for a fuller picture of coping processes and provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between stress, coping and outcomes to be developed. Instead of imposing a theory saturated narrative, utilising an open-ended questionnaire combined with semi-structured interview methodologies allows students maximum freedom in their responses. It allows
respondents to provide their own narrative as to how they think about their experiences and how they report coping processes.

In this current study, through the use of alternative research methodologies as elaborated in Chapter 3, more in-depth data will be gathered about multiple stressors. The coping processes related to high academic performance will be further explored. Such methodologies will enable a better understanding of the context and meaning of coping. The utilisation of alternative methodologies can better allow for the exploration of the larger patterning of contextual and person variables. Furthermore, they allow us to better understand how several stressful events interact with one another and how coping processes unfold and shift over time. Finally, they allow for the assessment of the effectiveness of coping strategies. In what circumstances does coping avert a stressful event?

Initially students were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire with several broad questions which invited essay-type responses, regarding important experiences, stressors and the ways they coped with these. Follow-up interviews took place either face to face or by telephone with each of the participants. This allowed focus questions to be asked to prompt and encourage students to further elaborate on what they had written. Verbatim notes were added to the to the open-ended questionnaire responses. These notes were then typed and provided to the interviewees for further feedback. This enabled them to check for the accuracy of transcripts and allowed the interviewees to add any further relevant thoughts.

In general, students were asked to comment on the following questions:
What other kinds of problems affected you while you were studying? Describe in detail how you were affected.

Describe how you coped with the problems that you encountered? Describe in detail your thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Which strategies did you find effective and which were ineffective? In what ways?

How did you manage your study?

6.2.3 Procedure

Students were located for the study by using a variety of contacts such as Student Services, lecturers, and student organisations. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone and usually lasted between one to two hours. The research study met the requirements of the Nepean Research Ethics Committee guidelines. Students gave written consent to be interviewed and they indicated whether they wished their real names to be used or to be identified under pseudonyms in the research write-up.

6.3 Results

6.3.1 Types of Multiple Stressors

What sorts of stressors do successful students experience? What is clear from interviews with high performing students is that they share many of the same problems experienced by poor performing students. Respondents’ situational descriptions were coded into six problem types previously identified for excluded students in Chapter 5: Relationships, Work, Finances, Medical, Practical, Adjustment. The following Table 6.3.1.1 summarises the types of problems described by high performing students. A fuller description of these stressors appears in Appendix G.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Type</th>
<th>Stressful Event/Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Relationship  | • Friends: leaving behind old friends, conflict with friends, conflict with flat-mates, boyfriend threatens suicide  
• Partners: starting a new relationship, getting married;  
• Divorce or relationship breakup  
• Parenting: pregnancy, caring for children, children sick, finding childcare  
• Other responsibilities: parent diagnosed with cancer, looking after ill parents, caring for grand children  
• Deaths of friend, ex-partner, grandparents  
• Lack of support or disapproval from significant others |
| Work          | • Unexpected emergencies  
• Work responsibilities and stress  
• Working in a male-dominated profession  
• Conflict with study schedule  
• Conflict with bosses  
• Industrial negotiations  
• Taking on extra unpaid work |
| Financial     | • Making the transition from a full-time wage to student allowances, and managing on reduced incomes/Austudy/Abstudy  
• Worry about asking parents for money  
• Stress about meeting financial commitments such as car loans, mortgages, partner’s business having financial difficulties  
• School-leavers taking on financial responsibilities for the first time |
| Medical       | • Chronic disabilities (dyslexia, visual disability)  
• Surgery  
• Generalised feeling of poor health (headaches, stomach pain, insomnia, tiredness) |
| Practical     | • Learning to live independently: cook, budget, do housework  
• Moving house  
• Sharing accommodation  
• Finding childcare  
• Getting access to the computer |
| Adjustment    | • Coping with disappointments  
• Moving away from home  
• Moving back home  
• Returning to study after being in the workforce or parenting  
• Living in student residences  
• Moving to a new country  
• Finding new friends/ loneliness  
• Feeling unconfident and insecure  
• Racism |
From the interview data high performing students reported many of the adjustment difficulties and ongoing stressors experienced by a considerable number of excluded students reported in Study 2. For school-leavers, in addition to adjusting to the academic demands of university, there were many developmental challenges and potential stressors in terms of missing out on a preferred university course; moving to a new environment; becoming independent from family and school friends; managing financial, work and family responsibilities; developing new relationships; negotiating conflicts and differences; consolidating their own identity and career choices; overcoming self doubts and anxiety.

Many older students may have established financial independence and brought to tertiary study, life and work experience. However, mature-aged students faced other challenges which involved re-evaluating their life direction. Those who had been absent from formal study for many years experienced anxiety about their academic adjustment in terms of coping with study demands, writing assignments, doing exams and facing their fears that other (younger) students may be more academically capable. Mature-aged students sometimes had more complex life styles in terms of caring responsibilities for dependents; financial commitments to mortgages and loans; and paid work responsibilities.

Along with these more normative stressors, high performing students also experienced emotional and personal crises such as medical problems, deaths and other losses, divorce, and having to manage chronic disabilities.
6.3.2 Multiple Stressors

In this next section, the relationships between stressors will be examined. A close inspection of the experiences described by high performing students reveals that stressors most often are not a singular, unique source of threat, damage, harm, or loss to an individual. Instead, many high performers describe stressors as interrelated. Furthermore, when we examine stressful events reported by high performers, the stressor categories of Major Life Events, Daily Stressors and Role Stressors overlap considerably. Many stressors are ongoing and chronic in nature, such as workload management, conflicting role demands, financial stress, care-taking responsibilities and chronic disabilities. The evidence gathered from interviews indicated that stressors in one area do affect and have the potential to cascade into other aspects of students’ lives.

The following examples from Julie and Herbie illustrate how high performers assessed stressors as overlapping and interrelated.

Julie described the personal challenges of leaving home for the first time and moving into residential college. She encountered many practical difficulties in training a new guide dog, as well as, organising her study and course materials. She identified a number of relationship stressors at university, where she felt isolated and alienated in the college residence. She also conflicted with her mother who thought she should socialise more “normally” with sighted students. Despite all of these hurdles, Julie excelled academically, gaining a GPA average of 6.8 (out of a possible 7.00).

Residential college was a stress because everyone was into drinking and socialising and I'm not into that. I hated college parties. Uni was a bit isolating. Classes were so big. I usually made friends for a semester and
then I would have to make new ones. I got a guide dog (Lydia) just before starting uni. Lydia was a difficult dog because she jumped everywhere. People either loved her or were critical and it was difficult dealing with other people’s reactions. Trying to organise course materials and trying to organise someone to help me in the library was also stressful. I had Participation Assistance but it had to be up to me. I was used to adults telling me what to do. Now I had to delegate tasks. It was difficult to say no when people helping me wanted to do things their way. Another person who was supposed to help me, didn’t turn up.

Herbie’s experience illustrates how financial, work, university and health stressors were interrelated for her.

When starting uni I had a financial debt on my car which was still owing for 3 years. This lead me to work more hours outside of uni for paid work, which put more pressure on my uni workload, e.g., meeting deadlines, examinations. This affected me through worries- whether I would make payments, finish assignments, do well in exams. I would sometimes lose sleep and have restless nights.

It is very interesting to note that the level of stressfulness described in the previous excerpts sounds reminiscent of quotes from Exclusion Appeal letters discussed in Study 2. So, how do high performers prevent chronic stress and academic decline from escalating into a negative spiral, as was evident in the case of low performers? These interviews with high performers revealed several interesting patterns as to how they coped with multiple stressors which will be discussed in the following section.
6.3.3 Cross-Situational Appraisal

In their appraisal of multiple stressors high performers displayed a capacity to view the whole picture, across multiple contexts of work, personal relationships and study. This capacity to make appraisals across multiple stressors will be termed for this study as "cross-situational appraisal". Cross-situational appraisal involves the capacity to compare and contrast stressors, to weigh up and assess their differential effects and interactions. An examination of complex cross-situational appraisals by high performers will extend our theoretical understanding of coping with multiple stressors, especially efficacious coping.

Secondary appraisal relates to the appraisal of resources to cope with the stressors. High performers tend to show flexibility in their secondary appraisal of stressors, that is, whether they constitute threat, harm, loss, challenge, or are benign. In terms of complex, multiple stressors, high performers showed a wide range of appraisals. These appraisals tend to change over time and across contexts. In multiple social contexts maintaining fixed or rigid secondary appraisals may be maladaptive over the long-term. This was the case with secondary appraisal by low performers who globalised and amplified threat appraisal. Alternatively, low performers rigidly dichotomised multiple stressors, where one stressor was viewed as a threat, while the other was considered benign.

6.3.4 Perceiving Dual Expectations

The notion of dual expectation situations is of relevance in discussing the current research findings. Stake (1997; 2000) defined such situations where there is an expectation to display both expressive (sensitivity and caring) and instrumental (independence and mastery) characteristics. In the following examples it will be argued that high performers not only display versatility across stressors but within stressors.
High performers clearly perceive and appraise the various social contexts of study, paid work, parenting and relationships as dual expectation situations, that is, requiring all types of coping: problem-focused, emotion-focused and relationship-focused coping.

The perception of dual expectations is an important issue in itself. Stake’s research does not address the question as to how we detect and recognise dual expectation situations in the first place. It will be argued that social support processes are important for the recognition of dual expectation situations. Further, unlike low performers who view study as requiring largely problem-focused coping, high performers primarily define study as a dual expectation situation.

6.3.5 Cross-Situational Versatility

Unlike the coping patterns by poor performing students who tended to respond to stressors either in rigid, passive or avoidant patterns, high performing students displayed what can be described as flexible or versatile coping responses. They viewed different aspects of their life as inter-related, and showed a high sensitivity to how coping in one aspect of their life might influence another aspect of their life such as work and personal relationships. High performers’ understanding of the social context of coping with academic studies allowed them to utilise a wide and flexible range of strategies. Cross-situational versatility enabled high performers to simultaneously use emotion-focused, problem-focused and relationship-focused coping. It will be argued that such coping is adaptive with complex, multiple, long-term stressors.
The following section involves an in-depth analysis of two students’ interview material, in order to demonstrate the key formulations being proposed.

Ray is a mature-aged student working full-time in the computing industry while studying Computer Programming part-time. He is a well organised and motivated student and has won a university award as a top Industrial Law student. He is married with a new baby and sees his roles of worker, father, husband and student as inter-related. He succinctly summarised the tensions between the different roles in his life.

For my wife and me, keeping our two careers going, as well as fitting in part-time study, and finding time for the marriage requires constant negotiation...Twelve months ago our son was born just before the final exams. Things were fine in the first few months because my wife was at home looking after the baby full time and I was on vacation from university. When my wife went back to work and I was back at uni, that was when things got difficult. I didn’t have time to spend with the baby and my wife was wanting more help.

Ray has found combining part-time study with his other roles a long-term stressor.

While mature-age students are usually highly motivated in their studies, it is difficult to maintain that motivation over such a long period of time. Including my TAFE study I’ve been studying for seven years with another two left. I am plainly sick of studying. When you are studying, both you and your family have to sacrifice many things that you enjoy. I would
much rather be at the beach, playing with my son, gardening, doing house
renovations, or reading for pleasure.

Ray’s work and study are in a very technical area, however, he defined his work in
both problem-focused and relationship-focused coping terms. He viewed the relational
aspects of coping as both challenging and the key to making things work for him at work,
home and his study.

Computing requires the application of formulae and methods, and while it
is very time consuming, and requires skill, I don’t find it mentally taxing.
In computing it is the human interaction that is difficult. You are trying to
find out from your clients what they really want. This can be very difficult
because the real problem may be very different from the perceived
problem.

As for his personal relationship, where Ray talked about the interaction between his
commitment to his relationship and to his study, he used both relationship- and problem-
focused coping in this context too. Rather than these two aspects of his life being in
conflict, his coping approach enabled Ray to view his commitment to each as enhancing
the other. He used relationship-focused approach in terms of: negotiation; gaining
support; meeting his wife’s needs; as well as sustaining their joint needs to keep their
relationship going. He used problem-focused coping in terms of: making a plan; setting
goals; and organising his study. His commitment to his relationship further enhances
problem-focused coping, that is, concentrating on what needs to be done in relation to
study.
A typical scenario might be that on Wednesday night we might start talking about what we’ll do on the weekend. I might say that I have an assignment due in three weeks, so I need to spend Saturday in the computer lab. My wife might agree to that but mention that she wanted to visit so and so on Sunday. I found that making a commitment to my wife about the time I would spend on my study kept me motivated to complete work. If I was wasting time, she’d remind me that I had said that I’d get my study done, so that we could do something on Sunday.

Ray’s dual commitments to his wife and to other students in a group project involved further need for problem-focused and relationship-focused coping. However, when negotiations became too protracted, he used an assertive response to problem solve the impasse.

Some assignments are based on group work which take a lot of extra negotiation...Sometimes you’re having a three-way conversation on the phone trying to work out with the group when it wants to meet and negotiating with the partner. Sometimes it happens that one person in the group has a lot of difficulty finding a time to meet. You might end up having to be brutally honest and say, “Look there are three of us who can meet. Maybe you’ll have to find another group who wants to meet when you want to.

This above example from Ray illustrates that problem-solving efforts, which are often constructed in the coping literature as individualistic coping, may be actually embedded in hidden or less obvious forms of relationship-focused coping. As discussed in Chapters
Stressors, Coping and High Performing Students

2 and 3, data gathered through most standardised coping instruments often reflects a highly individualistic bias, where individual action and emotional regulation are highly valued. However, this interview data provides a relationship context for understanding problem-focused and emotion-focused coping responses. In Ray’s example, if he were to fill out a standardised coping questionnaire, he may well have identified a number of problem-solving approaches used in relation to his study, such as constructing a plan and following it. From an individual perspective, Ray’s goal was to get his study done. However, his plan was constructed in a relationship context, where his plan had to fit in with his wife’s plan. Not only that, Ray and his wife had to construct a joint plan about what they would do together on the weekend. From a relationship perspective the goal was to spend time together with his wife. Here is the nub of the potential conflict between Ray and his wife in relation to his academic commitments. However, in Ray’s case, his cross-situational appraisal of different contexts and his versatile coping approaches across social contexts reduces potential conflicts with his wife, and for that matter, with most other students in a group project. His commitment to a plan to do something with his wife actually enhances his commitment to stick to his study plan. Furthermore, his wife is not simply a passive bystander in relation to his studies. She makes sure he sticks to his study plan by providing tactful reminders.

Ray viewed social support in more reciprocal terms, which is one of the ways that high performers prevent social support from deteriorating over the long-term. On one level, Ray knew that his wife understood the demands and the time that was involved in academic work, as she already had a university degree, but he does not take this understanding for granted. On another level, he recognised that she had sacrificed their time together and had ongoing needs for his company and help with parenting responsibilities.
A second example will illustrate some further points regarding cross-situational appraisal and versatility. Joanne is an engineering student studying a “sandwich” course which involves a semester at university followed by a semester in her workplace, and so on. She has a cadetship with a metal processing firm, where she works as a control systems engineer. She is highly successful in her studies winning a “Student Engineer of the Year” award. She described her work environment and work relationships as a source of stress for her.

In one department, I was the first woman who had ever come to work there. When I arrived I was met with a hostile reception. I was told that they hated ‘trainees, engineers and women.’ Well, I was all three rolled into one. I’d get bagged about things like not having the strength to loosen bolts that were on too tight.

Joanne is impressive in the wide range of strategies she utilised to deal with the prejudice against women engineers at her workplace. She had previously tried some unsuccessful strategies, such as seeking advice from others (Social Support) and trying more aggressive relationship-focused strategies, such as “hassling people back”. However, she assessed these to be ineffective as they escalated the conflict with her work-mates. Joanne described a creative range of strategies to overcome these work-related problems. They involved active problem-focused approaches by: thinking of different ways to deal with the problem; finding out more about the problem; drawing on her previous family experience; and by showing results in her work. She used emotion-focused strategies to reduce her negative feelings by distancing potentially personal insults. Relationship-focused strategies were used to show respect and interest; to ask for
advice; to build trust and win the confidence of the tradesmen. Finally, when all else failed she used flattery (with a touch of humour), which is arguably all three types of coping in one masterpiece. It was relationship enhancing, relieved tension and solved her work-related problems. Presumably, being “good friends” (a relationship outcome) enhanced Joanne’s capacity to do her job (a problem-focused outcome).

I worked out a number of ways to deal with these situations. First of all, I didn’t see it as my problem so I didn’t take the insults personally and didn’t let it get me down. Secondly, I put my head down and worked, because if you can get your projects to work and show that you have ability, it’s the best way to gain their respect. Thirdly, I discovered that these tradesmen hated engineers because they felt engineers looked down on them. In my own family everyone works in a trade, so I didn’t see them as beneath me. I saw tradespeople as having a lot of knowledge, skills and experience. So, I always make sure that I ask for their opinions and advice. If all else fails in breaking the ice, I found that, if I complimented the men on their cars, it always gets them to open up. By the time I finished my eight-week block there, we ended up being good friends.

In the following contrasting example, Joanne adopted a very different approach when adapting to the culture of university and to deal with her lack of acceptance by the other female students in her course. Joanne described her appraisal and coping across multiple contexts, school, socio-economic class, and university. Here, Joanne’s coping strategies were largely emotion-focused in terms of “waiting to see what happens”, distancing herself somewhat from situations over which she had little direct control, which could
have potentially distracted her from her studies. A comparison of different contexts enabled Joanne to gain more information (problem-focused coping), which helped her to develop a different perspective. She eventually found benefit in her situation through positive reappraisal (emotion-focused strategy) and came to value the skills and knowledge she possessed, viewing her experience and capacity to communicate simply as enhancing her work performance and her work relationships.

I’m the first person in my family to go to university, so it all felt foreign to me... Of the fifteen females who began the course, there are only about five left now. Amongst the women students, I was the only one who had attended a State public school. I’d never thought about it much but comments like, ‘Oh, you went to a public school’, made me feel that it was a bad thing to do. Eventually, I worked out that there were many advantages to my public school experience, such as having done power mechanics, knowing how to fill out tax returns, and having studied with male students. The language that people use at university can be quite intimidating. Everyone sounds so ‘perfect’, so educated. I don’t use big words and I don’t understand other people when they use them. I used to worry that people were looking down on me. But at work it is an advantage if you can speak simply. A lot of our machine operators come from immigrant backgrounds and they don’t understand much English.

In her work and study contexts, both cross-situational appraisal and a versatile coping pattern was evident. Did this approach extend to other contexts, such as her personal relationships? In her domestic situation, Joanne initially viewed it as an individual problem-solving effort, which resulted in an escalation of her stress.
About twelve months ago I got married. It was a bit of shock to go from my mum doing my cooking, cleaning and washing to having to do it myself. I got really stressed in the first six months because I felt I had to do everything in the house. My husband is very busy too...He wasn’t worried about the housework, and because he wasn’t doing it, I felt I had to do it.

Joanne then used a more versatile approach, involving all three dimensions of coping, in relation to the housework. She engaged her partner in helping to solve the problem, where they prioritised jobs and worked out a plan for getting the job done. Their relationship was enhanced by doing the housework together. Joanne used emotion-focused strategies to lessen the importance of the problem and revised her view of her husband’s ironing skills, which allowed her to delegate ironing to him. They further problem solved by coming up with new arrangements to meet changed circumstances, such as assignment deadlines. Like the previous example from Ray, all forms of coping are used in interrelated ways and social support is constructed in reciprocal terms.

We’ve talked about it, and I’ve realised that things won’t fall apart because the ironing isn’t done. We prioritised our responsibilities and housework has come down at the bottom of the list. We usually have a big clean up day on Saturday. I’ve also accepted that my husband is a big boy now and he can iron his shirts if he needs them. If I have a big assignment due, my husband takes over all the domestic duties.
In the examples of Ray and Joanne, when we compare their coping approaches, gender differences are not apparent. They seem to share far more in common in terms of their versatility and the active pro-social manner in which they approach their relationships.

Three further examples will be discussed briefly, as they illustrate how other high performers coped with different social contexts. Herbie is in her late twenties, divorced with no children. Prior to attending university to study psychology she had been working as a hairdresser, which she continued to do while at university. She comes from a large close-knit Lebanese family and had moved back home to live with her parents. Her father had a chronic medical condition which required ongoing treatment. Herbie identifies a versatile range of strategies to cope with multiple stressors related to her finances, responsibilities in caring for her sick father and her studies. In relation to her financial debts Herbie identified three emotion-focused strategies: “trying to forget” about her problems, which were ineffective and “imagining the worst possible scenario” and “realising it won’t last forever”, which provided stress relief. She further used problem solving in terms of “working harder” and “talks” to her family for emotional and practical support. Problem-focused strategies were used in relation to her financial debts, which also eased her worry.

As for financial worries, I had the financiers debit money from my account each month, before I had time to withdraw the money and spend it. When I couldn’t make payment, a phone call to them making alternative arrangements prevented more stress and eased my mind from worry.
Unlike low performers, Herbie does not use problem-focused coping in isolation from her study and relationship contexts. She is active, flexible and pro-social in how she dealt with her familial responsibilities, while taking a flexible and structured approach with her studies.

As for family responsibilities - I learn to cope by saying no, but that makes me feeling guilty. I hand over some of the workload to other family members and that makes me feel good. Prior planning helped. Being aware of hospital appointments for my father reduced stress by allowing me to organise around appointment times or seeking someone else to take him. I knew the days I had to work, so put aside the other days for study and told myself nothing else can change that unless it was an “emergency” like Dad needing to go to hospital. If I missed out some days on a study day, then those hours would be made up on the weekend.

Megan is a Communications student, who was offered a part-time job in a public relations consultancy. However, taking up the job meant extensive hours of travelling between university and her job (300 kilometres each way). As it was the middle of her university term, it was too late to change enrolment status to part-time study or distance education mode. She had to manage two geographical contexts, two places of residence and two types of demands, work and study. Megan saw both areas of her life as interconnected, which enhanced her motivation and commitment to both her study and her job. She reinterpreted her lack of friends in her new town as an opportunity to do more study. At university she had to adapt her study routine by working in the library to
fit in with her changed living situation. Rather than being stereotypic in her coping, she was flexible in her problem-solving efforts. Like Ray and Joanne, such a complex appraisal enhanced her coping with areas of her life that could be potentially conflictual.

Rhonda has completed her first year at university with high grades. She had to find a balance between her different work commitments, financial problems, family responsibilities and study.

As a result of work, I became overcommitted, tired, unable to relax and stressed. Apart from my usual duties as a telephone counsellor, I was involved in representing the counselling body at large in work related negotiations with management. This position entailed a considerable amount of work in my own time. My husband’s income was severely depleted and financial problems became a stressor. I worked longer hours and cut down my housekeeper’s hours, thus taking on more duties at work and home. My level of self-care was low as I struggled to support a depressed spouse and adapt to study. At first I tried to fill the financial gap by working longer. This led to feelings of self pity and resentful thoughts. This eventually impacted on my work. When I was overcommitting myself I added to the stress at home considerably. However, once I put more effective strategies in place, my family responded sensitively and willingly.

I cut down on my extra activities at work, refused public speaking engagements and ceased to be involved in industrial relations negotiations with management. I asked my family for help; shared home duties, for
example, shopping, vacuuming etc. When I was overcommitting myself, I added to the stress at home considerably. However, when I put effective strategies into place my family responded sensitively and willingly.

The interview data confirms the findings from Study 1, that high performers are indeed active in their use of problem solving strategies. However, unlike low performers in Study 2, who tend to use problem-focused efforts or emotion-focused coping in a rigid, inflexible and stereotyped manner, high performers take a flexible and versatile approach to coping.

6.3.6 Problematics and Complexities of Social Support

In Study 1, it was found that high performers made high use of social support strategies. Much of coping research has treated social support as a fixed coping resource in the environment, that is, one is either high or low in social support. As a process social support is frequently conceptualised as a uni-directional process, that is, it is assumed to be a simple one-way advantage to the coper. In the previous examples with Ray and Joanne, it was seen that social support is not uni-directional, and reciprocity is usually expected, especially over the long-term.

In the following section the complexities of social support will be examined. First, high performers do not define their relationships in uni-dimensional terms, that is, relationships are either always supportive or always unsupportive. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether or not someone is being supportive. There are paradoxical elements in relationships, which produce variations in coping both within and between relationships. In other words, high performers deal with different aspects of relationships
in different ways. Second, how students cope with hostile and conflictual relationships will be examined. As was seen in Study 2, half of poor performing students identified relationship difficulties as contributing to their poor performance. Last, how students cope with relationship losses will be discussed.

Social expectations about coping independently caused some students to place additional pressures on themselves and to experience tension within their relationships. In Rob’s case he felt guilty about no longer being the primary breadwinner to support his family. Rob reappraised his study context by viewing it as an “unpaid job” to “justify” to himself that study involved real work. Although his parents could not understand his reasons for studying, they offered practical support in terms of looking after his children.

I found it very difficult to have to justify going to uni and only work part-time while my friends had full time jobs. The things that helped me get through this was that my partner was supportive. My parents were not supportive. I think they thought that I was too old and too stupid. My father had the impression I stayed at home all day and did nothing. My family couldn’t understand why I would want to do anything like this but they were supportive when they would look after the kids during school holidays. A strategy that helped me to feel OK was to treat uni like an unpaid second job. This worked well. Also peer support - knowing that other students felt this and I was not alone.

Rob’s horizons are broadened by feminist theories he encountered through his studies. In his own personal life Rob challenged gender stereotypes by reversing care-taking roles with his wife. He talked about his determination to succeed in his studies:
I started studying full-time but swapped to part-time study when my third child was born. My wife went back to full-time work and I stayed home to look after the baby and two other children aged 3 years and five. At first my wife was ambivalent about returning to work, as she wanted to look after the baby. After a while she was happy to be at work and adjusted to not looking after the baby.

In some tutorials and small lectures I was the only male in the class. In some topics like feminism, I didn’t understand anything about it. Some of the female students were men haters. I had my own issues about being male in a predominantly female area of work - caring about people. You should have seen me ten years ago. I was a construction worker in a power station. I certainly didn’t believe in women’s rights then. I wanted to do a degree because I thought it would help my future. I definitely wanted to finally succeed at something - to be the master of something. I was determined to make a go of it, to get through it and determined not to walk out. I steered clear of the men hating women. I just listened and it changed my thinking and broadened my horizons. I can understand where they are coming from. I explained it to my wife who didn’t understand half of it - I raised her consciousness. After six months in a tutorial, the women would start including you as one of the girls.
Julie was hesitant about leaving the security of close family relationships. She indicated that she would not have left home, except for her mother’s insistence that she develop greater independence.

At school you have someone to hold your hand but at uni you don’t and that was traumatic. I’m very family orientated. My whole extended family lives two miles of each other, so I was moving away from a close family grouping. I missed having a good morning hug. Initially, Mum wanted me to move away to go to uni. She wanted to give me a chance to be independent, and if I didn’t do it then, she felt that it probably would never happen. Dad would have been happy for his little girl to stay at home.

The increased pressures on Julie to socialise in a sighted world, created tension in her relationship with her mother.

This caused tension between Mum and myself. She would worry that her daughter didn’t want to go to the annual dinner dance. She’d say, ‘You’ve got to get out and do things.’ And I’d say ‘No. I don’t want to.’ Any conflict in the family is stressful. Not making Mum proud was stressful. Not wanting to do these things that were expected was stressful.

Julie made her social adjustment to living in College by forming a close friendship with another blind student which provided the opportunity to develop her independence in her own way.
I made one friend in College, Emma, who was also blind. We would cope by going out, sometimes four times a week to dinner, to get out of the college environment. I also developed rapport with three families I knew before coming to Brisbane. It got me out of College and gave me older company and a relaxed family environment. At the end of two years, Emma and I moved out of College into a flat together. It was the best thing I ever did. We were good friends. We got to learn together how to be independent, where we weren’t scrutinised by others. It gave me more freedom and privacy.

Lorraine moved back home to live with her parents, leaving a full-time job to become a full-time student. While her parent are very happy to have her living with them, Lorraine is ambivalent about her continued financial dependence on her parents. She used a number of emotion-focused strategies to help her to view her situation as temporary.

Re-orienting my thinking to focus on the positives in my situation and being appreciative and grateful of the support I did receive. I am grateful for their liberal ideas and willingness to take care of me. It was effective in that it helped me to move past difficulties and to focus on getting done what I needed to do; helped me to not get stuck on the negatives and get down. My parents would reiterate that I would be able to move out when I was financially able and emphasised there was no hurry. Sometimes I would accept this and sometimes I would react against this and claim that they would like me to stay dependent on them. I would tell myself, “I will
be able to work fulltime at the end of my course and then move out and support myself."

6.3.6.1 Conflict

Joanne, Ray, Herbie and Rhonda had partners and family members who can be encouraged and organised to be supportive and cooperative. Relationship stressors were identified by half of poor performing students. What about high performing students who have to contend with conflict, lack of support, disapproval or loss in their relationships? When we extend the investigation of coping to relationships - some problematic issues become apparent. Relationships are rarely static and therefore coping responses tend to change and adapt. There is an interactional context to coping. How do others in the relationship system respond to the copers’ coping? How does that in turn affect further coping?

In this section, we will examine how high performing students cope with relationship stressors such as divorces, relationship break-ups and losses. Previous research indicates that people generally tend to use more emotion-focused strategies in relation to losses. The following excerpts indicate that high performers are more complex in their coping responses, especially when losses are associated with other stressors, such as changing residences, and increasing financial problems.

Maria is a mature-age student with four children and is a top student in Physics. As she began to do well in her study her marriage relationship deteriorated and ended in divorce. She initially tried to compromise and take assertive action (both active and relationship-focused). However, these coping strategies were ineffectual and her husband’s anger and resentment increased.
As I began to cope well and gained more control of my life, my marriage began to fall apart and the difficulties that had been there for a long time came out into the open. My husband and I ran a business together and he began to put more and more obstacles in the path of my study. He’d want me to do things for him on the days that I was attending uni and I’d say, “No, I’ll do it on the day that I’m not at uni.” Or when I was doing an assignment he’d ask me to type a letter and I’d say, “You’re watching television. I’ll show you how to use the word processor.” As I became stronger, he became angrier. By second semester I was deeply depressed.

Maria broadened the context and considered her situation from different viewpoints: from a future viewpoint; from other models of working/studying mothers around her; examining the implications of staying in her current predicament; and developing confidence from how other women had survived divorces. This broadening of viewpoint across different time frames and various roles enabled Maria to make some decisions and to develop problem solving strategies to solve concurrent financial and childcare difficulties.

I realised if I didn’t get a degree, I’d be stuck with the choice of staying in a bad marriage or doing a job I didn’t like to support myself and my kids. I saw other women had survived the break-up of bad marriages or been able to combine a career and marriage and I knew it could be done. In subsequent years I changed to becoming a full-time student. My children went to four days of day-care and I paid for this by working as a peer tutor to students who were having difficulty with their physics.
The break-up of Jo’s ten year marriage during her first year of study, led to job (as she worked in the same workplace as her partner) and place of residence changes, which added to her financial stress and emotional upheaval. Support outside of the family, in terms of counselling, provided Jo with a more neutral atmosphere to discuss her feelings.

In my first year of study my relationship broke down. This affected me in a number of ways. I had to move premises and in the first year I had to move a number of times which was very unsettling. My family and friends were happy about the relationship break-up. I felt I couldn’t talk about the break-up and how it affected me emotionally without feeling judged by them. They wanted it gone and forgotten. I also worked with my ex-partner so I found it necessary to find new employment. The contribution of a new job, new house and being single again after 10 years was a huge hurdle to overcome and affected my concentration and motivation at uni. I felt very isolated. My family and friends were happy about my marriage break-up. My twin sister was most accepting of me. I did for a period of time see a counsellor which was an opportunity to talk to someone about what was happening, without feeling I was being judged. I established new friendships at uni with people who didn’t know my past, who would be non-judgemental.

Jo viewed study as an opportunity to do something independently for herself, as well as an escape from her feelings of grief following her marriage break-up.

I had been scared about going to uni as I had never felt smart enough to go when I was younger. Study meant for the first time I did something for
me. I put a lot of time into study. It was escapism from my feelings. As much as study was a stressor, it was a huge pleasure in my life - a focus for my learning. I had brains. I wasn’t silly.

Marnie had to contend with a different type of interpersonal conflict with her boyfriend. When Marnie initiated to end the relationship he threatened suicide. She used social support (talking); problem-focused strategy (getting in touch with someone to help her boyfriend) and emotion-focused coping (distancing herself from the responsibility). Jogging, exercise, taking time out and hot showers, which are often described as escape-avoidant strategies, help her to cope with her emotions, as well as assisting her to think more clearly about her problems.

I felt upset and overwhelmed by the burden of suicide, however, sharing with one or two friends helped. I firmly removed responsibility from me and contacted his flatmates. I coped with relationship breakdown by talking through with close friends and family. Getting on with life helped. Getting bogged down in the “whys?” didn’t help. Dwelling, berating and crying didn’t help. I find exercise an excellent way of thinking clearly about current issues and concerns. Hot showers help too. Taking time out (i.e. go to the park and draw if I feel overwhelmed). Cry to my parents (only occasionally but I feel it is an important stress release). Distracting myself by having fun with friends.

Conflicts in interactions are not limited to close interpersonal relationships but can also occur in the wider socio-cultural context. Ivan is an international student from Singapore studying Marketing. He raised some of the significant cultural adjustments,
difficulties involved in cross-cultural communication and racism he experienced as an international student. Ivan tried to cope with his disappointments by taking a long-term view and trying to draw benefit from his experiences.

I found Australians to be mature, sophisticated and friendly and I felt that I was well treated. Initially I thought this was the norm. Later, when I experienced some hostility, it was hard to know whether I had offended someone or if it was plain racism. People seemed to be pleasant to me when they were sober, but, around where I lived, verbal attacks from drunks in the street puzzled me. I wondered whether there was always a hidden agenda and whether people spoke their minds truthfully when they were drunk. As an overseas student I believe it is important to be willing to learn to reach out to others, but it can be difficult to know what is culturally acceptable. Sometimes my willingness has not been reciprocated, but perhaps my efforts have been misunderstood. Although it may take time, perhaps even several generations, the willingness of individuals to bridge the gap will lead to better understanding of one another’s cultures.

5.3.6.2 Death and Potential Loss

Cate coped with actual and threatened losses. She provided emotional support to her friend, whose husband had died in tragic circumstances, as well as, practical and emotional support to her mother diagnosed with cancer. Interestingly this support is not a one-way process. Cate perceived her friend’s situation as far worse than her own. Her mother’s determination to fight the cancer provided strength and support to Cate.
The main feelings that I had were extreme anxiety, huge stress, sadness and pressure. I kept thinking that my friend who had lost her husband was just devastated and that she was going through a much worse time than me. However, at the same time I was confronted with the reality that the closest person to me may die and I wondered if that would happen. How would I and my family cope? I also kept thinking that it was shitty that tragic things happen to good people who didn’t deserve the tragedy... We lived on an acreage and I used to walk a lot in the afternoon for exercise. Mum and I used to talk a lot about her disease and how she was working to overcome it. She was very optimistic and mentally strong which made it easier for us.

At times, Cate used emotion-focused strategies to control her feelings of distress.

I also thought that I had to be strong for my mum and friend and needed to support them as much as possible. At times I withheld my feelings for fear that my family and friends wouldn’t know how to handle them. Consequently a lot of people thought I was doing well under the circumstance.

At other times, Cate used emotion-focused strategies to express her emotions and to seek comfort from her sisters. Cate felt angry with her stepfather using distancing strategies with him.

During the worst times I’d cry myself to sleep or talk to a friend or my sisters and have a cry with them. Sometimes I was angry at some of the
ways my stepfather did not cope with the situation. Consequently, I would spend more time with Mum and not talk to him a great deal about how I felt.

To manage her care-taking responsibilities for her mother and her study, Cate used problem-focused and relationship-focused strategies.

We just did what we had to do to look after her [mother]. Most of my energy went into looking after Mum, studying and spending time with friends. I also worked in a study group, which helped to keep me motivated. I relied a lot on my friends from uni for information for assignments. I bought a computer so I could do work a lot more from home.

It can be seen from these case studies, that in situations of loss, complex appraisals are made as to which aspects of multiple stressors require problem-focused coping; which aspects require distancing, escape-avoidance and distraction; which aspects require stress release and emotional expression; and which aspects require self control. Cate managed the complex interaction between giving and gaining support.

6.3.7 The Interactional Context of Study

High performers define coping with study in both problem-focused terms (making study timetables, planning, organisation, goal setting etc.), and relationship-focused terms (sharing problems, normalising anxiety, emotional support). A number of high performers found working with other students both socially supportive, helpful in clarifying expectations and standards, and in keeping them motivated. High performers
perceived study as a dual expectation situation, whereas low performers viewed study as only requiring problem-focused coping. Like the previous discussion on social support, high performers appraise which aspects of social interactions they find helpful and supportive and in which situations working independently is more effective.

Some poor performers who had failed practicums, projects and performance subjects reported conflictual interactions with lecturers. How do high performers deal with assessment processes, which have a subjective element? Both Andrew and Ivan used the interactional frame of a consultant working with a client (the lecturer) as a frame to negotiate expectations and incorporate feedback from lecturers. It helped them to balance their own view along with the ideas and expectations from lecturers. Such a frame assisted high performers to take criticisms from lecturers less personally. Andrew also incorporated feedback from other students by checking his own perceptions and ideas. He also reviewed and reappraised past work from a different vantage point of greater experience and knowledge.

You have to get used to having your work scrutinised and criticised. Architecture is very subjective. Sometimes I’ve done a design that I’ve thought wasn’t too bad, but it has been absolutely panned at a critique session, where you show your design to all the students, tutors and lecturers and explain and justify what you are doing. If a lecturer doesn’t like your work, you have the right to know why something isn’t working. You can then assess whether the criticism is based on a personal opinion or preference of the lecturer or whether there is some concrete reason behind the criticism. I talk to other students as well, to see what they think of my ideas. I try to understand what is working and what’s not and then I
have a chance to fix up my work before the final assessment. Sometimes I feel that I’ve been marked down but, when I look back on my work with the benefit of more experience, I can see the problems with it. With some lecturers it is difficult to understand their marking system. I try to treat lecturers a bit like clients and try to find out from them what they want and then I work with it.

Andrew, Cate, Jacqui, Rob and Denis have found a study group useful.

It’s good to get into a study group with some friends from the course. You might sift though the new magazines and journals together. This leads to interesting discussions about what is aesthetically pleasing, or what is ugly. It is also handy to study for exams together. We go through our lecture notes together. Sometimes you find that you’ve missed writing down something vital or that you have misinterpreted what the lecturer has said. This leads to discussions what each person in the group thinks the lecturer was actually saying. I find studying this way makes it much easier to remember the things that I’ve discussed and thought about.

Denis who has a learning disability overcame his lack of confidence by studying with a friend. It also enabled him to capitalise on one of his strengths - learning through discussion.

I have also found it useful to study with a friend. At the end of first year, I remember vividly feeling that I would never be able to cope with exams, that I would never be able to organise myself to get it all together. One of my friends said, ‘of course you can do it!’ We studied together, asking one
another questions and testing each other. Essentially his physical presence and encouragement was what enabled me to succeed in getting through first year.

Although he was anxious about seeking assistance from formal sources within the university, Denis was able to overcome his hesitance to utilise services. A sense of reciprocity to his tutor enhanced Denis’ commitment and hardwork to overcome his difficulties.

Disaster struck almost immediately when I started my Social Work degree. I discovered I had to do statistics in my first year at university! I was so anxious and despondent that a staff member noticed my plight. She ordered me to come to her office and asked me what was wrong. When I told her there was no way I could pass stats, she arranged for me to go to the counsellors. I felt terrible when I heard this. She was known as something of a dragon-lady and she did seem to be trying to help so I thought I better go. I had nothing to lose. The counsellor helped me to overcome my fears and anxiety about statistics by teaching me to relax using self-hypnosis. I also found a tutor who used to do Statistics for relaxation after he had put the kids to bed at night! To improve my reading and writing, I had tutoring in English. We went back to basics in grammar. It was very time consuming, but I put in the work because I had a very committed tutor, who also put a lot of work into helping me.

Working with other students was not experienced uniformly as beneficial.
I didn’t know my preferred way to study, but after meeting with other students to engage in group work before an exam, I found I was much more effective if I worked alone. (Rhonda)

Natasha uses both methods effectively by working with others, as well as on her own. I’ve always worked in a small study group to do exercises and prac reports. A couple of days before the report is due we come together with our completed work. We check one another’s calculations and pick up errors for one another. While these reports aren’t worth much marks, they can be very time consuming and if you do them thoroughly, it can save a lot of time revising at the end. I prefer to work on my own for essays because I find it is hard to help one another without ending up with the same essays.

Megan compares the benefits of on campus tutorials and off campus distance education.

When you are studying on your own by distance education, there is no one to reinforce your ideas, so that you know you’re on the right track.

Ivan discussed the tension caused by different work and learning styles amongst project members. He dealt with his frustration by broadening his context to identify some of the benefits of learning to work on a team.

I have excellent relationships with many local Australian students but when it comes to getting things done in groups I find we have very different approaches. I’m a strong planner and I get frustrated with the
drawn-to process of trying to reach agreement, when everyone wants to promote their own view and it is difficult to find a consensus. While Australians in the group may feel that Asian students don’t contribute enough to the discussion, we feel that we must find common ground as quickly as possible and move onto getting the task completed. The value of such group projects is that all students have to learn to adapt to the different working styles of others on the team, which is what is required when we work in the real world.

Not all interactional contexts are positive, as Maria found in relation to over-confident, vocal students. She eventually developed a different view of her competence and distanced herself from her fears.

Mature-age students sometimes take lecturers’ advice about how much work is expected too literally. Lecturers are usually trying to scare the younger students into working harder. Mature-age students can become discouraged when they think they aren’t doing enough work to meet lecturers’ expectations…Sometimes mature-age students feel inadequate because they don’t have the same background knowledge as students who have just come from high school. If I can’t understand a concept, sometimes a sentence or two from the lecturer after the class can help to clear up the confusion. I used to worry that I didn’t know as much as some of the other students. Some of the younger students may be very vocal in class and it took me a while to realise they were only vocal about what they knew and they didn’t talk about the things they didn’t know, which
was considerable because I ended up doing better than they did in the exams.

The picture of coping with social interactions provided by high performers demonstrates that they use highly complex ways of appraising different aspects of multiple stressors, and manage them in diverse, flexible and versatile ways. High performers appraise their relational context at work, in their study, and in the social and personal aspects of their lives. Relationship-focused coping may be central with long-term, multiple stressors. Further, the effectiveness of problem solving and emotion-focused coping is largely determined by the interpersonal context.

Data from interviews shows that ongoing relationships are generally not uniformly supportive or unsupportive. On occasions escapist and distancing strategies are effective; that emotion-focused and relationship-focused coping can enhance problem-focused coping.

Many poor performers found their personal and work stressors distracted them from their studies and experienced study as a long-term stressor. Four high performers described study (an area of competence in their life) as a coping strategy for relationship problems. In this context, study is used as an emotion-focused coping strategy, that is, as an escape from distressing feelings. In addition, it can be defined as a problem-focused effort, as it is a way students increase their sense of mastery, control, self esteem and competence. It can be seen that the same actions can have multiple purposes and intentions, an issue often overlooked in the coping research.
6.3.8 Proactive Coping

Proactive coping efforts as a means for minimising or tackling chronic stress has been proposed as having potential merit (Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997). As discussed in Chapter Two, Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) proposed a five stage model of proactive coping involving appraisal and coping efforts which require: (1) resource accumulation, (2) attention-recognition of potential stressful events coming, (3) initial appraisal, (4) preliminary (initial) coping and (5) eliciting and using feedback. Aspinwall and Taylor argue that in the early stages of the stress episode, there may be a greater range of coping options, as coping resources have not had the chance to become depleted, whereas options may become more constrained as the stressful situation develops. If stressful events can be averted or minimised, the burden of chronic stress experienced may be relatively low. Using Apsinwall and Taylor’s conceptualisation, high performers are model proactive copers. They are highly organised across their different social contexts, good time managers, efficient, and well prepared.

These strategies, which high performers identify as contributing to academic success and broader stress management in their lives, are not surprising or new information, as every study skills course and university orientation course would propose these proactive strategies for effective academic success. In the following section, it is apparent that high performers have incorporated the culture and expectations of their academic institutions. High performers pay attention to many areas of resource accumulation, initial coping efforts and feedback. They found such strategies reduced their overall levels of stress, as well as helping them to stay on top of academic demands.
1. Many report building their financial resources in terms of: building up savings or paying off debts prior to beginning university; developing systems for paying debts; budgeting finances and working out ways to save money; and gaining scholarships and cadetships.

2. Organising practical matters (mobility training, taping material) prior to starting university.

   I organised mobility ahead of time with the guide dogs people. I had the whole holidays to train Lydia. I also organised picking subjects and getting some of the lectures taped ahead of time. Mum brailled everything ahead of time. She colour coded my clothes with different shaped buttons, so I knew what coloured clothing went with what. (Julie)

3. Organising child-care prior to university starting.

   I knew what to expect so I got myself and the children organised. I got in the car and drove to every child-care centre within a 20-kilometre radius of uni to book in my two children. In the end just one centre offered me places for my two children. I made great efforts to get the children into a routine and to get the older ones used to helping with jobs around the house and, much to my surprise, I was able to organise myself and the children without too much trouble. I decided on two days of care and then tried to pick classes that fitted into those days. When lectures occurred on days for which I didn’t have child-care I had to arrange alternative care. I found on those days exchanging child-care with other people worked quite well. (Maria)
4. Seeking information and feedback

Like my two older brothers, I’d planned to go into a trade, such as motor mechanics and hadn’t given much thought to university. My mother was astute enough to recognise that I had academic potential and that if I didn’t do something that was challenging I would easily become bored and frustrated. She organised for me to see a careers counsellor. The results of the testing indicated that I might be suitable to engineering. I had no idea what engineers did, so I spent the next two years at school finding out as much as I could about engineering by attending university open days and careers excursions. (Joanne)

5. Developing academic skills and utilising resources for assistance at university. All students ensured they had developed adequate study skills, research skills etc. by attending orientation courses, seeking advice and reading books.

It helped to attend an orientation session for mature-age students to be aware of how others had overcome adjustments and difficulties. Taking shorthand notes in lectures and sitting away from people who chat kept me focused as well as taking water with me and having food at regular intervals. Doing a course on internet and library skills helped to develop research skills. I didn’t know how to write an assignment - this was particularly daunting. I read two books on this which were extremely helpful and I believe developing these skills has been a major contributing factor to my academic success. (Rhonda)
6. Utilising peer support in terms of study groups. This has been discussed extensively in previous section on the Interactional Context of Study.

7. Seeking advice and feedback from lecturers. This has also been discussed previously in section on the Interactional Context of Study.

8. Help in facilitating social adjustment.

A helpful factor was learning to manage time and deal with the stress of living with other students. Obtaining study tips and patterns assisted personal study, as well as knowing others were going through the same sort of study ordeal. (Marnie)

9. Keeping paid work down to manageable hours. As mentioned previously all students limited their paid work hours, which enabled them to have the time to do adequate academic preparation and work.

10. Valuing time as a limited resource - planning, organisation and time management. Without exception every student had systems for efficient time management and strategies for organising complex and sometimes conflicting role demands.

Because I was fitting study into a busy schedule, I needed to be focused and organised. I developed a structure which enabled me to complete assignments a week early, making sure I was not working on them at the last minute which would add to my stress. Planning ahead meant I could
advise others I would not be available for social functions and times I would not be able to carry out certain tasks at home e.g. meal preparation. It also meant I was able to prevent any problems with accessing the computer in a household where it is in great demand. (Rhonda)

11. Being adaptable and flexible to deal with new demands and unexpected emergencies.

   My way of coping is to be relatively organised but flexible as I have found that family commitments can interrupt at ever frequent intervals and inflexibility adds to the stress. (Muriel)

12. Goal setting.

   I think having short and long-term goals has helped me to succeed at university. My short-term goal might be to get through the semester but I think you need to have some light at the end of the tunnel, some purpose in your mind for all this work and study. My long-term goal is that I want to work in international marketing. (Kylie)

6.3.9 Broadening Conceptualisation Of Proactive Coping

Proactive coping efforts are conceptualised by Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) as almost always active strategies such as planning, behavioural strategies such as seeking information from others and taking preliminary action. Avoidant strategies and positive reappraisal are viewed as detrimental to proactive coping. The proactive model proposed by Aspinwall and Taylor suffers from some of the same limitations existing in the general conceptualisation of coping, which are raised in Chapter Two.
First, the proactive model is highly biased towards action, problem solving and problem management, as can be seen from the previous definition. Aspinwall and Taylor further reinforce the dichotomy in coping literature that problem solving is efficacious and emotion-focused coping is inefficacious. Several high performing students describe holidays, relaxation and taking breaks as having beneficial effects in helping them to manage long-term stress. Whether or not coping is efficacious is an issue of timing. With low performers taking breaks often meant they were escaping or avoiding doing a difficult task. With high performers, when it is combined with problem-focused coping, breaks are used as a way to refresh, energise and maintain motivation. Marnie found that jogging helped her to think more clearly about her problems. Joanne used the prospect of a holiday to motivate herself when her workload was high and she used it as a reward for hard work. Rebecca and Cate found it was effective to take time out to do gardening, go for a swim or a walk. Muriel used prayer and meditation, but also focused on one day at a time to stop herself from excessive worry. This allowed her “to cope without burning out.”

Second, as seen in the earlier analysis of social support, at least in the long-term, it is an interactional process. Joanne and Ray’s relationship-focused coping is in fact, proactive in maintaining and strengthening their relationships. For tangible problems like finances or study skills it is easier to identify when the proactive coping process begins. However, with multiple stressors it is sometimes harder to identify at which stage coping is proactive. When is today’s coping, tomorrow’s proaction? Ray’s and Joanne’s ability to negotiate with their partners and use relationship-focused coping to look after their relationships during times of stress could also be considered proactive in preventing chronic conflict in their marriages and perhaps preventing a break-up. Similarly, Joanne’s
quite sophisticated strategies in coping with her workplace difficulties prevented
escalation of the conflict, and could well have prevented a future discrimination and
harassment complaint.

Maria and Rhonda used a different form of proactive relationship-focused coping.
Both of them became more assertive in doing less in their family, personal and work
relationships. Rhonda stopped doing extra, unpaid work in her workplace and organised
her family to do more around the house. Maria, too, organised her children to take more
responsibilities, however, her husband is less cooperative. Maria’s decision to leave her
marriage on one level could be viewed as a coping response to her husband’s continued
lack of support. On another level it could also be considered proactive coping when she
considered how much worse things would be if she did not complete her degree - that she
would be stuck doing a job she did not like and would continue to feel deeply depressed.
Maria’s projection into the future helped her to do something, though difficult and
painful, to change her current circumstances.

One particular insight from Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) is especially useful in
conceptualising the appraisal of multiple stressors. They highlight the important
influence others have on the appraisal of potentially stressful events. Unlike cognitive
models which promote appraisal as an individual activity which occurs inside people’s
heads, the proactive model recognises that others influence the appraisal of stressful
events and that others provide assistance in interpreting feedback from preliminary
coping efforts. It is one of the important roles that study groups play. Previous
discussions in this chapter on the interactional context of study, indicates that others
provide important feedback about current problem solving efforts, and help students to
assess such questions as: “Is this assignment hard?” “Am I doing enough work?” “What does the lecturer expect?”

With multiple stressors, proactive coping also assists in the recognition of how coping in one area could lead to problems in other areas. With low performers, it was seen how social isolation further reinforced the compartmentalisation of stressors. Others act as models for proactive coping efforts.

6.4 Managing Complexity

In this chapter, high performers who could be identified as thriving, not only do well academically, but they also successfully manage a complex range of role demands and responsibilities. Thriving is apparent in the patterns of cross-situational appraisals and versatile cross-situational coping patterns identified for high performers. They are able to move beyond rigid role-defined, situational-defined and gender stereotyped expectations for coping. As such they are able to creatively and flexibly use problem-focused, relationship-focused and emotion-focused coping to deal with multiple, long-term stressors. To cope effectively with multiple work and personal stressors and to excel academically requires considerable levels of persistence and resilience in managing multiple tasks, as well as skills in managing social interactions. Many ways that high performers have coped with adversity and challenges in their lives has already been described in detail. In addition to all these areas of growth already discussed two new areas will be examined in the following section.
Discussion 6.5

Figure 6.5 Coping with Long-term Multiple Stressors by High Performers

MULTIPLE STRESSORS

APPRaisal
- Cross-situational appraisal
- Dual expectations

SOCIAL SUPPORT RESOURCES

COPING CROSS-SITUATIONAL VERSATILITY
- Active Problem solving
- Relationship-focused coping
- Emotion-focused coping

PROACTIVE COPING
- Pro-social

HIGH PERFORMANCE
Figure 6.5 summarises some of the key components of coping utilised by high performers. There are four important differences identified in this study which characterise high performing students’ coping with multiple stressors: cross-situational appraisal, versatile cross-situational coping, proactive coping, and social support.

With acute stressors it may be less important to interpret multiple social contexts and it may be effective to simply deal with the problem at hand through problem-focused coping. However, multiple, long-term stressors require a broader range of responses which need to transverse multiple contexts and multiple roles.

The perception of dual expectations seems to play a key part in facilitating cross-situational versatility. It was argued in Chapter 5 that poor performers appraised social contexts in a situational stereotyped manner restricting coping to rigid and stereotyped approaches. Even coping researchers have reinforced situational stereotypes. For example, several previous studies have defined work contexts as an agentic situation, and have pre-supposed that problem-focused efforts are appropriate and efficacious in agentic situations (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980; Terry, 1994; O’Brien and DeLongis, 1996). However, in aspects of the job where there is less control, such as dealing with a supervisor, an emotion-focused strategy such as self control was utilised more often in agentic situations (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1986). Conversely, researchers have defined close relationships as communal situations, where emotion-focused strategies are more likely to be utilised (Compas et al., 1988; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter et al., 1986; O'Brien and DeLongis, 1996; Terry, 1994). Even where a study included a relationship-focused coping dimension (O’Brien and DeLongis, 1996), work was defined as an agentic situation, and therefore, requiring greater reliance on
active problem solving approaches. In interpersonal situations defined as communal there was a greater usage of active interpersonally orientated strategies.

Defining a priori work as agentic and relationships as communal, whether one is a coper or a researcher, may be problematic in the long-term. Such definitions may be less problematic when only one stressor exists. However, with multiple stressors such a narrow appraisal of social contexts appears to elicit stereotyped ways of coping with that particular social context. Defining a situation as agentic or communal may limit coping responses, as has been shown with low performers.

When single, acute stressor events, such as exam stress, are considered it is likely that such situations do not contain dual expectations and less complex coping processes such as problem-focused coping are likely to be efficacious. However, as stressors become broader in scope, for example, parenting or work, and where these stressors are longer term or occur in multiples so do the social demands of the situation increase. As the social demands become more complex, dual and even multiple expectations are more likely to occur and cross-situational versatility is likely to be more adaptive. There is some support for this from Stake (1997) who found that students who responded to dual expectation situations in both planful and a flexible manner had greater positive well-being scores and lesser negative well-being scores than problem-focused copers (who responded primarily to meet instrumental demands while largely ignoring co-present expressive demands) or indeterminate copers (who did not respond, avoided, or were haphazard in responding that fail to respond to either set of demands adequately). The first patterns reflects the coping pattern of high performers. The last two patterns reflect coping patterns by poor performers, who coped with some social contexts, such as work, practical problems and financial problems, not as dual or multiple expectation situations
but as situations requiring primarily, problem solving responses, while avoiding dealing
with other stressors such as their health, study and relationships.

There is little evidence amongst high performers that they used more relationship-
focused strategies in contexts only defined as communal, such as personal relationships.
In fact, they used relationship-focused coping across all social contexts, including study.
Generally, relationship-focused coping is used less for palliative coping i.e. to make
themselves feel better, except in situations of loss or stress relief. High performers are
more likely to be active, gaining information, modifying initial appraisals and solving
problems via relationships.

The finding in Studies 1 and 3 demonstrating that high performers used higher levels
of social support can throw light onto the question as to how dual expectations are
detected in the first place. Low performers used social support primarily for palliative
coping, that is: when they were feeling bad or upset; as a last resort when they did not
see any other options; or to complain about problems. High performers used social
support proactively, as feedback from others in their social context to help them to
interpret expectations, meaning and appropriate problem solving actions. This concurs
with Stake’s (2000) findings where those who are high on instrumental and expressive
coping have higher social support appraisals. Stake’s conclusions concur with the
findings of this study, that those high in instrumental/expressive coping have:

both a broader range of skills and capacities for meeting the varied
demands of dual expectation situations and more advice, information and
constructive feedback available from others in the setting to assist them
with meeting dual expectations. Second, the positive appraisal of
resources likely reduces the individuals assessment of threat associated with situations deemed to carry dual expectations. Less perceived threat, in turn, reduces anxiety and avoidance tendencies, allowing for more effective use of available resources to meet situational demands. (p.883)

One further point needs to be made about dual expectations in the study context. High performers defined their study context as a dual expectation situation, whereas, poor performers define study as only requiring problem solving efforts. In the study context, students are expected to share their ideas in tutorials, to be open to feedback and critique, to cooperate in group projects, and to conform to lecturer’s supervisor’s expectations and standards (all relationship-focused demands). At the same time there are paradoxical demands: to be individualistic and independent problem solvers; to be competitive in examinations; to think independently and critically; to stick to timetables and deadlines; to be organised and manage time well; and to have well developed study skills.

In coping with multiple stressors high performing students utilised a versatile cross-situational coping approach in far more complex ways than standardised coping questionnaires have found. Previously, a few studies have found that people who routinely use a large number and variety of coping strategies (both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping) in response to stressors were found to experience lower levels of emotional distress (Billings and Moos, 1981; Folkman, 1986; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978, Mattlin et.al 1990). Similarly, Wethington and Kessler (1991) detected two types of coping profiles: versatility and passivity. Versatile copers, who comprised 49% of the sample, reported using virtually all coping strategies. Passive copers, less than 4% of the sample, reported using each strategy either “not at all” or “only a little”. Passive and active coping predicted coping effectiveness and their results indicated that having a
versatile coping profile is associated with good emotional adjustment to stressful events, particularly practical and interpersonal events. Passive coping can be associated with good emotional adjustment such as in chronically stressful situations that pose high loss or threat.

Most if not all multiple, long-term stressors usually involve a relationship dimension. High performers were highly active negotiating, gaining support, giving support, influencing, showing empathy, responding to feedback and new information and asserting their own needs in their relationships, work, personal or student context. As such, relationship coping can be both active and proactive (preventing conflict and discord). High performers generally tried to protect their relationships during periods of high stress, unless the cost was assessed as being too high (to self, studies, children).

Dunahoo’s et al. (1998a; 1998b) conceptualisation of pro-social coping, that is coping which is both active and relational, may be useful way to integrate the findings from all three studies.

The results in this study are consistent with recent research findings by Monnier et al. (1998) where a broader conceptualisation of relationship-focused coping was used. They found that active, and pro-social coping was more efficacious, which was defined as social joining, seeking social support and cautious action. Such relationship-focused coping was associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression. This continued to be true when tested longitudinally with active, pro-social coping being associated with better emotional outcomes and this was especially true under high stress conditions.
While the sample is too small to generalise widely about gender differences, high performers do not cope in gender stereotyped ways. Individualistic coping models have often depicted men as more active and action orientated than women. Dunahoo (1998) found that both men and women were active in the face of stressors. However, men were more likely to act in ways that may be hostile towards others, whereas women were more likely to act in ways that included others or depended on others as a means of problem solving. These gender differences were not apparent in this study - even in courses or workplaces that might be defined as traditionally more masculine (engineering, physics, and computer programming).

In Chapter Seven I will discuss the issue of culture as a mediator of coping. Furthermore, coping research paradigms are embedded within a cultural context which are influenced by, as well as influence cultural norms and expectations as to what constitutes efficacious coping.
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Appendix A Stressors and Ways of Coping Questionnaire

Student Adjustment to University

Information to participants - please keep for your information.

As part of my Research Masters, I am undertaking a research project investigating how students adjust to the demands of tertiary study, what strategies they utilise to cope with adjustment difficulties, and how that affects their grade point averages. The results of this research will be important in developing strategies to help and support students in their adjustment to University. Findings of the study will be published in academic journals.

The questionnaire is anonymous and your participation is entirely voluntary, and should you NOT complete the questionnaire there will be no penalty and it will NOT affect your grades in any courses.

Should you wish to discuss any issues raised by this questionnaire, you can make an appointment to see me at the QUT Counselling Service, telephone 3864 3488.

Thankyou for your cooperation

Kitty Vivekananda

QUT counsellor
Student Adjustment to University

This questionnaire is anonymous so there is no need to fill in your name or student number. Please fill in the answer sheets.

Age
Fill your age in years in the “Student Number Box.”

What faculty are you enrolled in?
Fill in “Course Codes Box” using the following abbreviations.

ART - Arts
BE - Built Environment and Engineering
BUS - Business
EDU - Education
HEA - Health
ITE - Information Technology
LAW - Law
SCI - Science
COM - Combined

1. Gender
A) Male
B) Female

2) How many fulltime years of your course have you completed?
A) Up to one year
B) Up to two years
C) Up to three years
D) Up to four years
E) Up to five years

3) Current Mode of study
A) Fulltime study
B) Part time study

4) Course grade point average
A) 6 - 7
B) 5 - 5.99
C) 4 - 4.99
D) 3 - 3.99
E) less than 3

5) Is English the main language spoken at home?
A) Yes
B) No
Areas of Adjustment

Below are some common areas of concern for students when adjusting to university. Rate the level of stress or difficulty each of the areas has caused you in your time at university.

A = little or no stress; B = somewhat stressful; C = very stressful; D = extremely stressful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Finances</td>
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<td>7. Career goals or career prospects</td>
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<td>8. Pressures and expectations from within myself</td>
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<td>9. Fitting into uni</td>
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<td>10. Getting on with lecturers and other students</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Coping with the demands of uni and study</td>
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<td>12. Responsibilities and commitments outside of uni</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Physical Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Emotional/relationship worries</td>
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<td>15. Any other reason</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Ways of coping

Rate the extent to which you have used the following strategies in coping with the situations you have found stressful in the above section.

A = Does not apply or not used  B = Used somewhat  C = Used quite a bit  D = Used a great deal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16. I just concentrated on what I had to do next - the next step</td>
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<td>17. I tried to analyse the problem in order to understand it better</td>
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<td>18. I turned to work on another activity to take my mind off things</td>
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<td>19. I felt that time would have made a difference - the only thing was to wait</td>
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<td>20. I bargained or compromised to get something positive from the situation</td>
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<td>21. I did something that I didn’t think would work, but at least I was doing something</td>
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<td>22. I tried to get the person responsible to change his or her mind</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I talked to someone to find out more about the situation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. I criticised or lectured myself</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A = Does not apply or not used</td>
<td>B = Used somewhat</td>
<td>C = Used quite a bit</td>
<td>D = Used a great deal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>I tried not to burn my bridges, but leave things open somewhat</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>I hoped for a miracle</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>I went along with fate sometimes I just have bad luck</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>I went on as if nothing had happened</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>I tried to keep my feelings to myself</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>I looked for the silver lining, so to speak; I tried to look on the bright side of things</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>I slept more than usual</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>I expressed anger to the person(s) who caused the problem</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>I accepted sympathy and understanding from someone</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>I told myself things that helped me feel better</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>I was inspired to do something creative about the problem</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>I tried to forget the whole thing</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>I got professional help</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>I changed or grew as a person</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>I waited to see what would happen before doing anything</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>I apologised or did something to make up</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>I made a plan of action and followed it</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>I accepted the next best thing to what I wanted</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>I let my feelings out somehow</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>I realised that I had brought the problem on myself</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>I came out of the experience better than when I went in</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>I talked to someone who could do something concrete about the problem</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>I tried to get away from it for a while by resting or taking a vacation</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>I tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, using drugs, or medications, etc.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>I took a big chance or did something very risky to solve the problem</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>I tried not to act too hastily or follow my first hunch</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>I found new faith</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>I maintained my pride and kept a stiff upper lip</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>I rediscovered what is important in life</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A = Does not apply or not used</td>
<td>B = Used somewhat</td>
<td>C = Used quite a bit</td>
<td>D = Used a great deal</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>I changed something so things would turn out all right</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>I generally avoided being with people</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>I didn't let it get to me; I refused to think too much about it</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>I asked advice from a relative or friend I respected</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58.</td>
<td>I kept others from knowing how bad things were</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59.</td>
<td>I made light of the situation; I refused to get too serious about it</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td>I talked to someone about how I was feeling</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.</td>
<td>I stood my ground and fought for what I wanted</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.</td>
<td>I took it out on other people</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.</td>
<td>I drew on my past experiences; I was in a similar situation before</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64.</td>
<td>I know what had to be done, so I doubled my efforts to make things work</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65.</td>
<td>I refused to believe that it had happened</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td>I promised myself that things would be different next time</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td>I came up with a couple of different solutions to the problem</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td>I accepted the situation, since nothing could be done</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td>I tried to keep my feeling about the problem from interfering with other things</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>70.</td>
<td>I wished that I could change what had happened or how I felt</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>71.</td>
<td>I changed something about myself</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>72.</td>
<td>I daydreamed or imagined a better time or place than the one I was in</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>73.</td>
<td>I wished that the situation would go away or somehow be over with</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>74.</td>
<td>I had fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>75.</td>
<td>I prayed</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td>I prepared myself for the worst</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td>I went over in my mind what I would say or do</td>
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<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>78.</td>
<td>I thought about how a person I admire would handle this situation and used that as a model</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td>I tried to see things from the other person’s point of view</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.</td>
<td>I reminded myself how much worse things could be</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.</td>
<td>I jogged or exercised</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
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</table>
Appendix B Means and SD for Study Demands and Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Means &amp; Standard Deviations</th>
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<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>School Leavers M = 2.26 (SD= .82) Young Adults M = 2.13 (SD= .89) Mature Age M = 2.22 (SD= .87)</td>
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<td>.403</td>
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<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>English M = 2.25 (SD= .87) non-English M = 2.35 (SD= .86)</td>
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<td>.409</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males M = 2.38 (SD= .91) Females M= 2.19 (SD=.83)</td>
<td>6.139</td>
<td>.014 **</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>Fulltime M= 2.30 (SD=.86) Part-time M= 2.09 (SD=.85)</td>
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<td>.029 *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>First Year M = 2.26 (SD= .85); Year 2+ M= 2.28 (SD= .92)</td>
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<td>.849</td>
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</table>

Appendix C Means and SD GPA and Demographic Variables

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Means &amp; Standard Deviations</th>
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<th>P</th>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>School Leavers M= 2.2 (SD= 1.1) Young Adults M= 2.03 (SD= 1.36) Mature Age M= 2.2 (SD= .91)</td>
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<td>.028 *</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>English M= 2.26 (SD= .96) non-English M = 1.72 (SD= 1.1)</td>
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<td>.000 **</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males M= 30.01 (SD= 5.16) Females M= 28.67 (SD= 4.75)</td>
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<td>.071</td>
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<td>Mode</td>
<td>Fulltime M= 29.48 (SD= 4.98) Part-time M= 28.2 (SD= 4.7)</td>
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<td>.929</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>First Year M 2.27= (SD= .95) Year 2+ M= 1.94 (SD= .99)</td>
<td>10.000</td>
<td>.002 **</td>
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## Appendix D Stressors and the Demographic Variables

<table>
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<th>Stressor</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Means &amp; Standard Deviations</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>School Leavers M= 2.87 (SD=.86) Young Adults M=2.76 (SD=.86) Mature Age M= 2.88 (SD=.83)</td>
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<td>.402</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>English M= 2.87 (SD=.85) non-English M= 2.78 (SD=.83)</td>
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<td>.743</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males M= 2.91 (SD=.84) Females M= 2.83 (SD=.85)</td>
<td>.911</td>
<td>.761</td>
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<td>Full-time M= 2.87 (SD=.86) Part-time M= 2.85 (SD=.79)</td>
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<td>.617</td>
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<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>School Leavers M= 3.10 (SD=.93) Young Adults M= 2.83 (SD=1.06) Mature Age M= 2.88 (SD=1.02)</td>
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<td>Males M= 3.04 (SD=3.04) Females M= 2.93 (SD=.98)</td>
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<td>Full-time M= 2.98 (SD=1.00) Part-time M= 2.96 (SD=.98)</td>
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<td>Internal</td>
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<td>Pressures</td>
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<td>Finances</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Males M= 2.69 (SD=.97) Females M= 2.63 (SD=.93)</td>
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<td>Fitting</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Full-time M= 3.46 (SD=.73) Part-time M= 3.38 (SD=.67)</td>
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<td>Lecturers</td>
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<td>English M= 3.38 (SD=.80) non-English M= 3.23 (SD=.80)</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>External</td>
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<td>.004 **</td>
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## Appendix E: Coping Strategies and Demographic Variables

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Appendix F  Problem Type by Gender for Excluded Students

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Appendix G  Types of Stressors For High Performers

Relationships

Like excluded students, high performers also reported many relationship stressors as affecting them. Some of these involve normative changes such getting married, while others relate more unexpected life crises. Conflicts, differences, tensions, worry and concern pervades throughout these four major themes identified in students’ interpersonal contexts: Seven students discussed increased or changed family responsibilities, either in caring for sick parents, children and even grandchildren. Ray talks about the major adjustment to his life, when his first child is born and his time for study is reduced. Maria, on the other hand has an even greater workload with the birth of her fourth child. Herbie moves back home to live with her parents, so that she can reduce her financial commitments, but it also means she has increased responsibilities for taking her father to medical and hospital treatments. Rhonda experiences worry and concern about her older teenage son, who is depressed and taking drugs, and appears to have lost direction and motivation in his life. Further still, Rhonda has to provide additional support to her husband, who is depressed too, due to a business down-turn. Muriel’s adult daughter, who is a single parent of a toddler, returns
home to live with her again and Muriel has to get accustomed to noise, crying and interruptions from her grandson.

Cate talks about the significant and stressful transition into role of caring for her mother, who has been diagnosed with cancer. They have a particularly close relationship and Cate is very sensitive to the needs of others in her life.

My mother was diagnosed with cancer and underwent a serious operation followed by radium and chemotherapy for 15 months. Our family had to nurse her through this time as well as maintain work/study obligations. As I was living at home I was one of the main carers. Also, a friend was tragically killed just before my mother was diagnosed with cancer. (Cate)

Rob experiences a major role reversal, as he stays home to look after his three children, while studying and his wife returns to work. Both returning to university to study Human Services and taking on the major child caring role is a far cry from Rob’s previous career as a dam construction worker.

In my second year at university our third child was born. I had the cook from the university come and get me out of class to say my wife was in labour. I stayed home to look after the baby while I studied. It was really hard to study with a little baby. With the mortgages my wife had to go back to full time work. She was ambivalent about going back to work because she wanted to stay home and look after the baby. (Rob)
Two students reported starting and developing new relationships with partners. In the first case, Joanne has to make adjustments from being in the role of a daughter to that of a wife.

About twelve months ago I got married. It was a bit of a shock to go from my mum doing my cooking, cleaning and washing to having to do it myself. I got really stressed in the first six months because I felt that I had to do everything in the house. My husband is very busy too, as he is completing his TAFE studies in electrical engineering, as well as working full-time. He wasn’t worried about the housework, and because he wasn’t doing it, I felt I had to do it. (Joanne)

In the other case, Natasha experiences increased conflict with her mother who disapproves of her new relationship.

Towards the end of third year, I had a major emotional crisis because I had started going out with a PhD student who was separated from his wife. My mother didn’t cope very well with this and I felt I wasn’t being allowed to choose who I wanted to go out with. I was really stressed at exam time. And I was finding it hard to concentrate and study. (Natasha)

Sharing houses and conflicts with flatmates are problematic for some students.

In my second year, I moved out into a house with three others, including my best friend. This was a big mistake. My best friend and I did the same classes, shared the same friends and we saw each other all day, every day. I
eventually moved back to college but things were never the same between my friend and myself. (Megan)

Three students talked about the devastation and worry of breaking up with partners.

Breaking up with my boyfriend before the final exams was a HUGE stress. He rang the night before the exam threatening suicide. This affected my concentration in exams, i.e., worrying whether he was O.K. or not. I felt his threats were unfair and he placed responsibility on me—something which diverted my attention and made me both angry and sad. (Marnie)

Maria has to contend with the break up of her marriage leaving her with the care of four dependent children.

I soon settled into working well in my studies. You are probably imaging it was all smooth sailing from now on. As I began to cope well and gained more control of my life, my marriage began to fall apart and the difficulties that had been there for a long time came out into the open. My husband and I ran a business together and he began to put more and more obstacles in the path of my study. By second semester I was deeply depressed. (Maria)

Megan talks about the changes to her relationships with friends from school.
As the year went on I was surprised to find that it was more difficult to fit in with friends back home....Naively, I thought relationships from school would stay the same but they don’t. (Megan)

Three students describe their grief reactions to the death of a special friend, ex-husband and grandparents. Rob loses both his grandparents within a short space of one another. When Muriel’s ex-husband dies, she is deeply affected. It re-kindles for her unfinished grief issues from the past and she takes leave from both her paid job and her university studies. Cate is devastated by the death of her best friend’s husband, who is killed suddenly and prematurely in a motor vehicle accident. Concurrently, confronted with the possibility that she may also lose her mother who is being treated for cancer.

The main feelings I remember were extreme anxiety, huge stress, sadness and pressure. I kept thinking that my friend who had lost her husband was just devastated and that she was going though a much worse time than I was. However, at the same time I was confronted with the reality that the closest person to me may die and I wondered if that would happen. How would I and my family cope? I also felt and kept thinking that it was shitty that tragic things happened to good people who didn’t deserve the tragedy. (Cate)

A few students experienced criticism and unsupportive reactions from family or peers about studying at university.
My parents were not supportive about me going to university. I think they thought I was too old and stupid. My father had the impression that I stayed home all day and did nothing. (Rob)

My friends did not respond in a caring and welcoming as I would have liked and that distanced me from them. (Herbie)

For students like Rebecca university study placed a “cultural” barriers with her non-student peers.

When exam time and assignments come around it was hard to adjust to not being able to do whatever my friends or partner was doing. It was hard to be disciplined at these times. (Rebecca)

Adjustment difficulties

For international students like Ivan making the transition to a new country and culture-expectations can turn out to be very different from the reality.

When I first came to Australia to study, I was looking forward to being surrounded by green open spaces! I had imagined a university with on-campus accommodation, sports fields, athletics tracks and all sorts of other recreational facilities. You can imagine my surprise to find myself in the heart of the city in Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, which consisted largely of buildings. I had to adjust very quickly to the idea of
studying and living an a crowded inner-city environment, not unlike that of Singapore. (Ivan)

New relationships

For some school leavers like Megan, starting university involves moving away from friends, family and familiar surroundings.

Starting university was very daunting. Deakin’s Warrnambool campus seemed so far from home, about seven hours away. I came from a small country town in north-eastern Victoria, with a population of about 3000, which is about the same number of on-campus students at Warrnambool. I had been at school with the same people from kindergarten to year 12. Many of my friends were going to university in Melbourne. It was scary to leave my family and friends and move to a town where I didn’t know a soul. (Megan)

Kylie, another school leaver, also has to make new friends at university and experiences feeling daunted by this significant social transition.

None of my close friends from school went to Murdoch, and I didn’t know anyone else in the same course. Starting university was a very daunting experience for me. Everyone else looked older and I felt too intimidated to ask anyone any questions. I felt lost as there wasn’t anyone to follow to classes and I didn’t know how the rooms and buildings were numbered. University seemed so much bigger after having come from a small, insulated
group at high school. It was difficult making the transition from old friends
to new friends at university and it took me a while to get the confidence to
talk to second- and third-year students. At school you tend to talk to students
in your own year but that barrier doesn’t really exist at university. (Kylie)

Julie describes how she is reluctantly catapulted into independence. For some mature aged
students self confidence in their academic ability and expectations from themselves and
others was a major personal issue.

I worried about being seen as stupid. I honestly felt that no one knew I was
not coping. I certainly told no-one for fear of looking like a failure. I did
used to say to peers and family that I might defer after first year and continue
the degree later when I had more time. This seemed a way out without me
losing face. (Jacqui)

I felt out of place being a mature aged student. I found it difficult being the
only male in some lectures and tutes. (Rob)

A lot of women, especially older ones, feel out of place in a course which
primarily has young males and it certainly felt totally alien for a suburban
housewife like me. (Maria)
Understanding different academic expectations

Academic adjustment to university involves more than academic potential. For school leavers, academic adjustment involves making the transition to a more independent learning environment, as explained by the three students below.

The biggest challenge in studying at university in my first year was the fact that I didn’t have to answer to anyone. If you didn’t do your work, there was no teacher to hassle you about it and no one cared. I felt I was on my own. I had days when my first lecture was at midday and I even have a whole day without classes. It is enticing to see this as free time. (Natasha)

Being in my 50’s and never having studied before, I had to learn how to study, how to set out assignments, read texts, use the library and computers and find a suitable time everyday to study. (Jacqui)

Disaster struck almost immediately when I started my Social Work degree at the University of South Australia and I discovered I had to do Statistics in my very first year at university! (Denis)

Coping with workload.

Most high performing students experienced managing their study workload as very stressful.

The workload in engineering is high...Towards the end of semester, I feel really tired. (Joanne)
I expected university to be slack after sitting for year 12 exams which I thought was the pinnacle of academic stress. I thought that I am never going to study this hard again but I have found that at university I have worked harder for a much longer period. Admittedly, I have nearly all high distinctions and you were happy to scrape by with the minimum passes, you wouldn’t have to work so hard. Kylie

Finances

Nine students mentioned financial problems as being particularly concerning them: meeting financial obligations and debts were an ongoing worry for several students. Andrew and Herbie are paying off bank loans for their motor vehicles, while rob worries about meeting his mortgage repayments on a single income.

The financial difficulties were stressful. I was worried about losing my house because I couldn’t meet the mortgage repayments. (Rob)

Other students worry about simply meeting the day-to-day bills.

My main feeling was worry! Worry about money, going broke, not being able to afford bills.... Rebecca

Mature aged students who had previously been working fulltime found it a significant change to reduce their spending, so that they could manage on government student allowances. Cate, Lorraine, Rebecca, Jo and Andrew discuss the financial adjustments of going from a fulltime wage to living on student allowances.
I quit full time work to return to study. Having a limited cash flow was stressful. It limited my ability to move out of home and have the resources I needed to complete my studies; to be independent and certain about my ability to support myself. (Lorraine)

Students who are accustomed to being financially independent felt reluctant to rely on their parents again.

Maybe having to ask my parents for money which I hate doing as I feel like I’m not living up to dad’s expectations of a responsible 30 year old who shouldn’t need her parents’ support. (Rebecca)

Others like Andrew use up their savings on expensive course materials.

It was a very rude shock to drop from a full-time wage of $25,000 to Abstudy. Architecture is a very expensive course because you spend a fortune on paper, models and drawing equipment. A decent of pens will cost you $80 to $120. I had saved up a few thousand dollars, but by the end of first year that was gone. (Andrew)

For school leavers like Julie, Megan and Joanne, they face the challenge of having to support themselves financially for the first time.
Surviving on Austudy and learning how to budget was a great challenge. I found that I could save money on food by sharing the cooking with two other students. Many university students don’t eat much meat, but we saved money by buying fresh foods, pasta and vegetables. (Megan)

The first thing that worried me about university was coping financially. My parents are four-wheel driving enthusiasts and their life-long dream was to drive around the world when their children left school. I didn’t want to hold them back because I was at university. (Joanne)

Ongoing conflict with her parents about her romantic relationship prompts Natasha to make a decision about moving out of her parents’ home. She contemplates dropping out of Medicine in order to take up full time work in order to support herself.

I talked to a university counsellor about my decision and I finally moved out of home into the nurses home at Prince Alfred Hospital I had to support myself by working sixteen hours a week at a laboratory, and I was frightened that I wouldn’t be able to cope independently.

Medical

Five students mentioned medical problems which concerned:

I was affected physically and emotionally by those experiences. I lost weight and found my sleep was disturbed. I woke several times a night and found it difficult to get back to sleep. I had vivid dreams that seemed very
strange. My mind raced and I was constantly tired. I felt like I always had a low grade virus though blood tests showed nothing was wrong physically with me. I also felt at times emotionally numb. (Cate)

Stress can affect me physically. I feel very tired all the time and I get stomach problems. (Rebecca)

Muriel experiences a more serious medical problem, which require surgery.

I also underwent surgery, which was a worrying time as my energy levels were low.

Two students have longstanding disabilities. Julie has a visual impairment, which provides considerable physical and social challenges to coping independently in a new environment away from a supportive family environment. Denis has been diagnosed with dyslexia, which has presented him with learning challenges throughout his life.

I never dreamed that I would go to university. I basically failed my way through my early school years until I was eventually diagnosed as dyslexic in high school. Denis

Job

The majority of students were engaged in some form of employment. Managing work responsibilities, demands and stress was an important feature in the lives of successful students. Unlike excluded students, who sometimes worked sixty to eighty hours of paid work a week, high performing students kept their paid work to limited hours, with the
majority engaged in part time work. This seems to allow greater flexibility in managing competing commitments. The two students who were in full-time employment had some level of flexibility in their jobs to allow them to fit in their university commitments. In Jacqui’s case she worked evening shift work, which allowed her to attend university during day-time, whereas, Ray’s employer allowed him on occasions to work at home, which enabled him to have better control over his workload and time management.

I might have to stay back at work unexpectedly till 9 p.m. (Ray)

Sometimes work schedules caused stress, when they coincided with due dates for assignments. (Lorraine)

Megan takes on a position in public relations, at the beginning of her third year of study, which requires long hours of travel.

For the next eight weeks, I travelled 300 kilometres to Bendigo, worked for three days and then travelled back to university for two days. (Megan)

Dropping shifts at work and worrying that this would be frowned upon was a stressor. Worrying about being able to focus on work whilst worrying about getting my thesis in on time.” (Marnie)

Jacqui works as a supervisor with significant responsibilities.
Work responsibilities were a major stress. Finishing shift work at 10 p.m. and midnight made studying difficult the next day. (Jacqui)

Work responsibilities are a significant stress—having to concentrate on other people’s problems whilst studying for exams can be hard. (Rebecca)

Joanne has a cadetship in a metal industry firm, which entails holiday work experience. She describes some of the hostility and antagonism towards her as the only woman in her department.

In my first year, I got to move around to see how every department operated so that I got a feel for the whole organisation. In one department, I was the first woman who had ever come to work there. When I arrived, I had to overcome the initially hostile reception. I was told that they hated ‘trainees, engineers and women’. Well, I was all three rolled into one. I also got bagged about things like not having the strength to loosen bolts that were on too tight. (Joanne)

Practical difficulties such as sharing accommodation, moving house and finding child care were identified by some students. As a blind student, Julie experiences additional practical problems, such as gaining her new guide dog and gaining independent mobility around campus. She has to contend with day-to-day problems, such as colour co-ordinating her clothes. She also has to contend with many practical difficulties in terms of using library facilities and organizing to have her course material brailled. Other students move house
which causes a disruption to their routine. Maria describes the difficulties of co-ordinating childcare:

Co-ordinating child-care with class times can be more difficult to accomplish. It is really hard to know before university starts what the timetable will be. (Maria)

Others have to learn to live in a large communal situation for the first time and having to get used to other people’s noise and having a lack of privacy.

I lived on campus, sharing bathrooms and a kitchen with 20 students. It was a bit of a shock learning to live with so many people. I had come from a small family, and had a very large bedroom at home. At university my room was about the size of a laundry and was right next to the kitchen. I had so many belongings I couldn’t fit everything into my room. People have very different habits and very different needs for privacy and space. Some of the guys would wake up at 2 a.m. to study, and wake me up when they were making cups of coffee or turning on the TV. (Marnie)
Long-Term Multiple Stressors, Coping and Academic Performance

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Ph.D.
2001

University of Western Sydney
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
Abstract

Long-Term Multiple Stressors, Coping and Academic Performance

This research comprised of three studies designed to investigate the coping strategies utilised by high and low performing university students with non-academic stressors. Coping research has frequently focused on single stressors providing a distorted picture of coping. Utilising a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this research provides new insights into the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of coping with long-term, multiple stressors. It extends our understanding of coping beyond traditionally individualistic conceptualisations where active coping is valued over prosocial relationship-focused coping. Conceptualisations of social support is broadened to view it in more complex interactional terms.

In Study 1, 521 university students were surveyed using a standardised coping inventory, the Ways of Coping Checklist Revised (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Several demographic groups were identified as at academic risk. Having good health, along with the high use Social Support and Problem Solving and the low use of Self Blame strategies all predicted high GPA.

Study 2 involved a content analysis of 179 Exclusion Appeal letters submitted by excluded students. When confronted with multiple stressors, poor performing students compartmentalised or amplified multiple stressors which resulted in patterns of reactive problem-focused or emotion-focused coping. Passive and uni-directional approaches to social support resulted in the depletion of such resources.

Study 3 investigated adaptive coping patterns using an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with twenty high performing students. High performers viewed multiple stressors as inter-related, which is termed “cross situational appraisal” and displayed a versatile coping pattern across stressors termed “cross situational versatility”. Proactive and prosocial coping are critical for the acquisition and maintenance of social support over a long-term period.

Implications of these research findings for Student Services staff are discussed.
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Kitty Vivekananda
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