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First-Generation Student Transition to University:

**An exploratory study into the first-year experience of
students attending University Kebangsaan Malaysia**

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ABSTRACT

Transition is the movement, the passage of change from one role to another. This research offers an in-depth understanding of how the transition to university is experienced by first-generation students. To explore and understand the process of change underlying the transition process, this research uses qualitative research methods, semi-structured interviews and journal writing. Drawing from the data, a longitudinal case study followed the 16 students' transition experiences for nine months, from the first semester to the end of the second semester of the first year. The research focused on three fundamental issues: higher education aspirations and decisions, the challenges encountered in the initial week of first year and the adjustment process, arguing that an understanding of these three aspects is necessary for a better understanding of the formation of learner identity.

The research findings demonstrate that in the early weeks of university students experienced disjuncture between expectations held prior to commencing university and the reality they encounter. These phases are characterized as experiencing conflict with their new role and anxieties with their ability to manage the academic demands and expectations. Based on the evidence gathered, this is caused by inaccurate information they receive from third parties and during their prior educational experience. Early experience, whether positive or negative, is an important phase within this movement. Students become more active agents by being engaged and identifying difficulties and finding solutions. Student engagement both in class and out-of-class provides them with more accurate information on the knowledge and skills for their learning identity. Academic and non-academic support received both on and off campus comes from a range of sources including lecturers, peers and seniors, parents and family members, all of whom are identified as important contributors to the adjustment process of these first-generation students.

Declaration of Author

I, Faridah Mydin Kuty, declare that the thesis entitled

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is the result of my own work, except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged as sources of help.

Signed: _____

Date: **14.03.2014**

This doctoral study is dedicated to:

my lovely husband Muhamad Arif Fazila...

my lovely daughter Arissa Irdina...

my lovely son Adam Irsyad...

Thanks for being a part of my journey

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Table of Abbreviations

CoP	Community of practice
FYE	First year experience
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
LPP	Legitimate peripheral participants
MEC	Malaysian Examination Council
MOHE	Ministry of Higher Education
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
PTPTN	National Higher Education Fund
SPM	Malaysia Certificate of Education
STPM	Malaysian Higher School Certificate
TESL	Teaching English as a Second Language
UKM	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
UM	University of Malaya
UPU	Centralised Admission Agency
UTM	University of Technology Malaysia

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Research into students' learning experience at university helps the institutions to meet and shape students' expectations and improve their performance. For a significant number of people, equality of access to higher education is perceived as the key to social mobility. In Malaysia, it is seen as fostering local national progression and countering social exclusion and poverty. Under the massification of higher education, more people are able to enter higher education and access opportunities for learning and development once reserved for an exclusive few. As a consequence, students from varied socio-backgrounds and education experiences are able to enter university.

Research on socially disadvantaged individuals in higher education has attracted the interest of many scholars in recent years, and the experience of first-generation students has been the subject of numerous studies. In this research an individual from a disadvantaged background is defined as being from a low socio-economic background, representing the population of students who are first in their families to attend university, or with parents who have no post-secondary qualifications (Choi, 2001; Gofen, 2009; Thomas and Quinn, 2006). Based on Reay *et al.*'s (2010) statistics, this group constitutes half of the student population in United States universities.

Improving educational access for disadvantaged students is socially and economically significant, because once students have completed higher education they have equal chances when competing for highly skilled jobs with high incomes and it enables them to develop 'personal capital' along with those from middle-class, educated backgrounds (Blackstone, 2001; Bond and Saunders, 1999; Forsyth and Furlong, 2003; Ostrove and Cole, 2003). Thus, entering higher education can be a critical turning point in the lives of students, and the question is to what extent the learning experiences in higher education institutions prepare students with the necessary skills and attitudes for the economy of the twenty-first century. A significant number of academics have conducted research on the experience and the unique challenges faced by first-generation students in university, concluding that there is a shortfall for those from this socio-demographic background regarding the cultural and educational capital needed to match the norms and

practices at higher learning institutions. Therefore, the ability to respond to first-year students' needs and the challenge of navigating the unfamiliar terrain of a university is considered to be crucial. Many researchers recommend techniques and means for the development of more effective practices designed to make the transition to university positive and seamless.

The search for specific studies carried out on the first-generation student experience in Malaysian university yielded few results. Thus, the study presented in this thesis is an attempt to extend our understanding of first-generation students in university within a specific academic, social and political context. The thesis focuses on the transition experiences of a small group of first-generation students who moved from sixth form to the undergraduate programme at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The study involves documenting and analysing transition experiences through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews and journal writing. A fundamental concern is to understand the meaning the students attach to their experiences and how they make sense of becoming a university student. Research examines the challenges they encounter in their new cultural academic context and their experience of previous education, and how their socio-economic background supports this process. It also explores the key processes supporting positive changes in students.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Enhancing the quality of education and remaining competitive has become a national priority in most higher education institutions. With the massification of higher education, increasing numbers of students and changes in their backgrounds comprise a new challenge for institutions in meeting the expectations of one of their most important stakeholders. They must deal with students entering university with different socio-economic backgrounds, academic pathways, expectations and knowledge about university and these differences may affect the way they negotiate their university experience. Scholars' views on students' learning experience at university are that socio-economic backgrounds significantly influence the transition and adjustment process.

Malaysia has initiated major changes to its higher education system. The national aim is to strengthen and transform higher education to be more progressive and competitive, contextualized in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan and National

Higher Education Action Plan 2007–2010. One of the agenda points is that higher education institutions are to improve the quality of the student learning experience. In Malaysia, while the number of published papers relating to transition and student experiences is somewhat limited, it is acknowledged that understanding undergraduate experience in higher education is important for the institution in terms of its practices or to improve the learning experiences of its students. It was proposed by a World Bank Report (2007) on Malaysian universities:

In order to enhance the learning experience of incoming students as the student population expands, Malaysian universities should consider organizing First Year Experience Seminars which have been found, in other contexts, to greatly facilitate student transition from high school to university as well as quickly integrate the new students into their intellectual community of the university.

(World Bank Report, 2007, p. 151)

There is an effort to apply the First Year Experience (FYE) programme, as developed in many American universities, to the Malaysia higher education context. For example, University Technology Malaysia (UTM), among the leading universities, introduced the FYE programme on campus in 2006. A recent study by Hushin and Rahim (2010) on student perception of this programme found that, even though students were positive about its purpose, they were unclear on its practicality, especially in helping them adjust to academic culture and social life in university. It is a positive start for an institution to start with a programme to help students with the process, but the most important point is that success is not based on the programmes like the FYE programme, the induction week or others, because students are different in terms of their needs and expectations. The basis here is to understand the root of the problem, and this involves negotiation between students and their institutions.

There is an international trend towards more complex understanding of the learner, accompanied by growing consensus on the need for some form of support to facilitate the differences that students bring to university. Research into the transition from school to university and the experience of the first years has been intensively researched in many western universities. Efforts to improve student persistence level, concerned with the processes at university and the ways in which the quality of the transition experience can be improved, are fundamental to research by scholars across the USA (e.g. Kuh *et al.*,

2008; Upcraft *et al.*, 2005, Tinto, 1993; Terenzini *et al.*, 1996), the UK (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2008; Adnett, 2006; Davies and Elias, 2003), Australia (e.g. McInnis, 2001, 2003; Krause and Coates, 2008; Pargetter, 2000), New Zealand (e.g. Zepke and Leach, 2006) and several other countries. The significant findings of this study are mainly on attrition problems identified as critical in first year that have a significant impact on a university's reputation and finances (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Thus, the focus of attention is to help student to embed into university life, and to enhance learning and retention during the transitional period.

The studies emerge from a growing perception that the first year is a critical year in which to bridge the gap between school and university educational experiences. A fundamental concern is how to integrate new students effectively into a new cultural academic environment different from students' previous educational and socio-cultural context. Much of the literature on the areas that influence the first-year experience discusses how differences in individual backgrounds impact on transition experiences (Johnson, 2008). This is often based on the premise that most students from low-income families, or students whose parents have no higher education background, have problems during the transition period. In understanding this dynamic, the importance of identifying the most influential factors in a student's first-year transition experience becomes evident.

The literature relating to first-year transition generally concludes that certain individuals' backgrounds have a great impact on the transition. These may be identified as ethnic minorities, those from low-income families, or those whose parents have no higher education background (Johnson, 2008). The relationship between student background and educational achievements has been of interest to many researchers due to the common perception that student socio- and cultural capital does not match the norms and 'habitus' of the institution. Nevertheless, student socio-economic backgrounds and previous education are not the only variables affecting educational achievement and, although the mechanism is not well established, poor education at upper secondary level may affect students' cognitive and affective abilities necessary for learning process at higher levels. However, most studies have been conducted in a different cultural context to that in Malaysian higher education.

Few studies conducted at national or institutional level can be cited about the efforts devoted to or the concern shown by the institutions on transition and first-year experience in Malaysian universities, so an overarching framework for understanding student transition is limited. The research that does exist recognize some of the challenges confronted by first-year students when they enter university. Determining the reasons why students fail to adjust quickly to university education is important, because a student's well-being at university correlates with their overall academic and personal emotional adjustment (Abdullah *et al.*, 2009).

One of the drawbacks is that no study has been conducted to explore further the educational journey of this group of students; however the current study gives new insights into understanding the transition process of these students, from sixth form to university. The majority of the research on the student experience at university focuses on student performance, satisfaction and assessment and there is a dearth of research focused on first-generation transition to higher education institution. Understanding the student learning experience can address key challenges that students may face and student voice can inform institutions how to plan for successful learner experience.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study has been to understand a few key issues regarding the transition to university for first-generation students. In order to understand the first-generation students who are the focus of this study it is important to understand the relationship between student socio-economic status and higher education choices and decisions. In addition, the study will aim to uncover the changes students experience as they move from the first to second semester at university. By looking at the transition experiences of students at different stages, this study will argue that a successful adjustment and engagement not only depends on one's socio-economic backgrounds and academic qualifications, but on one's ability to make change and constantly engage in this process.

This research hopes to raise questions about how certain students from disadvantaged backgrounds can succeed and if anything can be learned from these experiences, better to serve other students.

1.4 Significance of the Study

In view of policy reform and the restructuring of higher education to widen student participation, it is time for universities in Malaysia to rethink how they accommodate the diversity of students' backgrounds. Research on students from disadvantaged backgrounds has not attracted much attention in higher education studies. In particular, the term 'first-generation' is not common in Malaysian higher education literature, even though this is the majority group. There is no statistic available to show in detail the socio-economic background of students, but earlier studies on social mobility in Malaysia (Lee Kiong Hock and Shyamala Nagaraj, 2012; Marimuthu, 1984; Marimuthu *et al.*, 1999; Aziz *et al.*, 1987) appear to indicate that the policy for free education at primary and lower secondary levels since the beginning of 1960s, and the upper secondary level since the early 1980s, has provided satisfactory access to students from the lower-income bracket. In detail, a study by Aziz *et al.* (1987) shows that large proportions of sixth-form students' and undergraduates' parents are from the manual workers category. For example, the study by Nordin *et al.* (2009) shows that the majority of students appear to be from working-class backgrounds. The socio-demographic profile (parental education and income) of the 647 cases at two public and two private universities demonstrate that the majority came from families whose parents have secondary education (fathers 72.7%, mothers 81.9%) and nearly 58.8 per cent of the participants' parents earned under than RM1000–2000 a month. This matches the first-generation definition: students from the lower socio-economic groups with parents holding no higher education qualifications, so the majority of these students are indeed first-generation students.

Given the paucity of information available about first-generation students in general and the transition experience in particular, a gap has been identified which requires immediate address. Building a firm understanding of student experience is important in order to understand the effects of student background factors on access to university. Through an examination of the transition stories of first-generation students, this study helps to explain how students perceive themselves and recognizes the preparation and skills they need to engage and negotiate with the academic process, and to construct a new identity as a university student. Such information is important to address key challenges that both students and institutions face. A better understanding of these factors will not only endow higher education institutions with the knowledge and evidence-based

framework to underpin their policies targeting students from low socio-economic backgrounds, but would be immeasurably beneficial in the development of the aspirations and life chances of young people from different backgrounds. Looking closely from the students' point of view at the transition process will offer some perspectives on how higher education institutions and academics in Malaysian universities are currently responding to issues involving student expectations of the educational experiences.

Students come to university from a wide variety of cultural environments, family backgrounds and experiences. These differences have an effect on students' learning and engagement in university. A unified 'one size fits all' concept applied by many institutions fails to identify the differences in learners' needs. Evidence from international empirical studies shows the significance of student background in shaping the student university experience. Therefore, this study will be a significant attempt to understand students making their way into post-secondary education and the lived transition experiences of first-generation students in Malaysia. This study helps to fill the gap in the literature on social class in relation to student decisions to enter university and their participation experience in the academic and social activities in Malaysia higher education. This study is also aligned with the objectives of UKM, which aspires to graduate high calibre students. This study provides faculty members with information on how to facilitate students' transition in terms of their instructional approaches, and for institutions to modify policy, practices and support services.

The need to produce quality graduates with high levels of academic competency, able to think critically and with a good attitude, has become a serious concern for many public universities in Malaysia. Thus, the knowledge gained at sixth form level is profoundly important in shaping students' experiences and consequently their expectations of university studies, as they move to different learning institutions with new academic requirements of autonomy and independence. This study of transition provides useful insights into some fundamental issues of academic practice at sixth form in terms of the effectiveness of preparing students for higher education. At the same time, the findings have significant implications on reforming the sixth-form curriculum. The Malaysian government plans to reform sixth-forms to strengthen and enhance pre-university education in order to meet university expectations. The experience that student have at

school level has a significant effect on pathways to higher education (Arum, 1998; Conley, 2008). For example, according to Schilling and Schilling (1999), behavioural patterns established in elementary and secondary schools tend to persist through college years. For first-generation students, school is the place where they develop their cultural capital through engagement with teachers, peers and school activities.

It would seem there is a need to listen to first-generation students' voice on their transition experience in Malaysia. By adding to the collection of previous studies (Abdul Rahim and Azman, 2010; Nordin *et al.*, 2009), this study builds upon ongoing developments from the perspective of the individual student. Tracing students' experiences over time and focusing on both academic and social experiences at the institutions will provide empirical evidence to support the significant growth in official reports advocating that universities focus on first-year student experience, one of the recommendations by the World Bank Report (2007). Therefore, systematic and rigorous research regarding the process of transition to university has the potential to inform the development of policy and practices in Malaysian higher education. In particular, it will support the proposal for a 'First Year Seminar' for the Malaysian higher education framework (World Bank Report, 2007).

In addition, in a recent article Kaur (2007) urged higher education administrators and academics in Malaysia to prioritize the student experience, in particular that of first-year students: 'Malaysian higher education institutions have to carry out national studies on their first year "student experience" to document empirical data on how students respond to the transition from school to University' (p. 15). The researcher will make this mapping explicit in order to propose more effective educational practices in the first year and, by so doing, to improve students' first year experience.

1.5 Research Questions

A series of research questions was developed to guide the work, divided into two sections. In the first section, Research Question 1 seeks information about students' background characteristics and the influences on their university decisions. The second section, under Research Questions 2 and 3, seeks information about student transition experiences at university. It will look at each aspect to give a full picture of the transition process.

The research questions are as follows:

To describe student aspirations for university education:

1. How do a first-generation student's personal characteristics, parental education and sixth-form schooling experiences influence their choice and decision of university?

To describe the first-year experience of socialization process for first-generation students:

2. What are the challenges that first-generation experience during their transition into first year at university?
3. How do first-generation students overcome the challenges of their learning process?

1.6 Background to the Study

This first chapter provides brief information about Malaysia's economic and social development and discusses the government's various socio-economic policies supporting economic and social progress over past decades. It gives an overview of the Malaysian education system and addresses current planning and the future agenda on the development of education in Malaysia. The discussion is further narrowed by looking at a substantive growth of the higher education in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. The country's higher education, as a developing nation, is undergoing a transformation process to meet various demands.

1.6.1 The economic and social development of Malaysia

Malaysia is known as a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious country. The history of ethnic pluralism began with the British, who colonized the country in 1726, and their 'divide and conquer' policy laid the foundations for communal division in Malaysia. During colonial rule they encouraged migration, especially from China and India. It changed the nature of the ethnically homogeneous society to a more pluralistic society (Santhiram, 1990).

According to Census 2010, Malaysia has a total population of 28.3 million of which 91.8 per cent are Malaysian citizens and 8.2 per cent non-citizens. Of the total Malaysian citizen population, the Malays and other groups regarded as indigenous (namely

bumiputera or ‘sons of the soil’) comprise over 67.4 per cent, ethnic Chinese 24.6 per cent, Indians 7.3 per cent and others 0.7 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013). These ethnic groups retain their own culture and way of life. Although each has its own distinct cultural and religious heritage, these have also blended together to create Malaysia’s contemporary and uniquely diverse character. Islam is the national religion and the official language is Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), yet at the same time English is used in the legal system.

Apart from multi-ethnicity, British rule created an occupational segregation on ethnic lines. Chinese people are more likely to live in urban areas, undergo higher education and be engaged in non-agricultural occupations, with higher incomes than Indians and Malays. Indians work on plantations and Malays are predominantly a rural population. The difference in both socio-economic attainment and socio-economic origins is quite substantial between these three ethnic groups. This has caused uneven development and distribution of wealth (Andaya and Andaya, 2001). Therefore the Malaysian development plan focuses on reducing poverty levels by increasing income and job opportunities for all Malaysians, to eliminate race-determined economic activity.

One of the fastest developing in South East Asia, Malaysia’s economy experienced tremendous growth since gaining independence from the British in 1957. Since independence Malaysia has made great improvements in a number of economic and social developments closely linked to its government’s economic plan. It has implemented five-year economic plans since 1960, known as the Malaysia Plans. The first phase of Malaysia plans, First Malaysia Plan 1966–1970, Second Malaysia Plan 1970–1975, Third Malaysia Plan 1975–1980, Fourth Malaysia Plan 1980–1985) and Fifth Malaysia Plan (1985–1990), focused on eradicating poverty and balancing economic distribution among the ethnic groups. Between 1960 and 1990 there was a fundamental structural transformation of the Malaysian economy, as it moved from a primary (agriculture, mining) oriented economy to a manufacturing economy. These policies were aimed at restructuring society, the reduction and eradication of poverty, ensuring a redistribution of income, and increasing employment opportunities. From 1971 to 1990, the government introduced its New Economic Policy (NEP) aimed at the eradication of poverty among the indigenous Malay and a reduction in ethnic economic inequality.

From the sixth Malaysia Plan onward, the focus has been to improve the economy, productivity and create an enhanced quality of life. The emergence of new competitive forces driven by societal needs, economic realities, and technology are among the crucial factors guiding Malaysia development plans. Vision 2020 is a 30-year plan proposed by former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in 1991 to transform Malaysia to a developed nation by 2020. In the Tenth Malaysia Plan (2010–2015), Prime Minister Najib Razak proposed the New Economic Model (NEM) to improve competition, double per capita income by 2020 and start to abolish ethnic preferential treatment for Malays (e.g. in education, public sector jobs and housing). The government placed great emphasis on human resources capacity-building and stimulating a culture of innovation in Malaysia.

Malaysia has seen stable economic growth since its independence in 1957. The country's average annual Gross National Income (GNI) growth rate average was 6 per cent in the 1960s and increased to an average of about 8 per cent in the 1970s and 1980s. Malaysia's strong economic performance contributed to improvement in the quality of life for Malaysians and helped development in the educational sector, health, infrastructure and public amenities; indeed, development in the educational sector has been the major factor in supporting and facilitating this economic growth. During the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006–2010), RM 40.4 billion of government development funds was allocated to the education sector. Of this, RM16.1 billion or 40 per cent was for higher education. Nelson (2008) noted that Malaysia has spent considerably more public funds, relative to total expenditure, on education than most other Southeast Asian nations, with the exception of Thailand, and more than the average of all upper-middle income countries.

Access to better education is considered critical in raising the income and living standards of the poor in both rural and urban households. The percentage of school attendance of Malaysian citizens aged 6 years and over showed a significant increase during 2000–2010, from 91.3 per cent to 93.5 per cent. The percentage of Malaysian citizens aged 20 years and over with higher education (i.e. post-secondary, college and university) increased from 16.0 per cent in 2000 to 21.6 per cent in 2010 (Department of Statistics, 2003). The NEM placed great emphasis on providing educational and training opportunities for the bottom 40 per cent to enhance their capabilities, and this is reflected in the Tenth Malaysia Development Plan (2011–2015). This is in line with the objective of

the NEM to increase productivity, add value and boost knowledge-based economic activities and, in turn, raise the level of income for the bottom 40 per cent. The key characteristics of this target group (households in the bottom 40%) are income of less than RM2300 per month (of which 73% is *bumiputera*); 52 per cent with no school certificate, 51 per cent residing in urban areas and 48 per cent in rural areas. Ongoing government efforts to eradicate poverty and to improve living standards was planned to improve the living standards of an entire population. The government's concern was reflected in the emphasis on capacity-building through access to quality education. The next section details Malaysia's educational development.

1.6.2 Malaysian educational system

The Malaysian education system is based on the British model. There are three types of primary schools: Malay-medium national schools (SK), Chinese-medium national schools (SRJKC) and Tamil-medium national schools (SRJKT). Formal schooling in Malaysia begins at age seven, and education is compulsory and free to the end of secondary level. There are six years of official primary schooling, known as Standards 1–6, provided in the Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil languages depending upon students' mother tongue. Private primary schools are also an option but are popular only among the social elite. Secondary school is the continuation of primary school, consisting of primary and secondary levels. The period of study for the lower secondary level covers three years (Form 1 through Form 3). At the end of Form 3 students are required to take a compulsory national examination; passing this examination is necessary if one wishes to continue into upper secondary education.

For a long time, the Malaysian education system only provided nine years of free basic primary education (for the age cohort 6–12 years). Progress to secondary education was strictly screened by success in the public examination. Students who failed to achieve the required grade were barred from further education. But things changed in 1991, when the government decided to extend the provision of basic education to nine years; an additional three years of lower secondary education (Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 for age cohort 13–15 years) (Lee, 2002, p. 30). Students then take the Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) examination or Certificate of Lower Secondary examination, where they are screened for upper secondary education (Secondary 4 and Secondary 5 for age cohort 16–17 years). The

screening process used to be stringent but, as from 1999, the government decided to relax it by replacing the SRP examination with the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) or Lower Secondary Assessment, whereby students with the minimal attainment of a pass in any single subject are allowed to progress to Secondary 4 (Ng, 2000, p. 1). As a result, more students are able to progress to Secondary 4 and take the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE), equivalent to the British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, at the end of Secondary 5.

SPM is the minimum qualification for students in Malaysia to further their studies at the higher education level. This qualification allows entry to post-secondary education, whether college, polytechnic or pre-university education, that offers certificate to diploma level education. There are various options at pre-university level to qualify students for study at local or international universities. First is the Matriculation programme offered by the government through courses in the fields of science and accounting. There are two types of programme offered in Matriculation: the One Year Programme and the Two Year Programme. The first involves all students from all the streams and includes science, accounting, and technical streams, while the latter is only open to *bumiputera* students in the science stream. This is a preparatory programme designed to help students from this group who have achieved excellent results at SPM level. Tuition fees for Matriculation students are subsidized by the government, and students need only pay the registration. This programme is undertaken in a boarding school environment so students are able to concentrate and focus on their studies without distraction. A race-based quota is applied during the admission process consisting of 90 per cent *bumiputera* (the term describes the Malay ethnic and indigenous people, natives of Sabah and natives of Sarawak) and 10 per cent non-*bumiputera* (non-Malay).

Second, sixth form is a pre-university programme provided by the government through selected secondary schools. The duration of the programme is a year and a half. Previously, students had to sit for a major examination at the end of the programme, the STPM (Malaysian Higher School Certificate), comparable to British A-Levels or qualifications at American higher schools. In 2012, the Malaysian Examination Council (MEC) changed the structure and introduced a more modular format for the STPM. The one and half year programme is now divided into three semesters, and students are

evaluated after each; both their final exams and coursework or assignments are taken into account. The change of format is to equip students better to adapt to tertiary level studies when they enter university to study for their degrees. Students are required to take a minimum of four and a maximum of five subjects from the humanities and sciences. In addition, they are required to take the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). This programme is automatically offered to those who did not achieve a place in the public institutions of higher learning and Matriculation.

Third, the ASASI is a foundation course offered by the government, tailored to a specific university's degree programme. Similar to Matriculation programmes, ASASI programmes are also subsidized by the government and are only offered to *bumiputera* students. The fields offered are law, science, accounting, engineering and TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Apart from these three major pre-university programmes, students have other options such as college foundation courses, A-levels, and international pre-university programmes.

1.6.2.1 Higher education in Malaysia

Higher education in Malaysia is delivered through both public and private systems under the authority of the Ministry of Education. Both public and private Higher Education Institutes (HEI) offer certificate, diploma, first degree, and postgraduate degree. Public HEIs consist of universities and university colleges. Private HEIs consist of universities, university colleges, colleges, overseas branch campuses, open universities, virtual/e-universities, and IT academies. Polytechnics offer certificates and diplomas as a source of semi-professional qualifications for the workforce. Community colleges offer full-time academic programmes and short courses, based on requests from the local community.

Since independence, the educational sector in Malaysia has experienced a rapid growth. The pace of growth is represented by three different periods (Abdul Aziz *et al.*, 2012, p. 425):

the first era was marked by the implementation of the New Economic Policy (1970s–1990s), where social inequality is addressed by ethnic-based quota admission into higher education institutions; the second era (1990s) marked by Asian financial crisis, corporatization of higher education institutions and the introduction of Private Higher Education Act (1996), and the third era (2000s) marked by liberalisation and massification of the higher education sector.

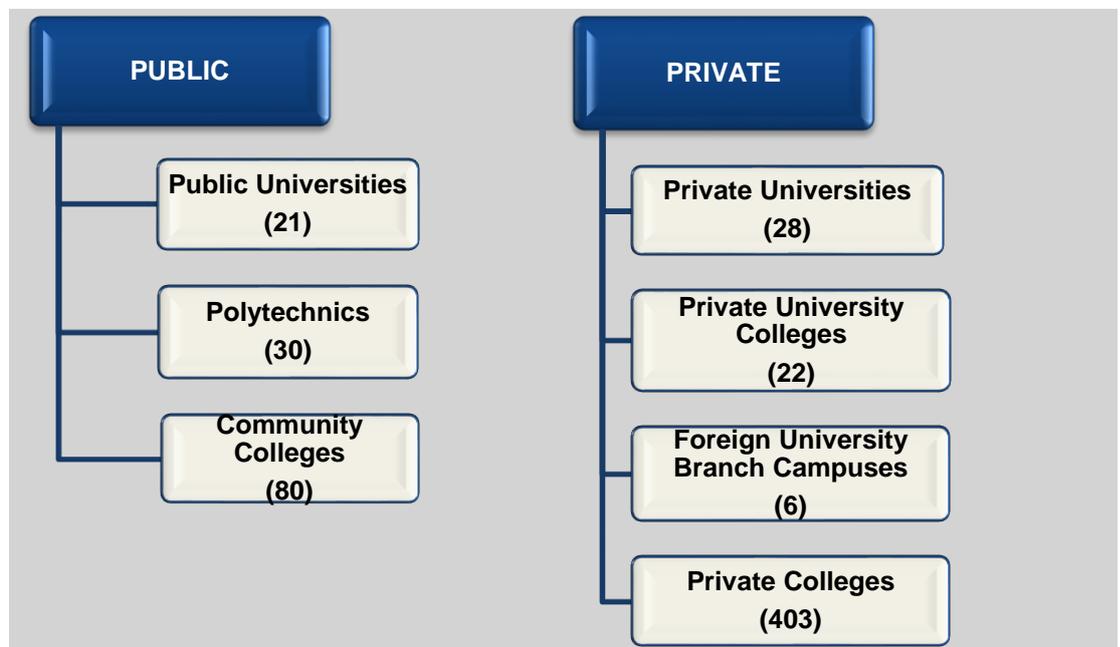
The expansion of higher education in Malaysia has been facilitated by policies to provide free education at the primary and lower secondary levels since the beginning of 1960s, and the upper secondary level since the early 1980s (Arokiasamy, 2011; Lee Kiong Hock and Shyamala Nagaraj, 2012). To achieve the goal of restructuring society, the government introduced the ethnic quota system, special admission criteria and processes, and financial assistance at public higher education institutions to assist and encourage disadvantaged students. The *bumiputera* policy gives preference to the Malay population to enhance their social and economic level compared to Chinese and Indians. This policy's success is seen in higher education enrolment continuing to increase, accelerating after 1990, indicating that higher education has become less elitist since the 1990s. A dramatic increase was seen between 1995 and 1999, when higher education reforms were implemented. In 2002, the ethnic quota system at public higher education institutions was replaced with a meritocracy system using academic achievement as the main selection criterion (Malaysia, 2003, p. 109).

Increasing demand for more qualified human capital and limited place at public universities especially for non-*bumiputeras* consequently gave rise to permission for the private sector to participate in higher education (Lee, 2004). This policy also helps to reduce loss of funds associated with student outflows and concurrently increase export revenue through inflows of international students. In line with this vision, the government introduced three acts: (i) Private Higher Educational Institutions Act (PHEIA), (ii) National Council of Higher Education Act, and (iii) National Accreditation Board Act (NABA) allowing private providers to award degrees instead of just conducting twinning and franchise programmes. This Act was subsequently amended in 2003 to provide for the establishment and upgrade of private universities, university colleges and branch campuses in Malaysia (Morshidi, 2006). The number of private providers has increased steadily. From Figure 1.1 it can be seen that there are four types of private higher education institutions currently operating in Malaysia. In 2011 there were 28 private universities, 22 university colleges and 403 colleges.

A positive trend for Malaysian higher education is that enrolment grew markedly. In 1995 only 6 per cent of an age cohort went to a HEI, and by 2010 this had increased to 16 per cent (Welch and Jarvis, 2011, p. 92). Between 1982 and 2010 the educational

profile of Malaysia’s population and labour force has therefore changed remarkably, particularly the labour force with a secondary or tertiary education. In 1982, the total labour force was 5,431 million and 1,983 million (36%) attained secondary education. In 2010, the total labour force had increased to 11,517 million and 6,412 million (56%) attained a secondary education. The numbers of workers with tertiary education over the same period has also taken a leap forward. In 1982, the number of graduates with tertiary education was 331.800 or 6 per cent of the total labour force. In 2010, the number has increased to 2,788 million or 24 per cent of the total labour force (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011).

Figure 1.1: Higher Education in Malaysia



According to Vision 2020, the government is keen to meet the policy target of 40 per cent of youths aged 19–24 enrolled in tertiary education. In this context, there is an expectation that higher education will enhance the nation state’s competitive edge in the global marketplace by producing the new ‘smart’ workers who hold key positions in the knowledge-based economy (Albatch, 2004; George, 2006; Leadbeater, 2000; Guri-Rosenblit *et al.*, 2007; Robertson, 2005). The objective is for a highly educated population support Malaysia government’s attempt to create a well-educated middle class (Torii, 2003). As stated by Banerjee and Duflo (2008) increasing the middle-class group is achieved through higher education.

The Malaysian government launched two important blueprints, the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020 and the National Higher Education Action Plan, 2007–2010 (both in August 2007) to enhance institutional competitiveness. In the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020, seven major reform objectives are outlined: widening access and enhancing quality; improving the quality of teaching and learning; enhancing research and innovation; strengthening institutions of higher education; intensifying internationalization; enculturation of lifelong learning; and, finally, reinforcing the MOHE's delivery system. The focus of these reforms is to make local higher education more competitive by offering a quality and relevant academic programmes and output, which will help Malaysia's higher education to achieve world-class standards. The plan projected that enrolment at tertiary level for the 17–23 age cohorts would increase from 29 per cent in 2003 to 40 per cent in 2010, and further to 50 per cent by 2020. This is to enable the percentage of workforce with tertiary qualifications in the country to increase from 20 per cent in 2005 to 27 per cent in 2010, and further to 33 per cent by 2020, thereby increasing the skill level of the workforce.

In 2011, the government of Malaysia allocated a sum of RM50.1 billion to education development. From the total budget, RM37.2 billion was allocated to the Ministry of Education and RM12.9 billion for the Ministry of Higher Education. The government was concerned to expand student enrolment by establishing a National Higher Education Fund in 1997 to provide financial assistance to students (Lee, 2004).

Table 1.1: Enrolment in Tertiary Education Institutions by Level of Study, 2000–2010

Level of Study	Number of Students in Public and Private Institutions ('000)									Average Annual Growth Rate (%)			
	2000			2005			2010			2001–2005		2006–2010	
	Pub	Priv	Total	Pub	Priv	Total	Pub	Priv	Total	Pub	Priv	Pub	Priv
Certificate	23.8	81.7	105.6	37.9	94.9	132.9	141.3	143.5	284.8	9.8	3.0	30.1	8.6
Diploma	91.4	117.1	208.4	98.9	131.4	230.4	285.7	188.7	474.4	1.6	2.3	23.6	7.5
1 st Degree	170.8	59.9	230.7	212.3	110.6	322.9	293.6	134.5	428.2	4.4	13.0	6.7	4.0
Master's	24.0	2.2	26.2	34.4	4.2	38.6	111.5	5.8	117.3	7.5	14.1	26.5	6.5
Doctorate	3.4	0.1	3.5	6.7	0.1	6.9	21.4	0.3	21.7	15.0	1.4	26.0	14.0
Total	313.4	261.1	574.4	390.4	341.3	731.7	653.6	472.8	1326.4	4.5	5.5	16.9	6.7

Source: Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006–2010, p. 245

Table 1.1 shows student enrolment in public and private higher education in 2000 and 2010. Student numbers increased significantly with the expansion of higher education institutions. For example, enrolment in public institutions doubled from about 313,400 in 2000 to 653,600 in 2010. In private institutions, enrolments increased by 80 per cent from about 261,000 in 2000 to about 473,000 in 2010. The universalization of basic education increased the output of secondary education, which increased the pressure on tertiary education.

The proportion of young Malaysians progressing to tertiary education is increasing. In Malaysian universities the prevalent characteristics of students are that they are adolescents straight from secondary education, registered full-time and mostly financed, whether by loan or scholarship or supported by parents. In Malaysia, applications for undergraduate degrees are centralized. Students apply through the Centralised Admission Agency (UPU). In 2012 the MOHE gave autonomy to five public research universities for administration, human resources, financial and academic management, and student intake. The meritocracy admission policy changed from simply being focused on students'

academic performance to 90 per cent academic achievement and 10 per cent involvement in co-curriculum activities. Increasingly, this is a reflection that higher education should be accessible to large numbers and more individuals, regardless of their income, social origin, ethnicity or physical ability (National Higher Education Strategic Plan, 2020). Furthermore, the government provides complete funding for all students. Thus, every student has the chance to attain tertiary education, regardless of financial status. Those with excellent results at pre-university level are normally offered scholarships by government or private companies. In particular, loans offered by National Higher Education Fund (PTPTN) have become the major source of financing for tertiary education in Malaysia. This fund is managed by the National Higher Education Fund Cooperation. The availability of loans for the majority of Malaysian students enables them to focus on their studies and perform well academically. The eligibility criteria are the family's net income: that is, the gross income minus provisions for each dependent in the family. Prior to 2010, only students with parental net income of less than RM3000 were eligible for the full loan, which covers both tuition and subsistence, while students with parental net income of between RM3001 and RM5000 were eligible for partial loans, covering fees and partial subsistence, and students with greater parental net income were eligible for loans to cover only their fees (The Star, 2010). Loans are only provided for Malaysian citizens who have been accepted into full-time accredited programmes in either public or private higher education institutions. Access to financial resources influences the retention of students in Malaysia's universities.

Increasing demand for access to tertiary education relates to internal and external factors. Internally, it relates to the democratization of secondary education, the transformation of the Malaysian economy and the recent emergence of a knowledge-based economy. Specific attention will be paid to the concept of a Bachelor's degree as a ticket to middle-class status for students from underprivileged backgrounds.

1.7 Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following main concepts are used. Definitions are given to provide an operational terminology of key terms.

1.7.1 Transition

A transition is a significant concept in this thesis, embracing events or processes that result in a change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles for an individual (Schlossberg *et al.*, 1995). In the literature, transition is variously defined by using the components of time, habitual, identity change and views passed from one state, stage, form or activity to another. Transition can also be described as an individual's ability to reflect, think and respond to the changes.

In this research the concept of transition refers to shifting between familiar and unfamiliar learning environments. In other educational discourses this shift is referred to as the first-year university experience. Studies in this area of higher education (McInnis, 2001) have found that learning is most fruitful when the transition into a new academic environment incorporates positive and rewarding student experiences that account for the needs of the student (Krause, 2001).

1.7.2 Higher education

The term 'higher education' usually refers to education at degree level and above offered by colleges and universities. In Malaysia, it covers all post-secondary education leading to the award of certificates, diplomas and degrees (Wilkinson and Yussof, 2005, p. 363). For the purpose of this study, higher education will refer to public university. A public university is funded by government.

1.7.3 Undergraduate students

'Undergraduate student' is general term for those who meet the criteria of enrolment straight from high school and enter university for a Bachelor's degree (Choy, 2002).

1.7.4 First-year experience

The term 'student experience' is often used to describe the holistic process of constructing personal meaning across a broad range of formal and informal academic and social settings in the context of university and the outside world, such as referred to by Baird and Gordon (2009), Harvey *et al.*, (2006), Krause (2005), Pitkethly and Prosser (2001), and Yorke and Longden (2004). Based on these studies, experiences are responses or results associated with the interaction between the student and context with which they engage.

The first-year experience of higher education refers to students' experience in the first year of university, with its range of emotions and expectations (Barefoot *et al.*, 2005). Many refer to it as a transition, which is important in determining student persistence and enabling adjustment to the higher education culture (Harvey *et al.*, 2006). It is a distinct period when students learn about university.

1.7.5 Socio-economic status

There are different perspectives on how the term 'socio-economic status' is defined and contextualized. This is because the characteristics are broad and multifaceted with inconsistent categories. This study will follow the three main economic capitals of income, education and occupation developed by Iannelli (2007), and Strenze (2007). Thomas and Quinn (2010) cite four main factors determining or contributing to low-economic status: income, occupation, geography and parental level of education. In Malaysia the criteria for disadvantaged groups are socio-economic factors such as family income, facilities for studying at home, the quality of primary education, geographic location, and the educational background of parents (Sandhu and Mani, 1993, p. 433).

1.7.6 Working-class students

Understanding that there are many accepted definitions and characteristics of the term 'working class', for the purpose of this study the researcher has defined it by parental education. Blustein (2006) defines social class as 'a social group, conceived as located within a hierarchical order of unequal such groups, the identity and membership of which is primarily determined by 'economical' considerations such as occupation, income, and wealth' (p. 173). The concept of a working-class or a lower-class group in Malaysia is defined by income and lifestyle. Society in Malaysia can be divided into three economic groups: the upper class, middle class and lower classes or working class. Using Malaysian Economic Planning Unit data, the majority of families with an income of less than RM2000 are represented as working-class, the majority of families with incomes over RM2000 to RM7000 report to being middle class, while those with a family income more than RM7000 are identified as upper class. Measures of socio-economic status are often based on social and economic aspects: occupational status (agricultural, administration and clerical and production); low-waged service and lower white-collar workers, no college background and lack of social, cultural and personal capital. Therefore, the definition of

working class adopted in this study typically refers to those than have less formal education, and work in occupations perceived as less prestigious (e.g. manual labour). The terms ‘working class’ and ‘lower socio-economic groups’ are used interchangeably throughout the thesis.

1.7.7 First-generation students

This study uses the term ‘first-generation students’ as those from a family in which neither parent has higher education qualifications (Thomas and Quinn, 2006).

1.7.8 Engagement

Engagement in university has been primarily measured by observable behaviours directly related to high quality learning outcomes. Based on previous research, Hu and Kuh (2001, p. 3) define engagement as ‘the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes’. Indicators of engagement include participation in academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experience. Specifically, engagement indicates the dynamic interplay between student and institutions (Krause and Coates, 2008).

1.8 Research Methods

This study took place at a medium-sized research university in the west of Malaysia. The aim of the study was to consider the experience of the transition into university. There is a scarcity of data about first-generation student experience in Malaysia’s higher education institutions. This study is designed as a qualitative study. The exploration offers opportunities for the researcher to understand and discover issues that are rarely discussed, through the voices of the participants.

The design of the study was based on the need to develop an in-depth understanding of the student experience, and therefore a qualitative approach was used to listen to the students’ voices and capture the social reality of their transition (Cresswell, 1998). This study was designed in a longitudinal style to allow ongoing contact between the student and researcher throughout the first-year. The study makes it possible to capture growth and the changes of experiences students’ within this transition period. A total of 16 students participated. The study was implemented in three sequential phases. In phase one, semi-structured interviews focused on students’ background biographies, experiences of

prior educational settings and decision to enter university, expectations and initial experiences of the transition to university. In phase two, data collection, the key educational experiences of students were obtained in the context of the academic and social integration process. This relied on a reflective journal kept by the student. The same group of students was interviewed in their second semester. The focus of this third phase was to encourage the students to reflect on their year at university.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews and reflective journals were used. These offered opportunities to explore particular issues and probe views and opinions (Robson, 2002). As stated by Roe (2005), qualitative research into the nature of students' transitions to university offers valuable insights into the internal and external contexts and factors that can influence the process. Data collected from these approaches will be analysed using an interpretive thematic approach. A comprehensive description of the methodology is outlined in Chapter Three.

1.9 Structure of the Study

The following is an overview of the chapters after this introductory chapter's presentation of the background and the purpose of study.

Chapter Two, the literature review, provides a contextual background to the research by reviewing the relevant literature on school to university transition. This chapter consists of three sections. The first section provides a definition on transition as a concept used to explain the student decision to enter the university. The second section provides theoretical background of the study through two theoretical perspectives: the transition theory and communities of practices. This section introduces the main concept of transition and, communities and learning communities as dynamic factors in shaping student learning identity. Finally, the last section discusses factors influencing first-generation students to enter the university that are introduced in this section. This expands the transition concept with the first-year university experience. The intention is to identify the causes and elements that contribute to students' first-year experience. This last section also presents the conceptual framework of the study.

Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, presents a discussion of the research design and methods adopted to answer the research questions. It begins with a general

description of the enquiry paradigm underlying the research. The following section discusses and justifies the choice research design, step-in sampling and data analysis. Finally, the chapter highlights several issues crucial to research ethics and research validation.

Chapter Four and **Chapter Five** provide the findings. In Chapter Four, the findings of the first stage of the research relate to student higher education aspirations and choices aiming to answer research question one and to provide pre-entry information on first-generation students. In Chapter Five, more details on factors shaping first-year experience are presented.

Finally, in **Chapter Six and Seven**, detailed summaries of the research and analysis of results are presented. Reflections follow on the main contribution to knowledge and practice and the main research limitations, leading to opportunities for future research, with a conclusion in Chapter Seven.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the literature on the transition and participation of students at university is reviewed, with special emphasis on first-generation students. A comprehensive search was conducted systematically to identify and synthesize all available evidence that supports the need for this study. Literature searches from reliable search engines and databases were undertaken using the following search terms: transition; school to university transition; first-generation student; first year experience and learning identity. The most recent articles from relevant journals were selected to ensure a contemporary discussion on those particular themes.

To develop a profound insight on the issues surrounding transition into higher education and first-generation student experiences, this chapter will be divided into seven main sections. This chapter begins with a thorough discussion of transition and its significant link to students' transitions. Thus, in the following section, the relevant theoretical frameworks on transition are introduced to give a more profound understanding of transition. In this section, the transition is not only seen as a form of change between different institutional contexts but as an identity formation process.

A detailed discussion about first-generation students' issues of access and choice, and the relationship between social class and higher education, is further explored in Sections 2.5 to 2.7. The discussion overall focuses on the personal and social factors shaping student educational decisions. These discussions bring to the fore the issue of individual capacity and underlying characteristics of a first-generation student in framing higher education aspiration and success. Additionally, despite the disadvantages faced by first-generation students, organizational norms of high schools are critical factors in fostering pathways to post-secondary education.

This section will be followed by a discussion of student experiences with the objective of understanding the relationship of transition to student learning experiences, especially for first-year students. The first year is a transition period when students need to adapt to new learning practices and social contexts in order to be incorporated into the

learning community. This is a multifaceted process, where there are several factors that relate to each other, one being the impact of first-generation status on being a student. The main objective is to shed light on fundamental mechanisms of how students negotiate their background identity in this transition process. This chapter concludes with a presentation of the research conceptual framework.

2.2 Conceptualizing the Transition

Transition is a multifaceted concept that accommodates both continuities and discontinuities in the life processes of human beings. Whether transition is expected or not, most agree it involves a passage of change (Lam and Pollard, 2006), a process where individuals shift from one constructed identity to another that bring shifts in culture, identity, role and status, as well as daily experience (Van Gennep, 1960). In other words, it describes any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson, 2006, p. 33).

The meaning of transition varies with the context in which the term is used. Within the literature, interchangeable terms are used to describe transition such as: growth, making progress, settling, separation, adjustment and coping with change process, changing of expectations and new conformities, adaptation, and readiness (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; Lam and Pollard, 2006). According to Kralik *et al.* (2006), transition happens over time and involves change and adaptation. Bridges (2003) explains that change is the way things will be different, and transition is about moving people through the stages to make change work. In other words, change is external and visible, while transition is a psychological process that people must undergo to relinquish old arrangements and embrace new ones. As stated by Bridges (2004), the word ‘transition’ refers to the ‘inner reorientation and self-redefinition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of those into your life’ (p. xii).

Transition in the educational field is a series of moves from one level to another, involving changes in the social environment and educational activity (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007). In particular, transition to university is one of the major challenges students have to face. This transition may be categorized as developmental and situational, perceived as a purposeful and planned movement. It involves moving away from home, living

independently and adjusting to a new institutional norm (Christie *et al.*, 2011). This also clearly stated by Stephens *et al.* (2012, p. 2):

students are led to believe that they will finally be able to separate and distinguish themselves from their parents and to realize their individual potential to find themselves, to develop their voices, to follow their passions, and to influence the world.

Being and becoming a learner is explained as the outcome of complex interrelation between students' individual characteristics and the physical institutional context of the experience of learning. For example, Wilcox *et al.* (2005) write: 'becoming a student is about constructing a new identity and a sense of belonging. Students need to negotiate between the old life they have left behind (family, home and friends) and the new life they have ahead of them'. In a broader definition, Wenger (1998, p. 215) describes learning as transformative, and therefore 'an experience of identity'. Luckett and Luckett (2002) propose that a theoretical position of learning should embrace the cognitive-constructivist and socio-cultural traditions. This is aligned with the concept of learning introduced by Barnett (2000), and Barnett and Coate (2005): learning is not only focused on gaining new knowledge, thinking and conceptual change, but involves new ways of doing things and new ways of being. Luckett and Luckett (2009, p. 470) claim that learning 'involves "deep transformation" of cognitive structure, identity and social structure'. The definitions presented here explain that learning is a process, the capacity of a human being for growth and change, both cognitively and emotionally.

In this research, transition is best viewed as a process-oriented phenomenon that involves individual response to change. Using this concept, transition is defined as a complex occurrence that involves person-environment interaction. It involves adaptations to self-concept and self-identity to accommodate the change. This definition implies that there are interactions between previous experience, present roles and goals, and between others. For the purposes here, transition is proposed to refer to several aspects: first, it is not only a about passage or movement to different educational levels, but is the event that marks attainment in education. First-generation student transition to university has been depicted as an opportunity for upward mobility, not only for the student but their family. Taking a student access perspective, this research identifies transition in terms of 'mobility' and the 'aspirations' motivating students for higher degrees. Issues of

motivation to succeed resonate with student goals in the learning context of the university, as this affects their social and academic experience at university. Second, a transitional process involves transformation, as people learn to adapt and incorporate the new circumstances into their life. It focuses on the process of shifts in identity and redefining of self, mastering new knowledge and skills and new ways of living. Third, the process of transition also recognizes that transition is accomplished in relation to other individuals in transition, such as influential family members and friends.

To gain clearer and richer insights into first-generation student transition, this research conceptualizes it as a composite concept consisting of three underlying dimensions. The multiple context approach seems to comprise:

Personal characteristics: Each individual's personal characteristics and psychological factors are unique characteristics that comprise what that individual brings to the transition. In this context, transition can be described as the individual background characteristics and attributes affecting how individuals think, interact, behave, and navigate change. Research has shown the importance of studying student cognitive and non-cognitive variables in relation to their transition experiences (Friedman and Mendel, 2009; Leuwerke and Turley, 2005; Gore *et al.*, 2004; Stephen *et al.* 2012). Two categories of factors of self are personal and demographic characteristics, including gender, age, ethnicity and socio-economic status and, second, psychological resources such as values, attitudes, and commitment.

Socio-cultural factors: A range of home, school and community settings need to be examined to see how these influences first-generation higher education aspirations and subsequent university experience. First-generation students attending post-secondary education represent social-class mobility, as a pathway to higher status and better paid jobs (Langhout *et al.*, 2007; Walpole, 2007). Usually, first-generation students experience more complicated issues during school to university transition, associated with their parents' socio-economic status (Choy *et al.*, 2000). According to Borrego (2004), 'working-class' is defined by family income, parental employment and education, values and lifestyle. First-generation students, despite economic, cultural and social barriers, are still highly motivated to succeed (Cabrera and Padilla, 2004).

From this aspect, positive educational experiences at school have a profound impact on the formation of students' aspirations for post-secondary education (Abbott-Chapman, 2007; Alloway *et al.*, 2004). Thus, the relationship between students and their schooling experience has a significant impact on transition experiences.

Institutional context: The institution system is essentially interaction between students and the learning environment of the university. Transition from one environment to another may be viewed as a rite of passage for first-generation students, demonstrating a significant separation from past beliefs and practices, and adaptation to new cultural beliefs and academic norms of academic communities at university. Successful transition is also often linked to the development of relationships and connections with others. In this context, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested that social interaction is the key to development of skills which would then impact on learning. Student sought the advice of some they perceived as being more experienced and more knowledgeable. The level of engagement, involvement, integration, resiliency and motivation, both academically and socially, determines the level at which students are likely to be successful.

In the present study, in order to comprehend the complexity of the transition and to understand students' movement, direction and flow as they progress over time, this research draws initially upon three dimension or stages that Van Gennepe (1960) proposed. The main idea in this theory is that individuals must pass through certain stages of development, with each stage marked by a particular development process and conflict.

Stage 1-Separation: This stage describes how students break away from prior norms and values and adopt new norms and values associated with culture of the university environment. Although transition involves some endings, not everything in the life of the students comes to a close, as there are continuities even as change occurs. Positive separations are characterized by maintaining whatever continuity is possible in identity, relationship and environment.

Stage 2-Transition: The second stage of transition begins when individuals experience an event that challenges their prior ways of living. There is often a sense of loss or of alienation from what had been familiar and valued. Students found this shift somewhat

challenging; the new emphasis on academic skills and demands to interact with a wide range of students is reported to be the most difficult aspect of the transition to university.

Stage 3-Incorporation: At this stage, conflicts between the old and new identities are resolved and students become more confident. Indicators of it occurring include individuals feeling connected to, and interacting with, their situation and other people. Individuals feel located so they can reflect and interact, and develop. It offers a useful basis to help to explain interplay between personal and socio-cultural factors within student learning.

People must go through all three stages to deal effectively with transition. However, the stages of a transition do not necessarily occur in a linear manner. They may be somewhat sequential, parallel, or overlapping. This suggests that an understanding of the transition experience demands multilevel data. The data needs to represent the layers of experiences in order to understand the complexity of the transition to university. This research set out to look at student experience for nine months and showed that students' behaviour changed over time. A longitudinal approach was adopted to see the changes comprising the transition, allowing the researcher to see how students adjust, and how they cope with such changes. In order to explore the nature and range of transitions that students experience, the methodological design of the study was based on qualitative methodology. The interview process used as the tool to gather data yielded a profound understanding of the phenomena. It enriches the existing literature because it reveals a vivid picture of first-generation students in a Malaysian university across an entire academic year, while other studies focus only on short period.

Understanding the factors facilitating a successful transition to university provides critical insights into student experience, expectations and outcomes. The pre- and post-aspects of the transition process that frame first-generation students' experience during their first year is presented in the conceptual framework of this research in **Section 2.6** (page 59). This framework suggests that underpinning students' experiences at university is a range of transitions within various communities that influence the way identities, knowledge and practices are constructed. It is reasonable to say that through this process students are faced with various practices and ideas. These might influence their conceptions of learning at university, and mastery of new skills and new ways of living.

The existing understanding of transition, as proposed above, is further explored within the transition and socio-cultural theory.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Rites of Passage

Van Gennep (1960), an anthropologist famous for the concept of ‘rites of passage’, maintained that the transitional phase in human life is marked by socio-cultural rituals. His work (1960) was tightly focused on the movement of people and societies as well as the ‘life crises’ people and groups experience in the course of their lives. In his view, life is comprised of a series of passages: from birth to death, or from membership in one community to another. A ‘transition’ was the term he gave to the period between separating from a known community of culture where norms, values and behaviour are familiar changing to a new culture or community where norms, behaviour and values are unknown. As stated by Martin-McDonald and Biernoff (2002, p. 347):

rites of passage occur when there is a transition in cultural expectations, social roles, and status and/or condition or position, interpersonal relations, and developmental or situational changes to being in the world.

The concept proposes that a complete scheme includes three stages: the pre-liminal (rites of separation); the liminal (rites of transition); and the post-liminal (rites of reincorporation). In the pre-liminal stage, individuals dissociate themselves from community membership of the past such as the family, the community and previous school friends. The separation can occur symbolically, physically or emotionally. With regard to first-generation students, it must be noted that many will be separating from their families and friends for the first time, to become a part of the new university community. According to Tinto (1987), separation from communities of the past can be isolating and stressful, especially if there are vast differences between the norms of behaviour of the previous and the culture. The ‘liminal stage’ (transition) is what Turner (1974) describes as being ‘betwixt and between’: a former role and future status. This transition stage is when the previous self is given up but the new self not yet fully established (Van Gennep, 1960). This period presents challenges, communicates cultural norms and promotes new skills that an initiate will need to have in order to integrate into her/his new role in the community

(Turner and Bruner, 1986). It describes students who are not yet internalised into the social and intellectual life of the new institution. For first-generation students, integration into a new community such as a UKM can be a difficult period and their past experience may not have equipped them with the means to be incorporated into their new academic community. Tinto (1987, p. 9) states that:

individuals who come from families, communities, and schools whose norms and behaviours are very different from those of the communities of the college (university) into which entry is made, face especially difficult problems in seeking to achieve competent membership in the new communities.

The post-liminal stage (habituation to the new status of university student) illustrates how well students have adjusted to the next level. Van Gennep's (1960) model is increasingly being used to explore educational transition because of its ability to position individuals' experience as they move through the phases at different periods.

Three phases of transition are also proposed by Bridges (2003). First, in the ending zone, there is a 'letting go' of the current position. In the case of transition to university, students need to realize that their old identity as school students is over and they need to 'let go' of old self-images and prepare for next phase of education. Second, the neutral zone is a disorientating process when students are in the middle of the transition and feel lost and empty (Bridges, 2004). This is a time when students think about transition and what the new beginning will be like; as Bridges (2004) says, 'the experience of the neutral zone is essentially one of emptiness in which the old reality looks transparent and nothing feels solid anymore' (p. 139). The third phase is of new beginnings, full of anxieties and confusion, but eventually the transition achieves adaptation and adjustment. These three phases demonstrate that transition is about how individuals gradually disengage from their old situation, experience a confusing state in between, and then adjust to a new situation. It is a normal process of being disoriented, then re-oriented, and requires the individual to develop. Changes will occur, but transition periods allow an individual the time to deal with the change psychologically so that they are able to adapt to the new situation (Bridges, 2004).

Both theoretical models of transition follow a linear pattern of three or four stages and share similar features involving an ending and a beginning: the stage of leaving or losing some aspect of life, facing a new situation, managing feelings of uncertainty and

challenges to confidence and, finally, reaching a resolution involving an adjustment to the new situation (Bridges, 2004; Van Gennep, 1960). This theory suggests that the new university student must engage in a complex process of adjustment to the institutional culture as they move from school-student status to university-student status. This includes impacts on relationships, routines, assumptions and roles in a variety of settings. They may be subtle or explicit; expected or not. This is a turning point for individuals, and is predicated on the individual's perception of the change. The explorations of these three phases help us to understand the transition process experienced by first-generation students.

However, Kralik (2002) challenges the notion of transition as following a linear pattern and proposes that transition is not only caused by developmental stages but by life events. This notion is supported by Foubert *et al.* (2005), who hold that the development process presented need not necessarily be interpreted as a series of steps, and may be conceptualized differently. This process is not necessarily static and the process is flexible within the context of the individual and the environment. Moreover, the proposition of levels of transition is slightly unclear, as the authors do not give an exact idea of how people may attain their new status.

Another theory of transition and process, complementary to the linear model, is the Community of Practice of Lave and Wenger. The model focuses on how individuals may navigate transitions and achieve positive outcomes. The theory offers a comprehensive framework for considering the complexities of adjustment to change in university. The following discussion briefly reviews this theory.

2.3.2 Situated learning theory

Situated learning theory is an influential framework for assessing an individual's experience to negotiate with new communities of practices by interacting with others (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The 'learning context' of university is viewed as social practice, and 'learning community' as agents operating within formal and non-formal structures. A 'community of practice' (CoP), as described by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 4), is 'a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing

basis'. The CoP theory provides a framework for assessing an individual's experience to negotiate with new communities of practices by interacting with others (Lave and Wenger, 1991; O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007). When entering university, students are aware of a specific body of knowledge and skills and are also exposed to different communities of practices with their own distinct characteristics, structure and purposes. Communities that exist within the university context are many and various: academic communities, disciplinary communities, and subject communities. At the same time, students are also members of communities outside the university and events within these communities may influence their experience. Studies have shown that students' experiences of studying at university shape and change their life (Brennan and Teichler, 2008), as well as form their identities (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004).

How learning happens in a social context is also noted by Elkjaer (2003). Individual learning is conceptualized as growing, involving opportunities to participate in the practices of the community as well as the development of an identity that provides a sense of belonging and commitment. Under this framework, learning is not an individual activity of acquiring theoretical knowledge, but occurs naturally when a person experiences a particular situation.

Learning is considered part of human nature, situated within and shaped by social and cultural contexts (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Young Sek Kim and Merriam, 2010). Central to this theory is an approach that 'place[s] more emphasis on connecting issues of socio-cultural transformation with the changing relations between newcomers and old-timers in the context of a changing shared practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 49).

Communities of practice advocate the social view of learning, where learning happens through interacting and participation in the community. Wenger *et al.* (2002, p. 27) state that CoPs are comprised of three fundamental characteristics that differentiate them from other social structures:

- a domain of knowledge which defines a set of issues
- a community of people who care about this domain and,
- the shared practice they are developing to be effective in their domain.

A CoP focuses on a specific ‘domain’: the area of knowledge that engages the community together and that defines its identity. The second element is the community itself and the quality of relationships among members that bond members. The feeling of belonging is important; it provides a strong foundation for learning and collaboration among diverse members, between the internal and external environments of the specific group. This connection enables them to address problems and share knowledge. Finally, each community develops its practice through sharing the body of knowledge and resources needed to operate effectively in the domain. Elements of a practice include tools, frameworks, methods, and stories, as well as activities related to learning and innovation.

The combination of domain, community, and practice enables COPs to manage knowledge. Domain provides a common focus; community builds relationships that enable collective learning; and practice anchors the learning in what people do. Thus the ‘tacit dimension’ proposed by situated learning theory helps to extend our understanding into the nature of learning of first-year students. This study is primarily concerned with three main principles of understanding or analysing learning in situated learning theory: participation, identity-construction, and practice. The three concepts are briefly outlined below.

2.3.2.1 Participation

Participation is positioned as central to situated learning theory, since only through participation in a community do individuals develop their identity and practices. Participation involves action (taking part), as well as relationships and connections to others in the community, as suggested by Wenger (1998):

not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities. (Wenger, 1998, p. 4)

The process by which newcomers become members of a community of practitioners is identified as legitimate peripheral participants (LPP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This term is introduced to explain how learners are part of the CoP and that learning is situated within social structures. As described by Lave and Wenger (2007):

Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and

communities of knowledge and practice. It concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a Community of Practice. (p. 29)

Through this concept of LPP, Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that participation in the community is the key for learning, where newcomers gain experience through a continuous interaction with other newcomers and the old-timers of the community. This process is individual and collective, since learning is situated and supported by more knowledgeable members who pass their skills and ideas to newcomers. First-year students begin their journey through university as 'peripheral members'. The word 'peripheral' indicates a pathway or a route the new members must follow in order to connect themselves with the community's established members. According to Collier and Morgan (2008), a 'peripheral' student is faced with two tasks: understanding their role as a student, and mastering that role. Thus, newcomers to university such as first-year students are not expected to participate fully in their learning until they become familiar with it. At this level, students have to leave previous norms and patterns of behaviour and begin to acquire the knowledge and skills associated with the subject matter and practices. At this stage many find themselves in a 'stage of disruption' (Schlossberg, 1984) in which they are no longer influenced by their past identity, yet are not yet into the new culture. The value of participation is to become connected: mastery of knowledge and skill enables them to move towards full participation in the practices of the community.

In a CoP, students who spend more time on campus engage with other students in relation to academic work, have a greater sense of belonging to an academic community and are more likely to develop friendship networks (Smith and Wertlieb, 2005). A sense of belonging is a common term for sense of connection, and is used to show the extent to which students feel attached, pleased and part of the university (Krause and Coates, 2008).

However, the 'apprenticeship' model of learning is challenged by the 'strict dichotomy' between 'periphery' and 'core/full' by proposing that participation may involve learning trajectories that do not lead to an idealized 'full' participation (Handley *et al.*, 2006, p. 644). The constraint on newcomers here is 'the dynamics of power': such 'full participation may be denied to novices by powerful practitioners'.

Benzie *et al.* (2005, p. 182) note that 'legitimate peripheral participation is not just about the goals, tasks and knowledge acquisition but also identity. In performing new tasks

and demonstrating new understanding, learners' identities are transformed'. Therefore, the dynamics between identity development and forms of participation is critical to the ways in which the individuals internalise, challenge or reject the existing practices of their community.

2.3.2.2 Identity formation

Being and becoming a learner is explained as the outcome of complex interrelations between students' individual characteristics and the institutional context where the experience of first year takes place. In situated learning theory, learning is defined as a socio-cultural activity, and individuals experience identity development as they participate in communities of practice (Young Sek Kim and Merriam, 2010; Wenger, 1998). As stated by Handley *et al.* (2006), 'learning is not simply about developing one's knowledge and practice, it also involves a process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted' (Handley *et al.*, 2006, p. 644).

According to Wenger, the process of identity formation can be illustrated in terms of three different modes of belonging (pp. 173–174): engagement, imagination and alignment. The first mode of belonging involves investing ourselves in what we do, as well as in our relations with other members of the community. It is through relating ourselves to other people that we achieve a sense of who we are, and through engaging in practice we understand how we can participate in activities and the competence required. Moreover, students' sense of relatedness or belonging makes a unique contribution to their engagement. The concept of engagement embraces a specific understanding of the responsibility for learning and, according to Hu and Kuh (2001, p. 3), engagement is defined as 'the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes'. Engagement in university is an important academic outcome in its own right. It develops and improves the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable the students to play an active role in the learning process.

Students at university were found to be involved in three common areas of engagement: engagement in classroom, engagement out-of-classroom, and engagement with the wider social context. In the first category, engagement in classroom, students

prepare for a class, and they interact and collaborate inside and outside of a lecture with other students. Under the second category, students are involved in extra-curricular activities and they work with colleagues from different faculties, backgrounds and administrators to handle a project. In the third category, engagement in the social context, they interact with others outside the context of their university. Engagement in these three ranges of activity creates the identities of university students.

In this process of negotiation of meaning, individuals might experience intra-community conflict, as individuals bring to the community a personal history of involvement in learning place, social and familial group in which these norms may match or clash with one other. Palmer *et al.* (2009) describe how ‘students can be suspended between one place (home) and another (university), which can result in an “in-between-ness”—a betwixt space—which in turn creates this lack of belonging or sense of placeness (Van Gennep, 1909/1960)’ (p. 38). Identities constructed in one setting may not be practical in a new setting. Therefore, transitions between settings have the potential to challenge established identities and force re-assessment (Osborn, McNess and Pollard, 2006). This is significant for first-generation students unfamiliar with the culture of a university. Students feel vulnerable, especially when they have to become familiar with new discourses and practices (Alfred, 2003).

The second mode of belonging, ‘imagination’, is the domain of goals and expectations wherein we create ‘new images of the world and ourselves’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 176). It enables people to interpret the experiences they have with others in their communities of practices. Imagination provides individuals with interpretive tools for placing themselves within the broader context in which they exist and explains why people have different perceptions, even when engaged in the same enterprises. First-year students, even if undertaking similar activities in their various academic tasks, may see themselves differently from their peers.

The third mode of identity formation is defined by Wenger (1998) as alignment, referring to the extent to which individuals are able to match their practices and activities to that of the community. Alignment creates a sense of identification with a community, while misalignment creates a sense of not belonging.

2.3.2.3 Practices

A CoP is organized around a 'practice' and in this context is about social practice, or 'doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do' (Wenger, 1998, p. 47). According to Handley *et al.* (2009), 'by participating in a community, a newcomer develops an awareness of that community's practice and thus comes to understand engage with (or adapt and transform) various tools, language, role-definitions and other explicit artefacts as well as various implicit relations, tacit conventions, and underlying assumptions and values' (p. 645). Brown and Duguid (2001, p. 203) define practice as 'undertaking or engaging fully in a task, job or profession'. The social practice of the community is what newcomers need in order to gain experience and knowledge and to move to the centre of the learning community actively. For example, Ibarra (1999) explains that individuals develop practices by observing others, imitating them and then adapting and developing their own particular practices in ways that match not only the wider community's norms, but their own individual sense of integrity and self. Ibarra calls this process 'experimenting with provisional selves' (1999). Thus, it is through participation in communities that individuals develop and possibly adapt and thereby reconstruct their identities and practice (Breakwell, 2001).

In the context of university students, when they begin their course as first-year students they are directly and indirectly introduced to the literacy practices of a discipline. Students are normally told by lecturers about the type of learning that they should practise. In other words, practice mainly involves learning to adapt to the academic tasks of one's academic discipline. They might try to adapt to this culture and its practices by following or copying what others, such as advanced students or seniors, are doing. As peripheral participants they undertake activities through which their knowledge and skills develop and help them to obtain an initial sense of the university culture. Reflectivity has causal power in both contexts, because it mediates between structure and agency.

The nature of individuals' participation in a university community influences their understanding of self and also provides them with important resources of social capital developing social capital (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007). To sum up this section, situated learning theory explains processes of learning and adapting to the characters, culture and behavioural norms of the institution attended and the discipline practised.

In order to develop an insight into student higher education aspirations, this discussion is presented from psychological and sociological perspectives. It offers different ways of looking at first-generation student pre-entry characteristics, and provides this study with a conceptual framework for understanding the field

2.4 Higher Education Aspiration and Decision

There is a much debate regarding the factors that might shape students' post-secondary expectations and choices. Post-school choices are seen as a multifaceted process, differing by social class, gender, age, ethnicity, family backgrounds and parents' education. In a study of factors that shape young peoples' decisions on higher education, Smyth and Banks (2012) conclude that the decision reflects: individual habitus; the institutional habitus of the school identified from the available resources and guidance provided; and finally young people's own agency, individual ability to access information on different options and make their own judgement.

In this section, three main domains: personal attributes; family social and cultural capital; and schooling experience are selected to discuss the extent these factors affects student higher education aspirations.

2.4.1 Personal attributes

Emerging adulthood is defined a developmental period extending from late adolescence, with a focus on ages from 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2010). According to Arnett (2010), this is a stage of identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and possibilities. These are critical years for adolescents to think, dream, and plan for their futures (Blakemore and Choudhury, 2006). In some cases students at the age of 11 or 12 have started thinking about their educational plans and occupational intentions. As students become mature they become more realistic about their academic competence (Jacobs *et al.*, 2002). Therefore transition to university is also considered as a transition from adolescence to adulthood consistent with Chickering's theory of psychosocial development of young adults participating in higher education (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

Clear ideas of what they want to achieve are important because they seemingly influence choices, decision, and activities, which affect the action they take (Nurmi, 2004). In connection to this adolescent academic self-concept, aspiration and academic

achievement will contribute their future outcomes, particularly their educational and occupational attainment (Goyette and Xie, 1999; King *et al.*, 2006; Troutman and Dufur, 2007). In addition, Nurmi (2004), Little (2007) and Beal and Crockett (2010) all explain how ‘future oriented cognitions’ motivate behaviour related to the realization of preferred outcomes. For example, this can be demonstrated by the subjects the student take, the extra-curricular activities they are involved in and everything associated with their future plans. When students have clear goals they are able to think about their educational paths to help them achieve their occupational goals. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) label it as an ‘aligned ambition’, a match between educational aspirations and occupational ambitions. In this aspect, cognitive factors such as expectations and beliefs have been shown to be key issues in explaining learning behaviour and motivation to learn (Bandura, 1982). The link between expectation and later attainment is agreed by Messersmith and Schulenberg (2008), and Ou and Reynolds (2008) state that adolescents’ educational expectations predict their educational attainment.

Students’ motivation for post-secondary education can be as either an intrinsic or extrinsic factor. Findings by Cote and Levine (1997) suggest that student motivations for attending university are based on five motivations. First, the *careerist-materialist motivation* involves seeing the university as a means of gaining money, status, a career, success, and the finer things in life. For first-generation students, attending university and getting a degree is seen as a plausible way of increasing their job prospects and future income or a pathway to middle-class status (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Gall *et al.*, 2000; McNamee and Miller, 2004). These studies acknowledge a strong relationship between socio-economic factors and aspirations for university education (Bowden and Doughney, 2010; Laming, 2010). Second, in *personal-intellectual development*, emphasis is placed on personal growth, studying and learning, and understanding the complexities of life and the world. According to Gasser *et al.*, (2004) and Salami (2008), internal motivation or high self-determination has a significant impact on student educational aspirations (Gasser *et al.*, 2004; Salami, 2008). This statement is in agreement with the self-determination theory that suggests that individuals’ decisions to engage in academic life are determined by their positive attitudes towards education. Third is the *expectation-driven motivation*, where the student responds to expectations and pressures from family and friends to attend a university and be awarded a degree. This motivation implies performing behaviour that

fulfils other people's ambitions or gains some other external reward. It is also known as collectivist motivation, when students go to university to meet the expectations of the family. Children's educational aspirations and attainment are indirectly related to parents' educational expectations (Benner and Mistry, 2007; Marjoribanks, 2005; Mistry *et al.*, 2009; Kirk *et al.*, 2011). Conversely, their child's academic achievement may influence parents' educational expectations for their children (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2001). Fourth is *humanitarian motivation*, the concern is with helping the less fortunate, improving the world and changing the system. Finally, in *default motivation*, students report that they do not really know why they are attending university, except that they believe that doing so is better than pursuing other available options.

Internal and external factors contribute to some degree to the student decision-making process. The study by Voigt (2007) concludes that choices reflect individual 'aspirations, anxieties, personal attachments and other factors' (p. 90). There are multiple variables or factors affecting students' choices simultaneously and Voigt (2007) discloses four elements: options, probabilities, utilities, and finally information. The element of individual choice is influenced by social class. For the middle classes, entry to university is planned at an early stage and it is an educational decision parents want their child to take (Ball *et al.*, 2000). Parents are involved from the start by giving directions, nurturing the interest and potential of their children and arranging for private tuition. Normally they select universities by their reputation and prestige. The literature consistently shows that parental education is important in predicting children's university participation (Knighton and Mirza, 2002). This scenario is different for students from working-class backgrounds; as noted by Archer (2000, p. 5), 'the possibility of going to university was a "non-choice", it had never entered into their choice/decision-making horizon'. This is mainly because parents' educational backgrounds limit their ability to discuss and share information about higher education with their child.

The second element of individual choice relates to students' chances of entering their chosen university and course. In this context, Voigt (2007) used the term 'discrimination' to explain the limitations some students face because of their race and social class. For example, some students refuse to start a programme or attend a university dominated by a certain group, feeling they would not get along with them and would be

discriminated against, and that their chances of making a success would be much reduced in this competitive environment. For that reason they apply instead to the institution where they think they might get along. The anticipation of rejection from a prestigious university can be identified with school background (Connor, 2001) and ethnicity (Archer and Hutchings, 2003). In certain conditions, students who did not get their choice when applying to a particular university or course think it is because of discrimination and that they were treated unequally. At the same time, despite alleged socio-economic disadvantage, some students struggle to achieve the best option because of high self-believe and wanting the best for themselves. The process is described as achievable possibilities where, according to Power *et al.* (2003, p. 83), educational choice is ‘not only identifying ‘the best’ but having the confidence to regard it as within reach’.

The third factor that affects student choice is cost and utility. Studying for higher education qualifications involves expense, and this is perceived differently according to socio-economic level. For students from a middle-class background and higher income group, studying for qualifications on a specific course and universities is possible. Even though nowadays many higher education institutions provide student loans, there is the question of to what extent students are able to pay back the loan if they do not find a good job. Finally, the choices are made on the basis of information. Student information and knowledge about higher education is different according to family background and type of school attended (Ball *et al.*, 2002). Rapid developments in information technology have made students open to various kinds of information regarding higher education.

The literature above presents the overall issues about education-related self-perceptions or expectations and attitudes on what students would achieve from their desired goal. Apart from positive attainment, ideas of advantage and disadvantage feature very strongly in educational trajectory studies. Previous research on the working-class students suggests that they always face a number of difficulties. For instance, Redmond’s (2006) and Thayer’s (2000) studies found that these students are less prepared for post-secondary education, have limited access to information about higher education, and show high drop-out and failure rates. Students from working-class backgrounds are seen as lacking essential capital such as the knowledge, experiences, and resources to succeed within a particular field (Archer *et al.*, 2003; David *et al.*, 2008; Thomas and Quinn, 2006).

At the same time, some scholars demonstrate that individual achievement and persistence in education is linked to individual academic motivation such as self-efficacy, positive attribution, intrinsic motivation and goal orientations. These are able to overcome the effects of socio-economic status (Bowles and Gintis, 2002; Grabau, 2009). The main conclusion is that not every individual has the capacity to become successful or to benefit from education in the same way. An individual may have greater or lesser control over the resources available to them.

2.4.2 Family social and cultural capital

The concept of capital refers to material and non-material resources (Jaeger, 2007). Bourdieu (1986) categorized it as economic, cultural capital and social capital. Economic capital is resources that have monetary value such as income and savings (Bergerson, 2007). Cultural capital refers to the ‘credentials and cultural assets embodied in individuals and their families’ (Schuller, 2000, p. 51). Social capital is those resources and the value that can be generated from social networks through relationships between family and wider society (Reay, 2000). Indeed, some scholars, for example David *et al.* (2008), Evans *et al.* (2010), Marks (2009), Sullivan, (2007) and Thomas and Quinn (2006), have drawn on Bourdieu’s concepts of capital as a theoretical ground to frame how ‘class distinction’ affects and shapes parents’ and children’s attitudes towards education and future success. The overall discussion on capital concludes that people with some level of economic advantage are able to create their own distinct culture that is valued and accepted in society.

Parental socio-economic status is conventionally measured by educational and occupational status. According to Bodovski (2010), Lareau (2003) and Nisbett (2009), parents’ educational and occupational level is positively associated with the educational attainment of their children. Children born to certain favoured social groups or categories benefit from a home environment that encourages cognitive and social skill development through greater parental involvement. Parents in high socio-economic status households provide activities supportive of achievement and learning. For instance, values are transmitted through socialization process, resources such as having a large number of children’s books at home and computers, or through parents’ deliberate efforts such as involving their children in extra-curricular activities such as music and dance classes,

painting and athletic activities (Cheung Andersen, 2003). This cultural capital, embedded in children's knowledge, language, and behaviour, is known as 'habitus' (Dumais, 2002) and is increasingly identified in connection with investigations into children's educational outcomes (Cheadle, 2008; Dumais, 2002; Horvart, 2001; Richards *et al.*, 2009; Schoon, 2008; Sullivan, 2001; van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007).

Parental education is a more significant factor in children's educational success than parental employment or financial status (Knighton and Mirza, 2002; Thomas and Quinn, 2006). As a counter to this, Saunders (2002) concludes that 'able parents will be more likely to produce relatively able children (because of the genetic and environmental advantages that they can pass on), and these children will often, therefore, emulate the achievements of their parents' (pp. 560–561). Children who possess high levels of cultural capital are characterized by academic brilliance, high cognitive ability and high educational aspirations (Jaeger, 2009). They are already familiar with cultural codes, styles, and ways of speech and behaviour that facilitate their successful integration into social institutions such as school (Lareau, 2003). In the context of Malaysia, a study by Vellymalay (2012) suggests that parents with high socio-economic status are deeply involved in their child's education at home. The study supports the idea that there is a positive relationship between parents' socio-economic status and parents' involvement in their child's education.

Furthermore, a child whose parents experienced higher education normally grows up with access to more college-related cultural capital and knowledge about university, and has clearer and more systematic educational plans (Ball *et al.*, 2002; Greenbank, 2007; Laming, 2010; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011). In this regard, parental influence has been cited as 'one of the best predictors of post-secondary educational aspirations' (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006, p. 536), in particular parental experience of higher education (Reay *et al.*, 2001). For instance, the study by Brooks (2003) of 15 young people's higher educational decisions found that the work context of their parents facilitated their knowledge of the nature of specific higher education subjects or institutions. This study also found a relationship between children's early academic achievement and how they 'identified themselves as high achievers' (Brooks, 2003, p. 288).

Children from advantaged backgrounds are able to make the right decisions about the universities and courses they would like to attend. These students' achievements are closely linked to their parents' significant role: giving advice in choosing subjects, helping to obtain good grades in school and public examinations, and in guiding them to choose a marketable degree course at a well-known university (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Ball *et al.*, 2002; Brooks, 2003; Thomas and Quinn, 2006). In this context, Goldthorpe (2000) explains that the primary concern of parents is to secure their social class and make further improvement.

Lack of the kind of cultural capital possessed by upper- and middle-class families is among the most well-known reasons that students from poorer backgrounds are so much less likely to participate in higher education (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Gibbons and Vignoles, 2009; McMillan and Western, 2000). What is more important for working-class parents is providing basic necessities such as clothing, food and housing (Lareau, 2000). Although they may want their children to pursue higher education, their influence could be considered weaker because they have limited financial and social resources, and a lack of first-hand knowledge of higher education (concerning the teaching quality or the rank of the university) that limits their capacity to facilitate higher education planning (Ceja, 2006; Oliverez and Tierney, 2005; Pugsley and Coffey, 2002; Thayer, 2000). In Malaysia, very few studies paid attention to cultural capital in the higher education decision. Earlier research concerning the association between students' family socio-economic status and home environment with student performance in mathematics reveals that Chinese students from high social class families achieved high grades (Lim and Salleh, 2002; Lim, 2003). Another finding from Hassan and Rasiah (2011) was that parents with higher socio-economic status tended to spend more on their children's education. Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that children from well-educated families receive more socio-economic, psychological and social support for educational success.

Increasing attention from the Malaysian government to improving the educational achievement of rural students and to reduce the performance gap between social classes is crucial to counteract the parental socio-economic background factor. Significant improvements in primary and secondary education have a major impact on student achievement. Educational expansion over the past few decades has tended to equalize

education opportunities for students from high and low social groups. The results of the studies by Hassan and Rasiah (2011) and Pong (1999) stress the continuing significance of the Malaysian government's preferential policy, giving favourable treatment to underprivileged Malays, as a fundamental factor in ameliorating family socio-economic effects. Providing financial assistance such as subsidies and scholarship for high achievers from low socio-class backgrounds has significantly enhanced the access to higher education.

Parents of first-generation students must rely on other individuals in the students' school or community network to facilitate the process (Lange and Stone, 2001). This relates to social networks in the context of intergenerational relationship such as relatives, friends and extra-familial adults (Shah *et al.*, 2011). Individuals interact with people around them, encountering people with other expectations and who hold different beliefs, and begin to think and act in new ways. This social environment may stimulate students' intellectual engagement and cognitive growth. High occupational success and advanced degrees awarded to family members or others could be perceived as a motivation for parents to encourage their child into higher education, or the child to take it as self-motivation. This accords with the study by Ituma and Simpson (2006) that identified the influence of extended family on the educational and career aspirations of Nigerian youths. For students, having siblings go on to higher education or still studying gives them an advantage in terms of knowledge about what to expect from university, and information about courses and which university to attend.

The dominant discourse emerging from educational research tends to over-emphasize the disadvantages of student with low cultural capital when competing with the academic structure and to de-emphasize other aspects of social reality. There has been less work on how factors like parental beliefs such as achievement expectations or efficacy might function as links between socio-economic status and achievement outcomes. For instance, parental encouragement, expectation and involvement in the child's education can compensate for disadvantages associated with social class background (Kirk *et al.*, 2011; Saenz *et al.*, 2007). Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999, p. 24) see parental encouragement as 'the frequency of discussions between parents and students about parents' expectations, hopes, and dreams for their children'. Some scholars cite parental

interest, expectation, trustworthiness, information exchange and norms as forms of social capital (Pong, Hao and Gardner, 2005).

The concept of social capital refers to the resources that can be inculcated in the home, accessed through social relations, school and community. Social capital plays a significant role in promoting academic achievement (Coleman, 1994; McNeal, 1999) and enhancing educational aspiration of children and youth (Muller and Ellison, 2001; Pribesh and Downey, 1999). Coleman (1994) defines social capital as:

[T]he set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organisations and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person. (Coleman, 1994, p. 300, cited in Schuller *et al.*, 2001, p. 6)

Research on parents echoes findings concerning families' resilience by identifying their habits, priorities, belief systems and values that help to overcome adversity. According to Simon, Murphy and Smith (2005), families' determination to overcome their difficulties makes them feel strengthened and more confident. Thus, children of poor but resilient families are capable of accomplishing both academic and social-psychological achievements despite the lack of economic resources in their homes (Orthner *et al.*, 2004). This is supported by the finding of McCarron and Inkelas (2006) of a positive relationship between parental involvement and educational aspirations of first-generation students. Parent-child communication, as a form of home-based involvement, is beneficial to children's success if it focuses on school matters (Epstein and Sheldon, 2006).

The transmission of these valuable resources differs by racial or ethnic groups' norms and values (Shah *et al.*, 2011). Asian parents in general expect much from their child's education, achievement and ambition that explains the high achievement of Asian children. For example, several studies (Cheng and Straks, 2002; Desimone, 1999; Fan, 2001; Hussain and Bagguley, 2007; Modood, 2004; Pong, Hao, and Gardner, 2005) find that Asian parents have higher educational expectations for their children, and invest more financially. This relates to 'cultural' explanations and orientations embedded within a society towards education. For example, in a Chinese culture education is seen as a channel for upward mobility. Obtaining an advanced qualification is something that all parents aim for, regardless of socio-economic background (Wong, 2007). University education is perceived as an important factor in 'prestige and prosperity', thus Chinese families exert

considerable pressure to promote their child's academic success. Parents set high standards for their children, for example, in Hong Kong many middle-class parents believe that their children need at least a Bachelor's degree if they are not to be disadvantaged in the future labour market (Wong, 2007).

Certain knowledge and behaviours valued and rewarded in educational institutions are inherited from the family and its social structures. However, such values are not held by every family, so individuals have to obtain theirs from other resources, for example school. Thus the following section will further explore institutional factors in student higher education decisions.

2.4.3 Schooling experience

Families' social class is not the sole factor behind individual educational attainment. Studies have pointed to the importance of the educational institution as the driving force to overcome economic disparities. Institutional habitus explains the way the social class composition of an organization such as a school influences an individual's behaviour (Reay *et al.*, 2001, 2005). The following discussion will outline existing research on the influence of school context on the success of transition for first-generation students from school to university.

As noted by Benbenishty and Astor (2005), school is at the centre of a child's ecological system and is perceived to be the most influential in the social context as a predictor of development. Early studies by Becker (1962) have proven educational institutions cultivate human capital in terms of skills, knowledge, and strategies that boost individual productivity. Educational research has demonstrated that positive schooling environments have a major influence for students who come from socio-economically disadvantaged families (Younger and Warrington, 2009). Educational institutions are a powerful contextual factor that can bridge the disadvantage faced by a certain group of students by offering access to educational, social and cultural capital, and therefore may be considered as offering students access to educational and social capital (Harris *et al.*, 2002; Kubitschek and Hallinan, 1998; Morgan and Sorenson, 1999), developed from the interaction of student and teacher and among pupils in school.

In-school factors such as school-related tasks, interpersonal relationships and the cultural adaptation processes they experience at school help to develop better academic literacy and personal competence. These have a significant effect on higher education participation and success (Antikainen and Huusko, 2008; Gogard, 2012; Shulruf *et al.*, 2008). A positive school culture demonstrates significant enhancement of students' achievement and strengthening of student efficacy in their potential for success, and their potential to continue their studies at higher level (Conley, 2008; Hoy and Miske, 2005; Schilling and Schilling, 1999; Younger and Warrington, 2009).

To illustrate the connection between school and university education, Engberg and Wolniak (2009) note the importance of activities at high school in facilitating students to enter college. High school is where a student is exposed to early expectations about the tacit knowledge required at university level. As stated by Conley (2008), 'The likelihood that students will make a successful transition to the college environment is often a function of their readiness—the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped them for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college' (p. 24). According to Conley, the key to making a successful transition is 'student readiness' and this is organized around four key components: key cognitive; key content; academic behaviours; and contextual skills and awareness. Concept readiness, invariably more than the qualifications students use to achieve entry to university or their course, and their skills and the knowledge and personal competence are major contributions to adjusting to the new environment (Cline *et al.*, 2007; Wyer, 2005).

Apart from its main function in delivering the curriculum, school is a social organization that provides opportunities for social interaction. Additionally, peers represent a set of factors with a direct impact on higher education aspirations among school students. The environment of the classroom with other students intent on pursuing their studies to higher education increases the likelihood that they, too, will aspire to attend university (Tierney and Colyar, 2005). Discussion with peers about educational and career aspirations stimulates and increases university-going behaviours among students. Extra-curricular activities such as academic clubs, sports, performance arts and language are other factors positively affecting student achievement (Grolnick *et al.*, 2007; Shulruf *et al.*, 2008). A

range of activities offered by a school not only increases student involvement but establishes social networks between peers and increases the student competence level.

Furthermore, school is considered a relevant resource for families and students seeking a post-secondary educational opportunity. For young people with no family tradition or experience of higher education, teachers and counsellors at school are importance sources of higher education-related information such as course details, the application process, admission criteria and financial advice (Dyke *et al.*, 2008; Howard, 2003; Reay *et al.*, 2005). The power of teachers and counsellors when mentoring and advising should not be underestimated. Teachers serve as role models and their effects on student success are significant (Elias and Haynes, 2008; Beam *et al.*, 2002; Roeser *et al.*, 2000). In particular, they have a positive effect on adolescents' educational success, especially among disadvantaged students (Choi and Lemberger, 2010).

Research on the effects of school characteristics and teacher quality on student academic achievement at the primary and secondary level are comparatively greater. This led to conclusion that the predominant influence on student learning, in particular for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, is the quality of the schools and teachers to which students are exposed.

2.5 The First-Year Undergraduate Experience

The first year at university is situated within the broad conception of student experience. The idea of early years' experience of university has featured strongly in the educational priorities of many higher education systems around the world, because this is a time when most adjustment is needed (Gall *et al.*, 2000; Harvey, 2006; Krause and Coates, 2008; McInnis, 2001; Reason *et al.*, 2006; Tumen, 2008; Woosley, 2003; Yorke and Longden, 2008). According to Pitkethly and Prosser (2001), the first year is the key to many students' experience of and success in higher education. The first year or transitional period is best exemplified as a time that bridges the gap between students' previous identities and the new learning context. According to Briggs, Clark and Hall (2012, p. 2), 'transition involves learners creating for themselves a new identity as higher education students'.

The need to assist students to make meaningful connections to the social and academic demand of university life is considered to be crucial (Barefoot *et al.*, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008; Kuh *et al.*, 2008; McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001; Pascarella, 2006; Reason *et al.*, 2006, Upcraft *et al.*, 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Zepke and Leach, 2006). This is partly explained by the view that the first year at university is a significant time for students to develop the attitudes, behaviour, skills and knowledge that subsequently determine their overall assimilation into higher education (Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Krause and Coates, 2008; McInnis, 2001; Roe, 2005; Tumen *et al.*, 2008; Reason *et al.*, 2006; Upcraft *et al.*, 2005). A fundamental concern is how to integrate new students effectively into their new learning environment. As mentioned by Tinto (2002), the ‘first year of college should be understood as a developmental year in which new students acquire the skills, dispositions, and norms needed to learn and grow throughout the college years’ (p. 7).

The first year is a period when students are said to be ‘most vulnerable’ (McInnis, 2001). For that reason, it is always emphasized in the literature that students must be inspired, supported and developed in their sense of belonging and directed towards their goals and successes. This is because students’ initial experiences have an impact on the long-term process of cultural, social and academic assimilation into the world of higher education (Gall *et al.*, 2000; Harvey, 2006; Krause and Coates, 2008; McInnis, 2001; Tumen, 2008; Woosley, 2003; Yorke and Longden, 2008). As stated by Reason *et al.* (2006), the first year in university is the ‘foundation on which their transition their subsequent academic success and persistence rest’.

This is also considered to be the year in which students often become disengaged and decide to leave (Yorke and Longden, 2008). For example, in North America approximately 20–25 per cent of students entering university leave after their first year, while an additional 20–30 per cent leave by the end of their second year (Grayson and Grayson, 2003). Wintre *et al.* (2009), for example, estimate that only 60 per cent of students entering university complete their degrees. In the UK, for instance, reports on student drop-out rates range from 22 per cent to 40 per cent (Wintre *et al.*, 2009). Encouraging persistence and improving retention rates have become prime concerns in many higher education institutions worldwide (Harvey *et al.*, 2006; Krause *et al.*, 2008;

Kuh *et al.*, 2008; Prescott and Simpson, 2004; Tumen, 2008; Yazedjian *et al.*, 2008). Student outcomes are perceived as the measure of an institution's success in managing transition, and high attrition rates will damage its reputation and cause a decline in public funding.

Research into the first-year transition process identifies several factors behind this problem, such as: inability to cope with the demands of the programme; being unhappy with the social environment, or the location and environment; dissatisfaction with institutional resourcing; and problems with finance (Bojuwoye, 2002; Davies and Elias, 2003; Yorke, 1999; York and Longden, 2008). In Australia, a study by Pargetter (2000) identifies a number of reasons why some students experience 'an unhappy first year', including: they cannot relate to the course or institution and drop out or fail and leave (15%); they do not have a successful first year of study, passing at least 75 per cent of their units (about 30–40%); they do not have a level of performance comparable to the level of performance required at their school (70–80%); or they succeed academically, but are unhappy personally. Apart from withdrawing, other consequences of failing to adapt to learning in university are: lack of connectedness and involvement (Perry and Allard, 2003), unhappiness and dissatisfaction (Yorke and Longden, 2008), loneliness (Pargetter, 2000), isolation (Lawrence, 2001) and alienation (Mann, 2001). Wingate (2007) strongly believes the reasons for students leaving are a 'lack of preparation for and understanding of the type learning that is required' (p. 392). Level of preparedness and readiness can influence student conceptions of teaching and learning at university; level of engagement, development of identity and social networks (Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Pittman and Richmond, 2008; Yorke and Longden, 2008).

In the Malaysian context, the dramatic changes in higher education and impact on to the student experience are beginning to receive steady attention. Anecdotally, concerns are expressed about challenges confronted by first-year students when they enter institutions of higher learning. For example, published papers on issues related to transition and the experiences of students suggest that students, especially those in their first year, face an adjustment problem in this transitional period. For example, Elias *et al.* (2010) state that students' knowledge of university in terms of academic and other aspects of university life is still undeveloped. This can be identified from several aspects such as lack

of autonomy (Thang, 2009; Thang and Alias, 2007); lack of skills (Abdullah *et al.*, 2009; Elias *et al.* 2009; Nordin *et al.*, 2009); and lack of engagement (Azman *et al.*, 2003). This continues after a student enters the second year, and Nordin *et al.* (2009) reveal findings that indicate that many university students in their second year do not do well in terms of coping and adjusting to the demands and challenges of university life. These students seem to have difficulties in their studies, personal, emotional, social and financial affairs. It was found that students had difficulty in coping with the academic workload. According to Abdullah *et al.* (2009), throughout the first semester a student's academic achievement correlates with their personal emotional adjustment.

In sum, the first year is a significant transition point, one that may affect the development of values, attitudes, and approaches to learning that will persist throughout their university experience. The ability of students to adapt and change is central to a successful transition in their first year. It also suggests that the ability to cope with the changes differs greatly between individuals, depending on their backgrounds. The literature below focuses on number of matters framing student experience in the first year. It aims to identify the aspects of transition chiefly contributing to differences in levels of transition difficulty and to advance our understanding of the transition process experienced by first-generation students.

2.5.1 Socio-cultural incongruence

The transition process cannot be contextualized in a universal sense; James *et al.* (2010) emphasize the need to determine the experience of particular student subgroups, given that 'the student experience varies greatly according to students' backgrounds' (p. 8). Discussion around the issues of student socio-economic backgrounds has indicated that there are certain conditions of individual backgrounds that guide the transition experience. Resource deficiency (Pascarella *et al.*, 2004; Warburton *et al.*, 2001), measured by economic (e.g. financial) or academic (e.g. preparation) means, were common factors influencing the participation and involvement of the student. These discouraging circumstances put them at a disadvantage from the start (Lum, 2008).

Devlin (2011) proposes a concept of 'socio-cultural incongruence' to explain 'the differences in cultural and social capital between students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and the high socio-economic status of the institutions in which they study' (p.

2). According to Lawrence (2005), not every student has the ability to understand university discourse. In this context, the system is based on certain values and standards that are not always made explicit. However, for those from privileged backgrounds those assumptions, values and expectations are embedded in their daily living (Devlin, 2012). They have what Margolis *et al.* (2001) refer to as a collection of cultural and social resources, and familiarity with ‘particular types of knowledge, ways of speaking, styles, meanings, dispositions and world views’ (p. 8) that helps them to feel comfortable at university. First-generation students normally lack the resources to understand ‘the rules of the game’. James and Jenkins (2010) agree that first-year students from low socio-economic backgrounds felt that they found it more difficult than their peers to comprehend material and adjust to teaching styles within the university environment.

Despite the common deficit conception of first-generation students, some studies contest the stereotypical view that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have more difficulty adapting to university life because of the differences in values (Greenbank, 2006). For example, a study by Griffin (2006) documenting the experiences of high-achieving African-American first-year students shows their able performance and high level of motivation academically relate to high levels of autonomy and independence. Based on this study, Griffin (2006) concludes that strong internal motivations are driving factors; these students were not dependent on their parents, peers or the institution to push them towards academic excellence. Few other studies have examined first-generation student achievement, but the study by Speirs and Rinker (2006), for example, suggests that an emerging professional identity and independence and a positive work attitude influenced their achievement at college. First-generation students are more focused on goal attainment and more motivated to complete their degree (Hicks and Dennis, 2005), representing positive adaptation when students have clear goals (Pike and Kuh, 2005).

As discussed above, information on student backgrounds provides a means to understand how individuals’ social positioning interacts with the context of transition to the new academic field.

2.5.2 Mastering student role

Direct entrants from school have to adapt and change their ways of learning, adapt to the changing needs of the new learning context, with different subjects, learning approaches and teaching styles.

2.4.2.1 Lack of skills and experience

The transition to a self-regulated learning model demands that students are independent and self-directed learners (Naumann *et al.*, 2003; Stephens *et al.*, 2012). This ‘self-regulating behaviour’ learning context is challenging for first-generation students because they have a limited understanding of university culture. Naumann *et al.* (2003) list many aspects that need adjustment to accommodate the process within the new culture: intrinsic goal orientation, task values, expectancy for success beliefs, control beliefs, self-efficacy, study strategies, goal setting, seeking assistance from others and time management. Of these factors, participants in Byrd and MacDonald’s (2005) study agreed that time management is one of the most critical skills needed for success.

The academic culture of the university differs from the structured learning experience of the school setting. Stress in adjusting to the new teaching and learning environment has typically been documented as ‘learning shock’ (Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Christies *et al.*, 2008). Differences in terms of academic rigour, academic adaptation and academic workload could have an effect on students’ ability to succeed in the first year of university. The skills cultivated in secondary school, or more precisely at sixth-form level, do not equate to the level of skills and independent learning required at university. Results from the study suggest that new students lack effective oral, writing and communication skills. More accurately, findings by Kariuki (2006) specify general problems confronting university students: (i) understanding the English language used in a textbook; (ii) understanding their academic work; (iii) expressing themselves clearly in English; (iv) making friends; and (v) taking notes in class. A study by Christie *et al.* (2011) on a group of students who took direct entry to the second or third year of a degree programme at university found that students adapt successfully into the new learning environment when they understood ‘what independent learning entails’ and who are ‘good time managers’.

Adriana (2006) observes that students are passive subjects in the educational process, maybe because this is the system with which students are familiar from primary

and secondary level (Michaelowa, 2007) and responsible for their success in gaining admission to university, yet not the process of learning. Student approaches to learning and their perception of the learning environment relate to prior experiences of learning to make sense of their experiences in higher education: conceptions of learning, motivation and self-efficacy (Ashwin and Trigwell, 2012). Normally, students do not bridge the gap between school and university quickly or effectively (Lowe, 2003). Therefore first-year students are classified as 'poorly prepared for higher education': they lack basic skills, fail to adjust to the unfamiliar approaches to learning and teaching, feel uncertain in an unfamiliar academic discipline, face different types of assessments; and feel reluctant to ask for help from lecturers and peers (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Bojuwoye, 2002).

At the same time, students will take their past performance as a benchmark for the learning they experience at university. The relationship between entry qualifications and students' first-year experiences is presented from two different viewpoints. In regard to this, McKenzie and Gow (2004) and Lowe and Cook (2003) agree that academic qualification is the most useful indicator of success for school leavers, while Madigan (2006), and van Rooyen *et al.* (2006) regard previous relevant studies or experiences as useful predictors of academic performance. Conversely, a recent study by Houston *et al.* (2007) suggests that entry qualifications are not a predictor of student performance except where this is mediated by other factors, such as course workload and the subject discipline. This is also agreed by Casidy (2011): prior academic achievement is not a valuable factor to explain academic achievement in university. For example, a study by Bone and Reid (2011) states that students with high marks in Biology at school level do not maintain their performance in the subject at university, and thus previous achievement is not an accurate predictor within the context of student achievement in the first year. However, students who perform well academically in the first year have more confidence to persist into the second year, and take more responsibility for their studies (Gifford *et al.*, 2006).

A cultural mismatch experienced by first-generation students in university has a significant effect on their engagement level. As explained by Stephens *et al.* (2012), individual performance is contingent on whether people experience a match or a mismatch between their own cultural norms and those institutionalized in a given setting. In this context, Fulmer *et al.* (2010) emphasize the importance of the person-culture match: when

a given context is self-relevant, students will experience greater physical well-being, be academically more engaged and perform better.

Furthermore, students face difficulties in engaging with independent study with less support from their instructor (Brady and Allingham, 2007). McCarthy and Kuh (2006), in a large study on American high school students, concluded that a serious ‘mismatch’ existed between the students’ learning habits and the habits that would be expected of them at university. This was also supported by Ternel’s (2000) findings. Apart from that, the university’s expectation of students’ to ‘adjust immediately’ to a different style of teaching and learning makes the process more stressful (Hagen and Macdonald, 2000). At the same time, students perceive that lecturers have a lack of understanding about what they are going through in making the transition to tertiary education.

2.4.2.2 Inflated expectations

Expectations are the result of the interaction of experiences with expected environment (Olson *et al.*, 1996); it means past experiences create expectations of what will happen in future. Furthermore, ‘expectations may also reflect what we expect to experience based on what others have experienced. In this sense, expectations are based not only on similar direct experiences but also on what we have learned from the experiences of others’ (Cole *et al.*, 2009, p. 57). The expectations are also influenced by several attributes such previous academic achievement, family socio-economic and educational background, demographical profiles, status as being of the first generation in their family to attend university and exposure to information regarding university (Forste *et al.*, 2004; Pike and Kuh, 2005).

Student expectation is related to the readiness concept. ‘The likelihood that students will make a successful transition to the college environment is often a function of their readiness—the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped them for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college’ (Conley, 2008, p. 24). It is stated that students who have developed appropriate expectations are better prepared for university and present more positive experiences in their transition from school to university. A study by Jackson *et al.* (2000) into the relationship between student expectations and university adjustment reveals that students who possess positive expectations are likely to adjust more successfully to university. According to Jackson *et*

al. (2000, p. 2101), ‘expectancies are of fundamental importance to adjustment, because our expectations about events often influence how we feel about and understand events, and how we choose to respond to them’.

Extensive research on first-year undergraduates indicates that there is a significant mismatch between student expectations and the actual experiences of university life. For example, according to Smith and Wertlieb (2005), the academic and social expectations of many first-year students were typically contradictory of what they actually experienced during their first year of college. Their expectations are often ‘unrealistic’ since they are founded in a secondary school experience that had often not prepared them for higher education (Cook, 2009, p. 26). This is related to the concept of the ‘freshman myth’ introduced by Stren (1966, cited in Pancer *et al.*, 2000, p. 39), which explains that students’ expectations are often not realized. Normally the encounter is a stressful and challenging experience in their first weeks and months of university, and not entirely what students had anticipated. Their unrealistic expectations can be a cause of considerable disappointment, consistently relating to decreased levels of well-being, performance and motivation, and some will withdraw from their studies. As a result, some students develop new expectations when their previous expectations do not support their current experience in higher education.

2.6 Conceptual Framework for this Study

The transition from the context of the school to the context of the university is a significant change. A student will experience new levels of responsibility, change of support, new academic demands, emotional stress and what some have termed ‘transition shock’. Being a student at university in the first year means a period of development of knowledge and skills, and it is also a critical time for the development of a professional identity. The newcomers meet norms and values that influence their work practice, behaviour and perception of themselves. There is a need for a more complete understanding of how this year influences the transition so that the positive aspects can be enhanced and any negative aspects can be diminished. The experience of first-generation students on the passage to university requires an understanding of where the first-generation students are coming from and how they engaged with their first-year experience. The research used three stages

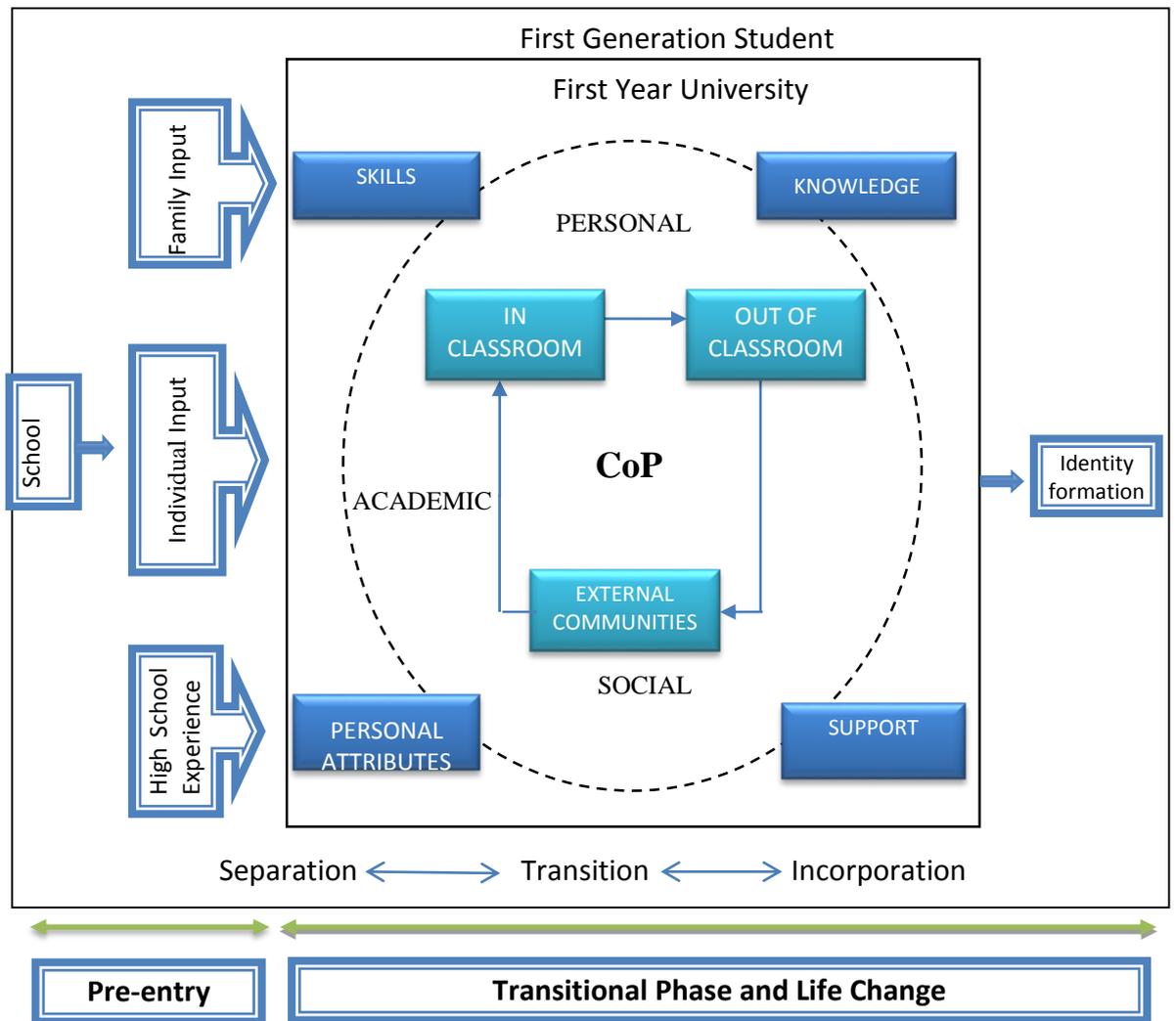
of transition (separation, transition and incorporation) to help understand the ways in which first-generation students make their transition from sixth-form to university.

The conceptual model in Figure 2.1 offers a graphical representation to guide the study of transition to university. Focus is initially on first-generation students starting at university for the first time. Considering this, the conceptual framework of this study describes how the complex interactions of multiple factors interact to influence the transition process of first-generation students during their first year. This model is based on the premise that understanding development and learning outcomes is a dynamic interplay between the individual and environmental context.

As students move to university they bring a set of values, norms and beliefs related to their home culture that will be used as reference points while they work out how to function in this new environment. Pre-entry individual characteristics outlined in the literature review such as parental educational attainment, prior educational experiences, sibling influence, intergenerational patterns and level of motivation influence the decision to enter university and the effects on their survival and performance in first year. They have with them experiences, values, knowledge, and skills and these may influence the way they experience learning at university.

The shifts that student experience, which this research terms 'transitions', are interactions between individuals and communities. The complexities of process were discussed from two potential patterns. In the first instance, the literature suggests that students who enter with resources, knowledge and skills most suited to the environment are more likely to succeed. In contrast, social realist theory points out that social individuals are active agents in their own development and can adapt themselves to the environment. In this context, this study is particularly interested in how socio-economic factors influence the transition process and learning growth process of first-generation students. Therefore, the model posits that student background variables might influence and combine with perceptions of the educational environment influencing the quality of effort or involvement.

Figure 2.1: A Conceptual Model



Adapting to the new academic and social environment is critical. Take the Lave and Wenger concept of learning that suggests that the centrality of participation is a transformative process, resulting from complex interactions between various elements such as academics and peers that formed students' learning identity. This model implies that development in this area is primarily a function of student engagement in the CoPs (e.g. the courses taken, classroom activities, academic task) and the students' out-of-class activities.

Integrating both theories, the relationship between the individual and society is one where students are not viewed as separated from social world but as a part of it. It is a process of participants' involvement with various communities in terms of their

interactions with peers, academic staff and with the structure of the university that extends to the external factors.

The interconnection between these elements illustrated in Figure 2.1 shows that the transition experience of the first-generation student is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, hence this model emphasizes the need to integrate the groups of factors in the most appropriate way for the process to be identified.

2.7 Summary

Following the aforementioned theoretic patterns, transition to higher education cannot be defined as a one-way process, but by a number of preconditions in the context of the discussion such the people; the context and also the social process. Thus, this section of this chapter consists of pre- and post- factors. In the first section, pre-entry factors such as individual personal attributes, family backgrounds, and their schooling experience affecting student transition were discussed. First-generation SES limits the individual economic and cultural capital necessary for a smooth transition to university. However, the value the student and parents place on education is high. This section concludes that the cultural capital students accumulate at home and school affects their adjustment process at university. In the second section, the challenges first-generation students face in their first year at university are discussed. The literature review identified the extent to which student personal backgrounds interact with the structural context and how the structural context framed experience as a university student in the critical stage of the first year. In the final sections of this chapter, the researcher adopts realist social theory and situated learning's theoretical views to explore the student adjustment process. Studying the interaction between individual and the university enables the researcher to understand better how students develop relationships with the CoP.

After reviewing the considerable number of research articles, it is clear that research on student transition is based in the western context and background. Only a few studies have explored transition issues among first-year students in Malaysia and none have identified specifically the experiences of first-generation students. Therefore, this study is conducted in the hope of contributing to the research on this topic in Malaysia. As far as the researcher is aware, no study has used longitudinal research methodology to study students' lived experience of transition into university, which in itself is a

contribution to education and the literature. For this reason there is a definite and urgent need for a study of this nature.

In the next chapter, case study research as the methodology of choice for the research is explored. An overview of case study research, an analysis of its use and a rationale for its appropriateness for the investigation of first-generation first year transition experience is provided.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with methodological issues and explores the approaches adopted in this study. The methodological approach taken in this research is congruent with the purpose of this study to explore the views, expectations and experiences of first-generation students with regard to their decision to enter the university and their experience of the teaching and learning process in their first year. In seeking to explore the transition from familiar into unfamiliar environment, a particular focus is the extent to which student experiences at university reflect or differ from SES.

The objective of the study decided the researcher that the research methodology should be that most likely to achieve depth in the subjective experiences of the students as they engaged with their transitional contexts. To address this, a qualitative study was employed that allowed for rich and descriptive detail of the transition experiences of this group of students. The investigation began by discussing the researcher's interpretivist position and consequent choice of a qualitative approach. The next section discusses the rationale for the research design and describes the case study as an appropriate research design to achieve the research project's aims and objectives. The complexity of the case study is explained, discussed and justified. The chapter then outlines the methods of data collection used in case study research and the processes of interviewing and journal writing, and next the techniques of analysis are discussed. Finally, the chapter discusses the study's quality criteria and ethical considerations pertaining to data collection and relevant to this research.

3.2 Research Paradigms

Research in general is an inquiry process designed to find responses to worthwhile questions by means of a systematic and scientific approach (Welman and Kruger, 2002). The aim of any research is to simplify reality, allowing a number of interrelated variables to be mapped showing their overall effect. According to Neuman (2003), research is a way of going about finding answers to questions. A critical step in undertaking research is the selection of an appropriate paradigm within which to conduct the research.

A research paradigm is a theoretical framework comprising a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that act as a guide to the researcher conducting a study (Creswell, 1994; Healy and Perry, 2000). For Patton (1990), a paradigm is ‘a worldview, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world’ (p. 37). This implies that a paradigm serves as a framework for how research should be conducted to ascertain truths. It acts as a theoretical basis for selecting possible instruments and methods for the research project. Guba and Lincoln (1994, pp. 18–27) identify four paradigms that researchers can use to guide and develop their research. These are (a) positivism; (b) post-positivism or realism; (c) critical theory; and (d) constructivism. Each of these will lead into different research perspectives. The selected paradigm, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), is based upon the researcher’s assumptions, perceptions and beliefs about the nature of reality and how knowledge is accessed.

In each research paradigm there are philosophical approaches that researchers must take into account when determining the effective way to conduct their research. This explained through ontological, epistemological and methodological positions. Each philosophical assumption asks a particular question about the kind of research that will be conducted and involves a specific approach or strategy that the researcher will employ to study the subject. The following discussion examines the ontological, epistemological and methodological approach used to guide this research.

3.2.1 Ontological question

Ontology is concerned with the nature of fundamental existence in the world. Blaikie (2000) defines it as ‘claims or assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other’ (p. 8). The attentions are on the problems that relate to the matters of ‘real existence’. According to Creswell (2007), an ontological stance implies that when researchers study individuals, they ‘conduct a study with the intent of reporting... multiple realities’—meaning that each individual studied has a different perspective on reality and these realities are then described by the researchers in detail and with evidence of those different perspectives (p. 19). Hence reality is seen as absolute and value-free and the way to discover it is through the experience of the individual themselves. It can range from positivism position, a view that ‘objects have an existence independent of the knower’

(Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 7). Neuman (2003) refers to this as a ‘what you see is what you get’ position. On the other hand, ontological position of interpretivism view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 110).

The focus of this research is on transition and change, not only physical, from one to another educational system, but also emotionally. It was important that the methods used to gather information about the transition should capture the subjective meaning of the participants. It could then explore the relationships between their previous life histories and their current role as university students to the key areas of teaching and learning in university and their engagement with other members of the campus community.

Considering the different views on what constructs reality now leads to other questions on how that reality is measured, and what constitutes that reality. This may be answered by looking at the epistemology of the research.

3.2.2 Epistemological question

Linked to ontology and its concerns about ‘the study of being’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 10), epistemology is concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 7). Epistemological assumptions are concerned with how knowledge can be created, attained and communicated, and in other words tries to understand *what it means to know*. Epistemology provides a philosophical background for deciding what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and adequate. As Guba and Lincoln (1998, p. 201) explain, epistemology questions ‘the nature of the relationship between the would-be-knower and what can be known’.

In this sense, assumptions about knowledge can be understood from the positivism standpoint, which claims that knowledge of the world is relatively fixed, based on logical discovery, and only phenomena that are observable and measurable may be claimed as knowledge (Collis and Hussey, 2003). In contrast, the interpretivism epistemology believed reality is constructed in and from interaction between humans and their worlds and is developed and transmitted in a social context (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). In this sense, to understand the process and knowledge presented by the participants, the researcher needs to get ‘inside’ the participant’s world (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The first-generation students in this study have a different socio-cultural background that makes them

experience a particular ‘phenomenon’ in a particular way. Maybe the perceptions and realities the first-generation students face in Malaysia differ from the general understanding of first-generation students. Therefore, as Crotty (1998) said, ‘only through dialog can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent’ (p. 73). Thus the role of the researcher is important, especially to discover the phenomenon by interpreting the meaning of the subject of the research.

3.2.3 Methodological question

Methodology is the strategy or plan of action that lies behind the choice of particular ontological and epistemological positions adopted in the research. It justifies which methods are appropriate to answer the specific questions and subject matter. As claimed by Crotty (1998, p. 3), it is about decisions on how to conduct research: ‘strategy, plan of action, process or design’. It deals with the ‘logic of enquiry, of how new knowledge is generated and justified’ (Blaikie, 2008, p. 8). There are differences between ‘methodology’ and ‘methods’, even though the two are frequently interchangeable (Hussey and Hussey, 1997). Silverman (1993, p. 1) suggests that ‘methodology’ identifies ‘a general approach to studying research topics’, whereas ‘method’ refers to ‘a specific research technique’.

In reviewing the literature regarding students’ experiences, there are differences regarding the methods that researchers have used to conceptualize students’ perceptions of transition and the influence of background. The selection of the research methodology is down to a choice of two primary alternatives: a normative (positivist) and interpretive (anti-positivist), or quantitative and qualitative (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Creswell, 2003).

The positivist research paradigm underpins quantitative methodology’s emphasis on measuring variables and testing hypotheses linked to general causal explanations. For example, the studies employed quantitative methods (Abdullah *et al.*, 2009; Horn and Nunez, 2000; Larose and Boivin, 1998; Cook and Leckey, 1999; Sander *et al.*, 2002). The data collection techniques focus on gathering hard data in the form of figures, to enable evidence to be presented in quantitative form (Neuman, 2003; Sarantakos, 2005). In contrast, qualitative methodology reflects the importance of participants’ perspectives (Cresswell, 1998; Marshall and Rosmann, 1999; Patton, 2002). The aim is to ‘capture lived experiences of the social world and the meanings people give these experiences from their

own perspective' (Corti and Thompson, 2004, p. 326). In recent years the need for a more substantive research using qualitative approaches that enable students to have a voice has been widely recognized (Grayson, 2003; 2010, Jehangir, 2010; Wentworth and Peterson, 2001; Roe, 2005; Thompson, 2008). As Merriam (2000) clarifies, 'If you want to understand a phenomenon, uncover the meaning a situation has for those involved, or delineate process (how things happen), then a qualitative design would be most appropriate' (p. 11). Qualitative research relies heavily on the words and stories people tell researchers and how they make meaning of their experiences (Bolle *et al.*, 2007). Meaning is the 'essential concern' of qualitative research, with the intention of exploring ways in which people 'make sense out of their lives' (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). In this type of research, the researcher is a primary instrument of data collection and findings emerge from the interactions between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). In this case the researcher is the investigator an interpreter of participants' experiences, opinions, emotions and feelings.

A number of studies have been conducted to provide insights concerning first-year students in selected universities in Malaysia (Azman, 2010; Elias *et al.*, 2010; Nordin *et al.*, 2009). Despite the knowledge gained from these studies, there is no adequate discussion specifically on first-generation students in Malaysian higher education. Motivated by this deficiency, a qualitative research is the appropriate choice for this study, since little is known about the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007). Locating this research within the interpretive paradigm allows each participant's voice to be heard and presents a more complex picture of how experiences were constructed.

The following discussion will give insight to the theoretical approach, justifying the chosen research design research methods.

3.3 Research Design

The purpose of this research is to develop a better understanding about the lived experiences of a group of a first-generation students in UKM. In order to achieve understanding of first-generation and their first-year experiences, a qualitative interpretive approach was best suited for this research because it allowed for first-person accounts and detailed descriptions. Interpretive research focused on naturalistic enquiry, concerned with producing meanings and understandings of the phenomena under study. According to

Cohen *et al.* (2006), the underlying assumption of interpretivism is to understand the subjective world of human experience. In order to maintain the truth of the phenomena being explored, efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within (p. 22). Thus, adapting a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm is suitable to explore the richness, depth, complexity and multiple realities of phenomena in this research; that is, explaining the development process during the first year of first-generation students in a specific context at a Malaysian university.

Regarding the aim of understanding the reality of first-generation students at university, this research starts with a pre-pilot study conducted among the first-year students at UKM. This step helped the researcher to identify specific issues related to their experience at university before conducting the proper fieldwork. Results from the focus group showed that issues of transition and adjustment in the first year of university are more challenging for students from sixth forms and working-class backgrounds than their peers with Matriculation and Diploma backgrounds. This initial finding enabled the researcher to identify the issues that needed to be researched in greater detail. At this exploratory stage, the approach to find the essence of the first-generation student experience was best achieved by conducting a case study. Case study methodology is used primarily when researchers wish to obtain an in-depth understanding of a relatively small number of individuals, problems, or situations (Patton, 1990).

This following section provides a general introduction to research design by examining several issues: a definition and explanation of case study, followed by a detailed outline of the research plan and rationale for using this method as a research framework.

3.3.1 Case study

The research design in this study adopts an exploratory-descriptive case study approach. The choices match the limited research information available on first-generation transition experience in Malaysia. Exploratory research is typically conducted in the interests of 'getting to know', to gain insight into a researched setting, group or phenomenon or a research topic (Ruane, 2005, p. 12). It is most advantageous 'where little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon' (Patton, 2002, p. 193).

Many different definitions of a case study have been given by a number of scholars such as Bessey (1999), Creswell (2007), Stake (1995), Miles and Huberman (1994), Merriam (1998) and Yin (2003), and no standard definition exists. Yin provides (2003) a key comprehensive definition and suggestions for the conduct of case research, defining case study as:

an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and; benefit from prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (2003, p. 13)

In this definition, Yin gives a clear delineation of case study as a phenomenon or event with a clear boundary and context. One should use a case study strategy because one deliberately wants to study contextual conditions.

Robson (2002) defines case study as ‘a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence’ (p. 5). Stake (1995, p. xi) describes case study as ‘a study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within importance circumstances’. A case study tries to catch the ‘close-up reality’ and ‘thick description’ of participants’ (Cohen and Manion, 2003, p. 182). Similarly, Creswell (2007, p. 73) notes that a case study ‘is a problem to be studied, which will reveal an in-depth understanding of a “case” or bounded system, which involves understanding an event, activity, process or one or more individual’. Some scholars present certain specific characteristics, for example Merriam (1998) identifies four essential characteristics of a case study: first, it is *particularistic*, so focuses on particular situation, events, or phenomenon; second, it is *descriptive*, referring to the rich and extensive set of details relating to the phenomenon under study; and it is *heuristic*, elucidating the reader’s understanding of the case to confirm what is already known or discover new meanings and knowledge. Finally, it is *inductive*, referring to the form of reasoning used to determine generalization or concepts that emerge from the data.

Given the interpretive standpoint adopted in this research, the current research is well suited to Creswell (2007) and Yin’s (2003) definition as well as Merriam’s explanation as it seeks to investigate and understand the experiences of first-generation

students in their first year at university. In this case the context of the study was a specific university and the boundaries (unit of analysis) comprised first-generation students from working-class backgrounds, former sixth-form students and first-year undergraduates. The data was collected in the context, and it is also bounded by a nine-month period from July 2009 to March 2010. This study sought to investigate the real world of first-generation university students and to appreciate their personal experience related to academic environment. Applying a case study to this research is not only helpful to determine a border between a case and context, but offers a framework to examine interrelated elements in the case; whether student experiences prior to entry to university, and current context experience are interrelated. Focusing on transition, the case is a study about continuities and changes in first-generation students and how these are experienced and negotiated by them in the new academic, cultural and social context. Therefore, in obtaining a more complete picture of the transitional process and to understand the process and changes, a longitudinal perspective is adopted. Longitudinal studies are common in transition studies and well suited to understanding the dynamic interactions between the context and process, the strategy, learning and change. Longitudinal study involves ‘studying the same single case at two or more different points in time... [in order to] specify how certain conditions change over time’—and, for this, the single case study design is appropriate (Yin, 2003, p. 42).

A comprehensive analysis of transition and adjustment process needs to cover certain periods of time to provide the details of how these processes actually happen. In defining the length of time, some researchers characterize longitudinal study as a study that takes a minimum period of a year or longer, while others simply define it as any research that is concerned with change in a particular period of time. Even though there is no specific indication of how long needs to be spent on the case study, Saldana (2003) suggests that a minimum of nine months is necessary, thus a single case study is consistent with the aim to explore, describe and explain the experience of first-generation students towards university learning experiences that were investigated for a defined period of time.

3.4 Sampling

Sampling is the process of selecting research participants (Henning, 2004). Qualitative research requires the purposeful selection of participants that will best help the researcher

understand the research question (Creswell, 2007). In a case study design, it is important to select participants to provide the researcher with the best opportunity to learn and understand (Stake, 2000). Cohen *et al.* (2000, p. 185) claim that ‘significance, rather than frequency, is a hallmark of case studies, offering the researcher insight into the real dynamics of situations and people.’

Participants were chosen using purposive sampling, where participants are selected based on particular criteria (Patton, 2002). According to Cohen *et al.* (2000) and Patton (2002), purposive sampling is useful in any in-depth study as it allows a wide range of issues to be explored. They claim that choosing specific people who have specific experience and unique knowledge of specific issues is better than having a large number of respondents with little knowledge of the issues to be explored.

The process of sampling in the study can be divided into several stages. The first was identifying the university. In the first place, the decision to select UKM as case study was made because it is where the researcher works as a tutor and, as such, has the advantage of access to the information and resources. The second stage involved choosing participants who ‘met a particular criterion’ (Patton, 2002, p. 238). The following predetermined criteria were used to select potential participants: (a) traditional-age students (those under 21 years at the point of university entry); (b) first-generation status, (c) and sixth-form leavers. First-generation students, for the purpose of this study, are defined by the same criteria used in the literature review: those from a family with no higher education background.

The sampling process began by submitting a written request for permission to conduct a research at UKM. Once the request was approved, the researcher tried to obtain the first-generation student data from the Student Service Department, UKM, but no specific data on the first-generation student population was available. Therefore the researcher approached colleges of residence to secure participants. Two residence colleges were selected after obtaining permission from the heads. The researcher explained the purpose of the research and the specific sample that this research needed. The same procedure was used at another college. The colleges of residence were selected based on their first-year student population and, at each college, a hundred flyers were distributed detailing the title of the research and its purpose and who could be involved (sample of

flyers in Appendix A). In total 35 students from the two colleges agreed to participate in the study by contacting the researcher by email and telephone. Meetings were arranged at each college. In College A, out of 18 responses only ten students attended for the meetings while in College B, only 15 students attended the meeting. The researcher concedes that the obligations students faced in terms of lectures, tutorials and other activities limited their attendance and participation in the study.

During the initial meeting the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the procedures, the objectives and duration, and participants were assured of confidentiality. Each participant was given a file containing all the information related to this study such as the consent form, the background information, the interview questions and journal questions. Students were given the opportunity to ask any further questions regarding the research. Overall, 18 participants showed interest in participating in this study yet only 16 participants responded when contacted again for an interview and these dropped out after the first interview.

3.5 Sample Size

Regarding sample size, Perry (2001, p. 313) claims that at doctorate level, '35 or so interviews' are required. However, this is viewed differently by Patton (2002) who emphasizes that, in qualitative research, 'there are no rules for sample size' and strongly asserts that the size of sample is dependent on 'what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available resources' (p. 244). Patton (1990) suggests that a qualitative study will 'typically focus in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases (n=1), selected purposefully', which contrasts with a quantitative study that will 'typically depend on larger samples selected randomly' (p. 169). Accordingly, the selection of sample size will 'have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected' (Patton, 1990, p. 184). A small number of cases facilitates the researcher's close association with the respondents, and enhances the validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry in naturalistic settings (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006).

As noted above, the participants in this research comprised 16 first-generation students. Eight of the 16 participants were male and eight are female. By ethnicity, six

identified as Malay, four Chinese and six Indian. They are from diverse programmes. The profile of participants is presented in Table 3.1 below:

Table 3.1: Demographical Profile

Initial	Academic Qualification	Gender	Race	Programme
Azif	STPM	Male	Malay	Law
Emma	STPM	Female	Indian	Education
Harn	STPM	Female	Chinese	Education
Avin	STPM	Male	Indian	Law
Ting	STPM	Female	Chinese	Maths
Mirul	STPM	Male	Malay	Law
Nissa	STPM	Female	Indian	Law
Abby	STPM	Female	Malay	Law
Awwa	STPM	Female	Malay	Education
Ying	STPM	Female	Chinese	Chemistry
Prema	STPM	Female	Indian	Law
Dan	STPM	Male	Malay	Education
Gary	STPM	Male	Chinese	Education
Azie	STPM	Female	Malay	Malay Literature
Milly	STPM	Female	Indian	Oleo Kimia
Tino	STPM	Male	Indian	Actuarial Science

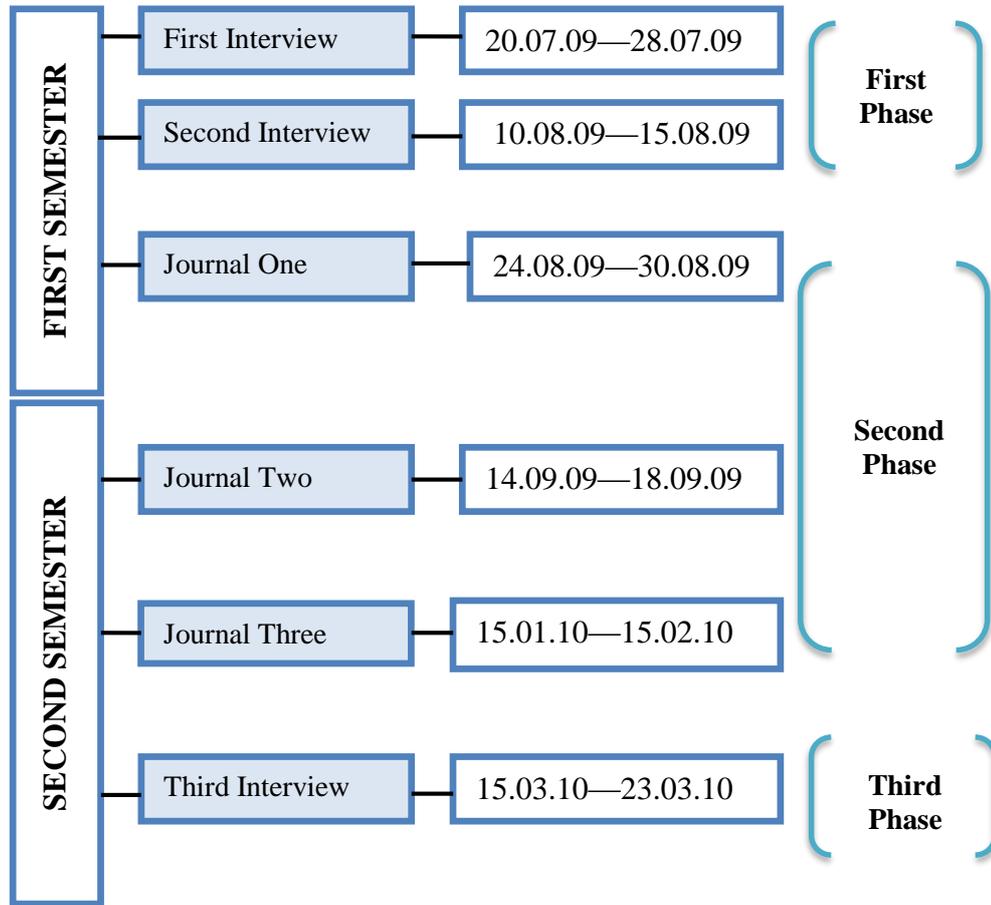
The variation among the group of participants embraces the multi-ethnic nature of higher education in Malaysia and in particular at UKM. The sample is likely to generate rich information on the type of phenomena to be studied (Miles and Huberman, 1994, 34). Research has shown that demographic inputs (e.g., gender, ethnicity) and backgrounds have significant influences on first-generation students' experiences and the meaning they make of their experiences. For example, studies by Abdullah *et al.* (2009), Hurtado *et al.* (2007), Yazedjian and Toews (2006) draw attention to the influence of gender in the adjustment process. Additionally, ethnicity has a significant impact on defining meaning in the transition process (Allen, 1999; Choy, 2001; Thayer, 2000). However, in the analysis and discussion, this study does not intend to present findings according to diversity (gender or ethnicity) but to examine the shared elements. To minimise possible differences, the researcher has made it clear from the outset that this research is focused solely on generational status and not merely exploring the differences. The reason for this restriction is because the aim of this research is to address issues of apparently limited input. One

must develop a better understanding of first-generation students in the Malaysian context, exploring the issues facing them during the transition period. This will lead to important indications for future research exploring new areas of study. Studies of the sample according to gender and ethnicity should be further examined in a different study.

3.6 Data Collection Methods

In qualitative studies, there is a need for multiple types of evidence gathered from different sources, often using different data collection methods (Hatch, 2002). Crotty (1998) defines research ‘methods’ as ‘the techniques or procedures used to gather or analyse data related to some research questions or hypothesis’ (p. 3). Having a variety of data collection methods help to explore the issue in more depth. There are many potential research methods to adopt in any particular methodology and, according to Marshall and Rossman (1999), case study relies on a research strategy integrating multiple techniques for data gathering such as interviews, observation, document analysis and even surveys, conducted over a period of time. Data collection in this research falls into three main phases from July 2009 to March 2010. Over these nine months, data were captured from three in-depth interviews, and three journals.

Table 3.2: Data Collection Duration



The data collection plan was developed to assist the researcher in obtaining relevant information according to time frame, in line with UKM’s academic year. At the same time, the data collection plan provided a convenient reference to the participants so they were clear about the researcher’s intention to collaborate with them. By the nature of longitudinal research, determining the optimal time frame for data collection on research into transition during the first year at university affects the type of issues that can be explored with a participant, and assures the effectiveness of data gathering.

The data collection for the study was divided into three stages, each with different aims and rationale using different data collection tools. It was anticipated that by collecting data in stages it would be possible to gain an understanding of how or whether the participants’ experience of becoming a university student changed over time. To understand their experience, the researcher needed to gain access to the participants at a number of stages, to capture ‘change’. Changes in student experience can be defined as the

extent of achievement or failure to achieve desired goals in first year. In particular, this can help identify students' needs and expectations; conversely, for those who are 'at risk', the findings will help institutions to improve practice. The study also facilitates analysis of the extent to which prior school experience and student backgrounds are predictive of these adjustment processes and outcomes.

In phase one, participants were interviewed on two occasions. The first interview was conducted approximately three weeks after participants had started university. The rationale was that the students at this stage had already settled down after induction week, course registration and other official procedures. Studying students early in their placement allowed the researcher to establish contact with the participants, collecting biographical information, and examining participants' motivations and goals to enter university. This data provides a valuable baseline for understanding participants' future experiences as they progressed over the course of the study. The follow-up interviews were undertaken two weeks after the first interview. Separate interviews with participants were conducted, although interviews could be held jointly if preferred. The reason the researcher separated the interviews was because their focus was different and it was desirable to limit the duration of the session. In the second interview the focus of interview was on student initial experiences in university. The first six to eight weeks of the first semester are considered critical because it is during this period that students form impressions about the university environment and whether they 'belong' (Upcraft *et al.*, 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2006). Thus, it gave a strong sense of exhilaration and excitement about going to university (Christie *et al.*, 2005).

In phase two, the researcher chose journal keeping as an alternative to in-person interviews, especially since the researcher was in Southampton, UK, during this period. The purpose of writing journals is to encourage a record of self-reflection about experiences. The participants were asked to write a minimum of three journal entries from August 2009 to February 2010, when the developmental changes were expected to occur. One rationale for determining this frequency is that students had more time to respond and it was intended to be a less burdensome workload. Journal writing provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on what they feel necessary.

In phase three, a third interview was carried out at the end of participants' second semester. The researcher assumed at this point that the students would be in position to reflect on their prior understanding of their role and talk about any changes during the course of their first year at university. This enabled the researcher to explore the changes in students' attitudes as they moved into their second semester, their engagement with and experience of the curriculum and the learning process, and their attitudes to study.

The following section will explain in detail how the empirical data were collected.

3.6.1 Interview

An interview is a 'researcher-provoked way of gathering data' (Silverman, 2010, p. 245). Crouch and McKenzie (2006) hold that interviews can generate knowledge, or at least understanding, thus will give insight into the incidence or the phenomenon studied. According to Verma and Mallick (1999), interviews feature interaction between three variables: the interviewer, the interviewee and the context of the interview, including the questions asked. Furthermore, Kvale (1996) asserts that the qualitative research interview attempts 'to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world' (p. 1). Significantly, interviewing is a particularly efficient means of collecting data in case study; Yin (1994) argues that 'the most important source of case study information is the interview, because most case studies are about human affairs, and human affairs should be reported and interpreted through the eyes of people' (p. 84).

The benefit of interview is clearly explained by Patton (1990), whereas an interview helps to find out what is in and on someone else's mind. As Patton explains:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe... we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. (p. 196)

From this perspective, Patton (1990) drew the conclusion that through the interviewing process a researcher can enter into the other person's perspective. Interestingly, this definition highlights the ability of the interview to reflect individual

present and previous experiences and find the relationship between the two, as was the case in the present study. In this research, the student transition experience consists of cultural, social and historical elements that all influence the students' interpretation of their experiences. To understand students' transition experience requires attention to their perceptions formed by their previous education and experience. Therefore, it is argued that the narratives and life history of students can give insights into their experience, knowledge and practice. Byrne (2004) proposed that the 'interview has been particularly attractive to researchers who want to explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past' (p. 182).

Depending on the need and design of the study, interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. A structured interview is most appropriate when the goals of the study are clearly understood and specific questions have been identified. Structured interviews are used to collect the same data from all interviewees, which makes it more reliable as those replies are based on 'identical cues' (Bryman, 2008, p. 193). Unstructured interviews use open-ended questions that are usually 'informal', in varying order and with different wording in each interview (Bryman, 2008, p. 196) and where respondents use their own words and perspectives in answering interview questions (Patton, 2002, p. 348). The semi-structured interview has influences from both structured and unstructured interviews and has a set of pre-planned questions for guidance, which allows the interviewer to ask questions in any order as the interview progresses. The interviewee is given the opportunity to elaborate or provide more relevant information. The use of semi-structured interviews is classified as a suitable form for case study research as it can produce rich data (Gillham, 2000), as opposed to structured interviews that allow little freedom for a researcher to make any modifications to the interview schedule, since they are characterized by closed questions whereby content and procedures are planned and organized prior to the interview. Other characteristics of semi-structured interviews are that they attempt to establish rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee, allow the interviewer to create an atmosphere where an interviewee talks freely and is clearly understood, and ask questions that encourage participants to open up about their attitudes, thoughts and feelings. They also allow flexibility, where a researcher is free to follow the participants' interests and concerns (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Radnor, 2002).

This study employed a semi-structured interview; as Chase (2005) notes, some participants openly tell their stories without prompting, while others need a more structured approach. Thus, it was more convenient to leave questions less structured and it seemed a more natural way of approaching the interview questions. In this context, the concept was employed of the ‘emphatic’ interview (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p. 696), suitable to minimise differences in status, or ‘researcher power’ and showing the human side of the researcher to understand better the complex reality of a given situation. The researcher’s status as a first-generation ex-student brings the researcher nearer to the interviewees’ stories and more easily to understand the process they are facing.

By reducing the gap in power, the interviewee is enabled to be more open about themselves and this has the advantage of obtaining more detailed information, because there are some questions related to biographical detail. Glesne (1999) believed that developing rapport makes the participants more willing to talk about personal and sensitive issues. She differentiated friendship from rapport, claiming that friendship meant, among other things, a ‘mutual liking and affection’, whereas in rapport one’s ‘need to be liked is overshadowed by the necessity of being accepted and trusted’ (p. 96). It is believed this relationship is to reduce the gap between researcher and interviewee, and to create a friendly atmosphere in place of the initial formality.

To structure the questions, the researcher followed Wengraf’s (2001, p. 111) idea for a ‘lightly structured depth interview, taking a biographic narrative interpretive method approach’. This proposes that interviews start with a broad, open-ended ‘single question aimed at inducing an initial narrative’, in which the interviewer intervenes only minimally, followed at a second stage of the interview by more specific questions developed from the issues or ideas highlighted by the participants in order to obtain further elaboration. A third element is a follow-up interview when the researcher plans a discussion of related issues that allows further clarification of themes identified in previous interviews. This supports the qualitative longitudinal interview approach, as the objective of this study is to address issues of continuity and change in relationships to first-year experiences. Longitudinal research principally involves collection and analysis of data on more than one occasion over a specified period of time period (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Menard, 2002). Cohen *et al.* (2000) state that the study may be done in a shorter period of between several weeks or

months, while a long-term study can extend over many years (Cohen *et al.*, 2000). Ruspini (1999) gives the common characteristics of qualitative longitudinal interview as: (a) data are collected for each time or variable for two or more distinct periods, (b) the subjects or cases analysed are the same or broadly comparable, (c) the analysis involves some comparison of data between or among periods. In general, there are no fixed rules on the ideal number of interviews. Some qualitative researchers with a positivist stance tend to agree with Kvale's (1996) view that 'the more interviews, the more scientific' (p. 103).

In this context of the study, the interview was conducted three times, twice in the first semester and once at the end of semester two of the first year. The same sample of participants was interviewed to trace their transition experience from the point they entered university to the end of their first year and the objective was to track their transitional experiences. It was considered that a minimum of three interviews of each participant was appropriate for this study, and it is important to acknowledge that the study had resource and logistical considerations. In this respect, the limitations of the researcher were distance and the nature of the study, curtailing the researcher's involvement.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language. Language is one of the controversial issues in qualitative research. The objective of qualitative research is to obtain the best data, and for that reason interviewees were given the choice of using the language in which they were comfortable communicating, whether English or Malay. Since the first language in Malaysia is Malay, most of the students preferred it. For those who preferred English, it was allowed because the researcher was more likely to achieve free expression of the themes and, besides, it was necessary to respect the students' decision even though the researcher's preference was to speak in Malay to feel more involved. Even though using Malay language gave some advantage to the researcher and interviewees, it also has some disadvantages, especially in the translation process. Seidman (2006) observes that if interviewers are fluent in the participants' mother tongue and interview in that language, they will subsequently face the complexity of translation. In this case, the researcher was aware of this problem as highlighted by Vygotsky (1987, cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 104):

Finding the right word in English or any other language to represent the full sense of the word the participants spoke in their native language is demanding and requires a great deal of care.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on the student. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewee and this enabled accurate transcription of what was said and how it was said. Each interview was conducted in a formal environment at the venue of the participants' choice. In some cases, the researcher selected a place that was easily accessed and agreed with the interviewee. As the researcher was in the university, this meant the interviews were conducted in places such as the library, the hall and tutorial rooms.

In the interviewing process, the researcher avoided questions with double-meanings, double-negatives, complex or threatening tones and ambiguous or leading wording that would affect the process. The interviewer avoided making any judgement on interviewees' responses. In addition, the researcher tried to employ some important strategies and skills suggested by Denscombe (2003): being attentive, sensitive to the feelings of the informant, able to tolerate silences, and adept at using prompts, probes and checks.

Before the interview session ended, the interviewees were asked if they wished to raise any points that they thought still needed to be added but had not mentioned in the interview. As the final point, the interviewees were thanked for their participation.

3.6.1.1 First interview

The focus of the interviews was to get to know the participants and find out about pre-entry information. The interview involved an element of retrospection to find a context for each individual. The researcher felt it was necessary to collect details about backgrounds, motivations for entering university and past learning experiences. Beginning the interview process with relatively easy questions could be considered a 'warm-up' (Robson, 2002, p. 277), allowing both the participants and researcher to feel comfortable and free to give their opinions. The first phase of the study was an opportunity for the researcher to explore the elements perceived as important in participants' transition process and this first interview would form the basis for the rest of the study. The aim was to build up a picture of what motivated the student to go to university, and cover all interaction between students, their family, school, community from when they first considered applying to university to the stage when they accepted an offer of a place.

The interview schedule used for the first interview consisted several sections based on the following themes:

- I. Identify individual's backgrounds and experiences
- II. Obtain information about prior experience at sixth-form
- III. Explore their choice of degree and university
- IV. Investigate participants' expectations and perceived preparedness for studying at university.

A list of questions can be found in Appendix E.

3.6.1.2 Second interview

The second interview session was conducted two weeks after the first interview. The second interview focused on students' initial experiences in university. A list of questions can be found in Appendix F.

The main issues that were examined during the second interviews were as follows:

- I. Feeling of acceptance at university
- II. Reflections on the experience of being a student at university
- III. Academic experiences
- IV. Social experiences.

3.6.1.3 Third interview

The third interview was carried out at the end of the students' second semester of their first year of university. This follow-up interview with each participant was conducted to acquire further data, exploring in detail the findings from the first interview and the reflective journal. The researcher assumed at this point that the students would be in position to reflect on their prior understanding of their roles and identities as first-year students and talk about any changes in their understanding of the transition process during the course of their first year at university.

The interview did not only probe for additional information but was an opportunity to confirm the early analysis for emerging themes and patterns. The questions mainly encouraged students to reflect on their experiences of transition as expressed in their first interview and in their journal, and say how their views had changed over the year, or not,

and why. This interview enabled the interviewees to reflect critically about what they experienced about the transition to university, how they saw the changes and how they found themselves at the end of first year, the role of the communities with which students engaged and their influence on their experiences at university. A list of questions can be found in Appendix G.

The main issues that were examined during the third interviews were as follows:

- I. Students' overall perceptions of their first-year experiences
- II. The changes students experienced between first semester and second semester.

3.6.2 Journal writing

In addition to the interviews, this study used journal writing, described as an appropriate alternative to in-person interviews or observations especially when time, financial constraints or geographical boundaries are barriers to an investigation. For this study, they were an appropriate method to bridge the gap between the second interview and the third interview and explore what happened to students within this seven months period (August 2009 to February 2010). This is the time frame when most transitional experiences are most likely to occur.

One of the important use of journals is to promote reflection. They provided an opportunity to encourage students to reflect personally on issues such as challenges faced, coping strategies used, support received, support required but not received, perceptions of personal and professional development, and any other aspect of being a first-year student. The use of journal entries is advantageous because it is rich in depicting the values and beliefs of the participants (Marshall and Rossman, 1999), potentially revealing a greater understanding of the students' perceptions of these experiences (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003).

According to Janesick (1998), writing is a participant-centred approach (Janesick, 1998; Ortlipp, 2008). Holly (2002) agrees and suggests that 'writing is a method of knowing' (p. 79). This autobiographical account gave the participants the opportunity to speak for themselves that gave the researcher the chance 'to access the sense of reality that people have about their own world and attempt to give "voice" to that reality' (Musson, 1998, p. 11). Janesick (1998) sees a journal as a 'powerful heuristic tool' and 'research

technique' and the rationale is 'a journal as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and participants in the study, as a type of interdisciplinary triangulation of data' (p. 506). Journal writing encourages reflective thinking, according to Dymont and O'Connell (2007), and is 'the students' subjective reflections and analysis of their experience and thoughts' (p. 140). Spradley (1980, p. 71, cited in Knowles *et al.*, 2009, p. 336) points out: 'A reflexive journal includes a record of participants' experiences, ideas, fears, mistakes, confusions, breakthroughs, and problems'.

In this study, the purpose of journal writing is to engage the student emotionally and personally in the construction of personal meanings of the situation they had experienced. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe journals as powerful ways for individuals to give accounts of their experience. In this context, students describe, interpret and evaluate their past experiences. Their main strength as data is that journals can provide a direct path into the insights of participants (Hatch, 2002, p. 141). In some cases, individuals are comfortable expressing their feelings, ideas, and insights in writing, and these can be powerful data revealing how they understand the phenomenon under investigation (Hatch, 2002, p. 141) and emerge directly from the participant.

There are number of situations embodying the decision for using the journal method. First, the journals kept by the participants allowed the researcher to understand their perspectives on certain experiences missed in interview and accessed the students' experiences between the two main interviews. Second, this method was motivated by the physical distance between the researcher and the participants. Students were asked to write about their experience (either positively or negatively) in response to questions. In this journal, students not only revealed the challenge about being a university student but provided a record of their feelings, attitudes and subjectivities. Finally, journals provided an opportunity to understand the changes and development in student experience, because this study was interested in how students' experiences of transition changed over time.

3.6.2.1 Journal writing administration

Students were informed at the beginning of this research that they were required to write a journal as a reflection on their personal, academic and social experiences. At the beginning the researcher planned to ask students to write weekly journals, but this may have lead to tension and a diminution of the quantity and quality of their journal responses. As an

alternative, students were required to submit their journal three times, once at the end of first semester and twice in the second. This timing provided students with a clear context for reflection; entries were submitted at a point when students had begun to establish themselves in the setting and were in a position to write about the routines and habits of their daily life at university. In these journals, students were required to reflect on their experiences within the academic, social and personal context. Students were given questions as a guideline, but at the same time the researcher encourage free-focus writing. They were also free to record any educational experiences that they felt had particularly significant meaning. The researcher preferred the reflection process to be naturally articulated by the students, enabling participants to describe their experience as they understand themselves. A list of questions is found in Appendix H.

Students were given the option to write in any language, either Malay or English, to prevent any lack of language proficiency from detracting from their reflections when they wrote their journals and also so they were more comfortable and perceived it to be convenient to express their ideas and views.

Responses were returned to the researcher via email as word-processed documents or web forms sent to the researcher's personal address. McIntyre and Trusty (1995, cited in Terriona and Pillion, 2008) point out that the electronic journal offers the advantage of bridging geographic distances between communicators. As noted by Fielding and Thomas (2001), the use of emails in qualitative data collection enables opportunities for reflection and follow-up and serves as a ready-made transcript of an exchange. Furthermore, it saves the researcher time and money and simultaneously reduces any errors introduced through incorrect transcription. Through email, the data that is eventually analysed is exactly what the interviewee wrote.

One of the pervasive issues surrounding the using of electronic email for research is protection of participants' privacy and confidentiality. It involves primarily how the data is transmitted and stored (Nosek and Banaji, 2002). On the consent form, the researcher clearly emphasized the anonymity of the participants by assuring them that students' screen names or email addresses used for data transmission would be removed.

Even though the method is convenient, inexpensive and can give good results, there are number of challenges to efficient feedback. In this research the researcher found the main drawback of using journals as a research method was the time and effort required of participants in keeping up with submitting journals. Some sent apologies for not completing their journals on time, giving the main reason as being too busy and that it was difficult to find a time to write about their experiences. Some provided very short responses to the questions posed, while others were excited to tell the researcher about their experiences and discussed at length their feelings and experiences, so the quality of the reflexive thinking in the qualitative data varied from participant to participant.

3.7 Data Analysis

This section details the data analysis process of interviews and journals, considering the perspectives on interpretivism advocated in this study. In the theoretical approach to interpretivism in **Section 3.2** presented in this study, individual agents are perceived as having their own views and paradigms formed by their interactions within the systems and the structure. In this position, the researcher is an active agent who constructs and develops the meaning that is transferred to them, and makes sense of the data and justifies their interpretation without changing the real meaning and definition of the situation under study.

Typically in qualitative research, the analysis begins once data has been collected, transcribed and read through and the transcripts coded (Creswell, 2007). Glesne (1999) says that ‘data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read, so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with data, you describe, create explanations, pose hypotheses, develop theories, and link you story to other stories’ (p. 130). Bogdan and Biklen (2007, p. 159) claim that qualitative data analysis is the practice of ‘working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them and searching for patterns’. For this study, the analysis is to understand the nature of student transition experiences, from something that is already known to something that is going to be known.

The analysis process in this study followed the data analysis method explained by Creswell (2007) and Yin (2003), as a way to organize the data chronologically and thematically. Creswell (2007) and Yin (2003) propose that the analysis of data in a case

study is to reveal patterns that will inform the interpretations and description of the case. According to Yin (2003), the analysis of data in a case study should lead the researcher to uncover patterns and themes that will inform the interpretations and description of the case. In this case, Yin recommended three general analytical strategies: 1) relying on theoretical propositions, 2) rival explanations, and 3) case descriptions. It explains that the categories and coding scheme are derived from three sources: the data, previous related studies, and the theoretical framework that used in the study, and may be developed both inductively and deductively. The analytical strategy that relies on theoretical proposition is similar to the deductive coding scheme employed, and is also appropriate to this context of study.

There are several approaches and techniques for the data analysis process in qualitative study proposed by social science research, and no single way to analyse qualitative data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Patton, 2002). Basically, the process of qualitative data analysis often begins during the early stages of data collection. Starting the analysis process early will help the researcher to refine constantly the data collection methods and may help to direct the data collection towards sources that are more functional for answering the research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). According to Creswell (2007), the general process that researchers use for data analysis in qualitative research consists of three steps: first, preparing and organizing the data for analysis; second, reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and third, representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion. For the purpose of this study, the interview and student journal data were analysed through a process of thematic analyses.

3.7.1 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a distinctive data analysis method used in qualitative research (e.g. Creswell, 2007; McMillan and Schumacher, 2010; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Braun and Clark (2006, p. 79) define thematic analysis as ‘a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’. Thematic analysis is considered to be a flexible and straightforward technique for data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that can be used in all stages of research (Boyatzis, 1998) and within various theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81) to give a better understanding (Hardy and Bryman, 2004, p. 562). It is an appropriate and highly useful tool ‘which can potentially provide a rich and

detailed, yet complex account of data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). This method of analysis was chosen because of its flexibility and because it is a relatively easy and quick method to learn for a novice qualitative researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In thematic analysis, themes are created based on the research framework (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). These themes are created based on a 'top down' coding scheme where the researcher starts the coding process with some codes in mind, normally based on the literature; a 'bottom up' coding scheme, where the codes are inductively driven from the data; or an 'iterative coding' scheme, where the coding process is based on both predefined codes and driven from the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010, p. 392). Themes can be 'labelled' (named) based on two levels; manifest level or 'semantic' (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which is 'directly observable in the information'; and latent level, which is based on data 'underlying the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). The thematic code is considered to be a good one if it reflects the 'qualitative richness of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 31).

3.7.1.1 Data analysis procedure

In this research the analysis of interviews and journals followed six steps of thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006): a data familiarization stage, code generation stage, theme identification, reviewing and refining stages, and a findings reporting stage.

Step 1: Data familiarization stage

The process begins at the level of preparing and organizing, which is the process of converting raw data for analysis by transcribing all audio-records and typing the transcription into computer files. For this study, after the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and the transcripts kept in separate files (e.g., Interview 1, Interview 2, Interview 3). Journal entries were sorted by participant into chronological order (e.g., Journal 1, Journal 2, Journal 3). In transcribing the interviews, the researcher listened to the records and simultaneously typed everything verbatim. After transcription, all the data was reviewed several times to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Later, the transcripts were forwarded to participants for validation and amendment. None wished to make any changes. The similar approach used for journal, and the content was read carefully to understand the meaning.

The data familiarization stage suggests the researcher should be familiar with the data through being immersed in the data. In this research, this step was conducted by reading and re-reading the transcripts at least two or three times to gain familiarity, also by comparing the transcript with the actual recorded interview to ensure its accuracy. This step was crucial to enable the researcher better to understand participants' views and to highlight the important themes of patterns in each interview. The same approach was used when the researcher read the journal.

Step II: Code generation stage

Generating code was the next step in the analysis of the interviews and journals in this research. This phase begins after the researcher has become familiar with the data and what is interesting about it (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding is the process of identifying and labelling themes and, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 103), the first step in qualitative analysis is 'open coding' or 'conceptualizing', where 'labels' or 'codes' are assigned to specific pieces of the data. Codes are 'tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 56). Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 57) categorize codes into three different types, namely: descriptive codes, interpretive codes and pattern codes. There are two dominant qualitative coding approaches, the first approach more 'deductive' while the second is more 'inductive'. By contrast to the deductive analysis strategy, this approach searched for themes emerging from the data itself. Patton (1990) explains the inductive analysis of data is where the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis' (p. 390). The patterns, themes and categories do not emerge on their own, but are driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling the researcher according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions.

These categories, while related to an appropriate analytic context, must also be rooted in relevant empirical material: 'The analyst moves back and forth between the logical construction and the actual data in a search for meaningful patterns' (Patton, p. 411). According to Hatch (2002), inductive analysis is 'a search for patterns of meaning in

data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made' (p. 161).

Coding for this study was done manually, and for each interview a preliminary analysis was conducted using Microsoft Word. Thematic analysis can also be undertaken with the assistance of computer software such as NVivo and Atlas-i. However, the researcher decided to do the analysis manually to deepen further her familiarity with the research data, and thus enhance her understanding of the topic under study. Each of the interviews were read carefully with attention to each line, capturing every detail within the transcripts. Important words (based on the research question) were highlighted. Notes were taken on the text, and an extra column inserted into the transcript for comments and writing down thoughts throughout the process of thematic analysis. The codes were then given a theme name. For example, for student higher education decisions a total of four main themes were identified under the topic 'university decision and aspiration'.

Step III: Searching for themes, reviewing themes

After coding, the search for common themes started throughout the interviews and journals, reviewing and refining these themes by comparing and contrasting the data across the entire set of interviews. Codes with similar themes were grouped together, which led to building meaningful categories. Creswell (1998) agrees that the researcher develops theories and hypotheses in the course of research, derived from categories of classified themes. The data and its interpretation were examined thoroughly for underlying themes and patterns that characterize the case more broadly.

These categories and themes from interviews and journals were linked to build a logical chain of evidence. This relationship helped the researcher to capture the general patterns and themes, especially important in developing a chronology of how students moved through different stages in the transitional process, also to highlight the key people, events and the social actors that take part in the transition process.

Step four: Findings reporting stage

The analysis process ends through presenting the findings in a way that explain the themes and patterns revealed in the data, which cut across all the participants. As illustrated in Table 3.3:

Table 3.3: Research Question, Themes and Sub-themes

Research Question	Main Theme	Sub-themes
How do a student's personal characteristics such as motivation, parental education, schooling experience and other background factors influence a student decision of university	1. Self-motivation	i. Academic goal ii. Career aspiration iii. Personal development
	2. Family-based motivation	i. Parents' influence ii. The role of siblings iii. The role of extended family
	3. The school habitus	i. Learning experience ii. The role of teacher iii. The role of peers
	4. External resources	i. Social media ii. Exhibition iii. Local community support
What are the challenges for first-generation students during their transition into first year at University Kebangsaan Malaysia?	1. Discontinuity in identity	i. Role
	2. Academic practices	i. Modes of learning ii. Learning task iii. Assessment
	3. Academic communities	
	4. Learning subject knowledge	
	5. Independent learning	i. Academic skills ii. Personal organization and time management
	6. Language	
	7. Social relationships	
How do first-generation students do experienced the learning process and negotiates the challenges?	1. Self-directed learner	i. Commitment and attitudes ii. Study skills
	2. Academic engagement	i. The classroom experience ii. Out-of-classroom experience
	3. Support	i. Institutional level ii. Interpersonal level
	4. Involvement in extra-curricular activities	i. Personal competence ii. Contact with the community

3.8 Research Validation

The quality issue is of more concern in qualitative research than quantitative research because of its less precise nature and the difficulty of applying the more well-established criteria of quantitative research (Savenye and Robinson, 2004, p. 1049). There is a number of dimensions that can be used to judge the quality of qualitative research or what some scholars term the ‘credibility’ of qualitative study (Silverman, 2010). In this, reliability and validity are central issues in all research. According to Neuman (2003), this concept is theorised differently depending on the methodology used in the research process. The question of whether it is possible for qualitative research to be valid and reliable is debated (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Patton, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These researchers claim that quality in qualitative research is difficult to define, because the nature of qualitative study is for ‘generating understanding’ rather than the ‘purpose of explaining’, as in quantitative study (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551) or, as Bryman (2008, p. 366) defines it, qualitative research is a ‘research strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification’. Therefore, validity and reliability of qualitative research is related to the selection of a viable source that supports a deepening of the understanding of the study. The next section will explain how this research methodology design enhances research validity and reliability.

3.8.1 Validity

The concept of validity or truth (Silverman, 2010) ordinarily refers to ‘the ability to produce accurate results and to measure what is supposed to be measured (Sarantakos, 1993, p. 99). Qualitative researchers believe that some of the criteria of evaluating quantitative research do not accord with qualitative research’s nature and goals, so qualitative researchers have developed different models to explain the process of evaluating qualitative research. Maxwell (1992), for example, has identified five types of validity model for evaluating qualitative research: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, and internal and external validity. Maxwell’s model explains the steps that researchers need to take in order to have validity through the different stages of their study. This starts with the data description stage, through building the theory, and ends at the implications of the study and its applicability in different contexts, known as ‘external validity’ (Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2010; Bryman, 2008).

Creswell and Miller (2000) have a different view of the quality issue, and suggest that validity should be viewed through two lenses: ‘the lens researchers choose to validate their studies and researcher’s paradigm assumption’ (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 124). They suggest a nine-criteria model for validating qualitative research: data triangulation, member checking, an audit trail, disconfirming evidence, prolonged engagement in the field, researcher reflexivity, and collaboration and peer debriefing (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 126). In order to improve a qualitative study, researchers need to employ one or more of these criteria (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

To increase the validity of the research and to ensure that the participants’ views were accurately represented, participants were each offered a copy of their interview and asked whether they were still in agreement with what they had said; all agreed with the interview transcripts. Research findings were also checked and discussed with the research supervisor, and the discussions were useful in stimulating further analysis of the data and provided a clearer picture of the study from another perspective. The follow-up interview design in the study helped the researcher explore participants’ responses in the previous interview or journal to elicit further information, but also as a form of validation.

3.8.2 Reliability

Reliability refers to the replicability of the study (Bryman, 2008); reliability implies having the same findings each time the study is repeated. In qualitative research, Silverman (2006 p. 288) believes that interviews could be considered reliable by applying the peer-checking technique suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000). In this case, analysis could be done by more than one researcher (Silverman, 2010).

Patton (2002, p. 433) stresses that evaluating qualitative research is not an easy task, and points out that ‘no straightforward tests can be applied for reliability and validity’ and ‘no absolute rules exist’. Patton simply suggests that in order to undertake valid qualitative research, researchers should ‘do their very best with full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of study’ (Patton, 2002, p. 433).

3.8.3 Triangulation

Triangulation is another technique the researcher used to establish dependability of this research. Triangulation involves integrating multiple methods and source to provide an in-depth understanding of the event or process studied, or both (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Denzin (1989) has distinguished four types of triangulation:

- a) Data triangulation: the use of more than one of data collection (researcher used interview and journal writing).
- b) Observer triangulation: using more than one observer in the study (not employed in this research).
- c) Methodological triangulation: Researcher combined some forms of biographical method, based in in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviewing, life history, and retrospective perspective in carrying out the research.
- d) Theory triangulation: using multiple theories or perspectives. In this research, realist social theory and communities of practices used as a theoretical framework to support the study.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell (1998), because of the nature of the tradition of inquiry, a qualitative researcher has to face many ethical issues that emerge during data collection in the setting, data analysis and also dissemination of qualitative reports. For Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 290), ethical issues need to be considered throughout the research process: before starting the data collection, during the data collection stage, and at the stage of reporting the findings. Researchers have stressed some ethical principles that must be considered when conducting research (Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002):

- a) participant anonymity: identity of participants is not revealed in reporting findings
- b) informant consent: the participants agree to participate in the research based on their understanding of the research details
- c) confidentiality: researcher will guarantee that participants privacy will be protected
- d) risk assessment: participants informed if the research can caused any harm or risk.

As the aim of this study was to investigate the university entrance experience of first-generation students, the research dealt with people. Therefore, it was essential to take ethical issues into consideration. As data collection was performed in two stages, the researcher was well aware of the about the human subject ethics protection during the data collection in the setting and in analysis and dissemination of the research findings. Approval to undertake the research was applied for by the researcher and in due course this was considered and granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Southampton (Appendix A).

The following steps were taken in order to conduct ethical research:

a. Before the data collection

Prior to the commencement of the project, a meeting was held so the researcher could give participants details of the study. They were given an informed consent form before the data collection process that provided information on the purpose and procedure of the study, the requirements of participation, the length of the study and the commitment needed (Appendix B). They were informed that the study was a long process throughout the first-year, and they would be interviewed three times and required to write a journal on-line three times and send to researcher via email.

In addition, the consent form stated that participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assured that any identifying information would remain confidential and that, to protect individuals' confidentiality, a pseudonym would be assigned. The student participants were clearly informed that this study would not harm them in any way and the information sought would not create anxiety or harass them. Each participant was informed that they had the option to contact the researcher's university or supervisor if they had any complaints or questions.

The participants were given the opportunity to voice any questions or doubts that they had and, after the participants were clear about the study, they were asked to sign the consent form.

b. Data collection stage

Before commencing interviews, the researcher went through the information sheet with interviewees. They were informed that the interviews would be recorded, it was explained that this was only for research purpose, and all interviewees agreed.

When a student commits themselves to participate in this research, at some point their lives are going to be different. Considering their daily life commitment as a student, the researcher tried to be systematic when arranging meetings, and met participants at a time and a place they agreed, and made sure that the researcher would be able to contact them if the circumstances changed. When working with the journals, the researcher minimised the interruption by asking participants only to write the journal when they were free. The researcher wrote to them and reminded them about the journal time to time.

c. Reporting the findings

New names were created and the data were coded using these. The data showing participants' real identities were kept in a separate file. A research paper that was published did not reveal the names of the research participants.

Since this research is qualitative and the researcher was the primary research instrument, it was important that researcher addressed bias and how to deal with it. Threats to the validity of conclusions typically are the selection of data that stand out to the researcher. It is impossible to eliminate the researcher's theories, preconceptions or values (Maxwell, 1996). The researcher's subjectivity stance, as a first-generation student once herself, interested her in understanding the transition journey to university. This position had a significant role in providing the researcher with a chance to use the data more vigorously and dynamically from the perspective of an insider in the context. It also helped in encouraging participants to disclose more information and it was important that the researcher did not relate these personal experiences on the participants, by interpreting the data through the researcher's individual experiences. Through student journals it helped to overcome the possibility of being biased. Furthermore, rigorous methods of data analysis were also helpful in identifying factors outside the researcher's personal experience.

Therefore in qualitative research it would be impossible to eliminate completely the influence of the researcher. The aim is not to eliminate it but to understand it and use it productively (Maxwell, 1992).

3.10 Summary

In this chapter, the researcher has presented the theoretical framework of this research. This is influenced by both constructivism and interpretivism. This particular paradigm has a significant bearing on the aim of this study, which is to gain a greater understanding of the transition process of first-generation students over the first year of university from the standpoint of 16 participants. Within this framework, this research has adopted interpretive case study as a methodological framework for studying the meaning embedded in this transitional process, how these experiences are interpreted, and the students' understanding of being a university student.

The research process began with a general description of the philosophical assumptions, including the ontological and epistemological assumptions that informed the research design. It was then followed by a description of qualitative approach for this research, by adopting interpretive case study methodology. The interviewing of students in a longitudinal scale was to obtain their perceptions and experience of academic, personal, and social experience to provide detailed, meaningful representation and interpretation of how first-generation students developed their identity. A deductive and inductive approach was used to find themes supporting the literature review, yet add new understanding. Aspects of qualitative research quality are also discussed in relation to the trustworthiness of research.

The following chapter will present the data analysis of the study in Chapter Four and Five, on how they experienced the academic and socialization process.

CHAPTER FOUR: MOTIVES AND ASPIRATION FOR UNIVERSITY

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of data analyses of the aspirations and decision-making processes of first-generation students concerning university education. The information gained from the analysis elicits pre-entry characteristics from the students regarding their individual education goals and also uncovers the factors that motivated them to enter university. Although much early work focused on the impact of students' previous school performance and their socio-economic backgrounds, the predictive power of these types of variables was quite limited, so identifying other factors can potentially challenge, confirm or expand current understanding of first-generation students in a different context. This is important because early decisions translate into the transition experience to university, which will be further explored in Chapter Five.

The findings for this chapter were obtained from the first phase of data collection, the first and second interviews conducted in third week and sixth week after students started university. The analysis is based on thematic analysis as described in Chapter Three (**Section 3.7.1**). Student quotes are used throughout the chapter to support the emerging themes, and any personal names that appear are pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of respondents.

The chapter is organized into two major sections. The first, **Section 4.2**, begins with a presentation of demographic profile of first-generation students in this study. The key contribution of this data is to give an overview of student participants in this study and their families' socio-economic backgrounds. As described in the literature review, first-generation students have particular demographic characteristics distinguishing them from their non-first-generation peers. Their SES is determined by combining their parents' educational level, occupational status and income level.

The second, **Section 4.3**, presents students' university decisions and choices. The following research question guided the analysis:

How do a first-generation student's personal characteristics, parental education, and sixth-form schooling experiences influence their choice and decision of university?

Analysis centred on extracting meaning from the factors behind students' university decisions. The students' accounts highlight five factors in the process of negotiating their decision to enter the university. The first, personal motivation, is bound up with individual perceptions of their intellectual ability to meet their expectation of entering university. The second, family-based motivation, presents parents' SES and involvement in students' education. It also highlights the potential impact of elder siblings and the role played by extended family such as aunts, uncles and cousins in their university pathways. Subsequent themes present how their school context contributed to their university path. The fourth, the importance of social networks as a medium where the information of university was transferred, is discussed. This theme explores the external resources (local, e.g. community) contributing to university education decisions.

Within these themes, the early information on university education aspirations and pathways is developed through a retrospective interview approach. By analysing the range of factors that influence their early decisions on university education, student decision is contextualized as a web of complex interactions. **Sections 4.3.1 to 4.3.5** are structured to further demonstrate these five categories, so a detailed picture of students' early decisions on university education is presented to enable comprehensive understanding.

4.2 Students' Background

In this section, the background information of the 16 students will be presented. Table 4.1 shows participants' demographic information; students in this study are from a direct entrance sixth form.

Table 4.1: Participants' Demographic Information

ame	Age	Gender	Race	Siblings	No of Child	Course
Azif	20	Male	Malay	5	Youngest	Law
Harn	20	Female	Chinese	2	Second	Education
Ting	20	Female	Indian	3	Third	Mathematics
Avin	20	Male	Chinese	5	First	Law
Mirul	20	Male	Malay	6	First	Law
Nissa	20	Female	Indian	4	Second	Law
Abby	20	Female	Malay	4	Second	Law
Hawa	20	Female	Malay	4	Youngest	Education
Ying	20	Female	Chinese	2	First	Chemistry
Dan	20	Male	Malay	7	Five	Education
Gary	20	Male	Chinese	3	Second	Education
Azie	20	Female	Malay	4	Third	Malay Language Studies
Milly	20	Female	Indian	4	First	Oleo Chemistry
Tino	20	Male	Indian	2	First	Actuarial Science
Emma	20	Male	Indian	3	First	Education
Prema	20	Male	Indian	3	Third	Law

In terms of gender, eight male and eight female students participated and comprise six Malays, six Indian and four Chinese.

Within this group, 11 are the first from their family to go to university, while five already have a brother or sister studying or graduated from university. The students participating in this study take different courses such as Law, Education, Mathematics, Chemistry, Actuarial Science, Malay Language Studies and Oleo Chemistry. Their diverse backgrounds are vital to provide multiple and different perspectives and are likely to produce contradictory experiences and expectations. It also represents the nature of the academic environment at Malaysian universities, which is multicultural.

In terms of student socio-economic backgrounds, the information on parents' educational backgrounds, occupations, and an income is briefly summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: The Family Backgrounds of Participants

Name	Father Occupation	Father Education Status	Mother Occupation	Mother Education Status	Income
Azif	Hospital attendant	Form 5	Housewife	Form 3	RM750
Harn	Farmer	Secondary	Housewife	Primary	RM1200
Ting	Electrician	Form 1	Housewife	Form 3	RM2000
Avin	Estate worker	Primary	Estate Worker	Primary	RM1500
Mirul	Estate worker	Form 5	Housewife	Form 5	RM2000
Nissa	Factory worker	Form 3	Housewife	Form 3	RM600
Abby	Army (Retired)	Form 3	Housewife	Form 5	RM2000
Hawa	Passed away	n/a	Housewife	Form 3	RM850
Ying	Audit officer	Form 5	Clerk	Form 5	RM2500
Dan	Lorry driver	Primary	Housewife	Primary	RM900
Gary	n/a	n/a	Clark	Form 5	RM1500
Azie	Hawker	Primary	Housewife	Primary	RM2000
Milly	Hawker	Form 3	Housewife	Form 5	RM700
Tino	n/a	n/a	Clinic Assistance	Form 5	RM700
Emma	Retired	Form 3	Housewife	Form 5	RM700
Prema	Factory worker	Form 3	Housewife	Form 3	RM900

Parental occupation is based on father's occupation, but in cases where information was missing, the mother's occupation was used. The first-generation parents were usually engaged in lower-paid, lower-status professions (unskilled or semi-skilled), from clerical and service occupations to semi-skilled manual workers, while most students' mothers are housewives. In terms of educational background, the majority of students' parents' highest education was at secondary level, with the highest to Form 5 and the lowest to only primary level. In terms of monthly household income, parents earn between RM700 to RM2500 per month. This would fall into the Department of Statistics, Malaysia's (2010) categories of low income (RM0 and RM999) and lower-middle income (RM1000 and RM3999).

The socio-economic information presented above supports the definition of first-generation students developed and proposed by the researcher, that is, students whose parents have neither attended nor earned any post-secondary education qualifications (Engle and Tinto, 2008).

The following analysis will further expand the identity of students within the context of their university education pathways.

4.3 University Decision and Choices

In this section, the factors will be analysed that underpin the students' decision-making processes to enter university. Several different meanings or interpretations are attached to how students think about studying at university. The analysis suggests that the whole objective of aiming for and entering university is a desire for self-improvement; (educationally, financially and professionally).

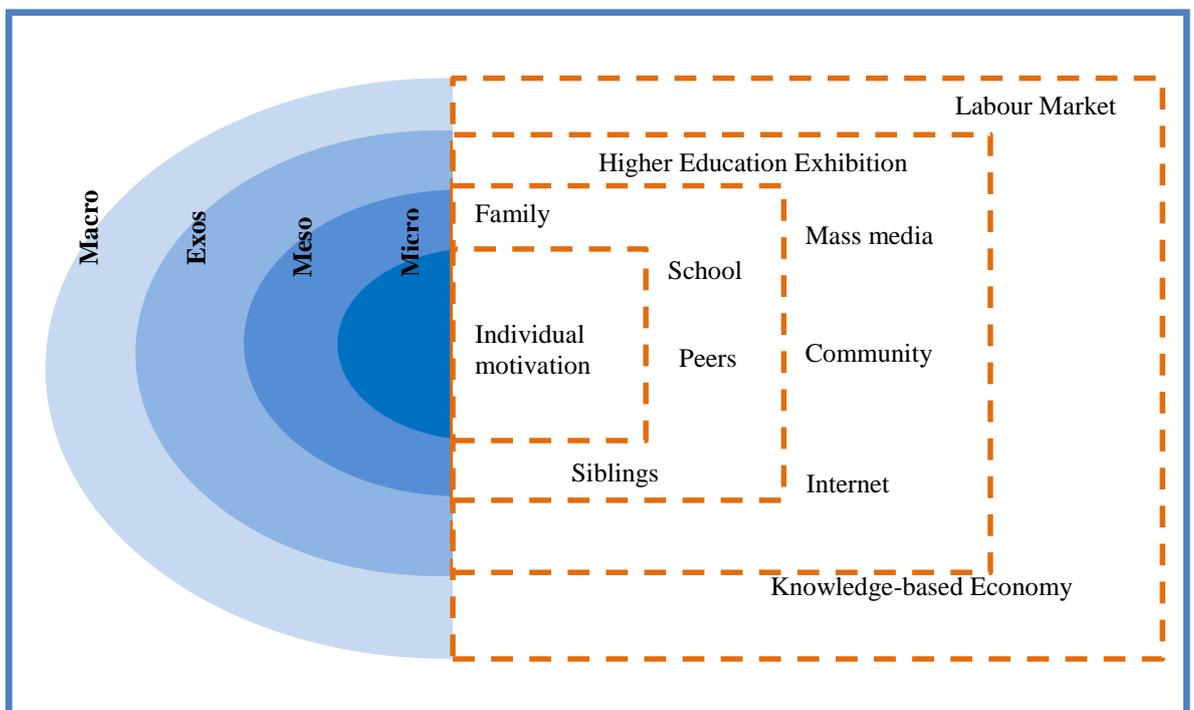
Based on individual student's interpretation, university is described as a place to increase personal academic potential: 'a place for study'; 'a place for students who show certain academic ability'; 'a place to get a degree'; others mention a desire to learn: 'a place where they can develop niches of interest'. Some express a belief that a degree from the university will record for them for their achievement: 'a place to be certified for certain ability'; one expressed the idea that university would involve a different type of study: 'a place where they need to be self-independent', with more freedom: 'a place where they are free'. The most obvious and consistent theme that emerges from the interviews with students who participated in this study was the majority of them wanted 'to be the best'—they wanted to become a successful person and that they believed it could be achieved by going to university.

The students' accounts confirm that the aspiration to attend university was a long-considered option. For instance, 10 of the students said they first aimed to enter university while they were in lower secondary school, and the decision becomes focused when they were in sixth form. Students' perspectives of university education and their decision to enter the university were influenced by various factors. In other words, decisions on university education are not solely an outcome of individual academic potential and

achievement, but relate to the impact of surrounding factors with which their behaviour interacts to influence each other.

To present the relationship between individual and their environments, this study takes the ecological systems model by Bronfenbrenner (2005) that illustrates the multiple levels of influence including microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The nested frameworks of interactions as shown in Figure 4.1 begin at micro-level; an individual factor focuses on the potential impact of individual intellectual ability and intrinsic elements such as motivation and goals that contribute to what students want to achieve.

Figure 4.1: A Model of Factors that Influence Student University Aspiration and Choice



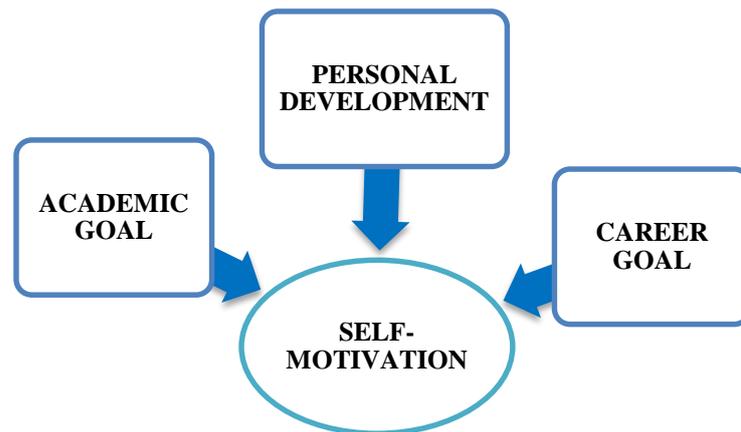
At the second level, the mesosystem consists of interactions between a student, parents' backgrounds and expectations, and this is supported by the role played by siblings and extended family members. It also includes the school habitus, with a crucial role to make a difference to student academic achievement through academic practices. At this level, social networks are a way of viewing the potential impact of friends as a medium communicating knowledge about university. At exosystems level, external resources refer

to factors such as community engagement, the Higher Education Exhibition, internet, and the mass media in assisting the student decision-making process. Finally, at macro-level, factors such as labour market competition and the knowledge-based economy emphasis on academic credentials become more important, and are embedded in students' career aspirations at the micro-level.

4.3.1 Self-motivation

Previous studies (eg Brown and Burkhardt, 1999) suggest that individual academic attitudes and previous achievement have a strong impact on what students want to do and achieve without considering their differences. For example, a study by Fisher (2005) on Black students finds that the desire to be responsible for one's own life as well as possessing high expectations for oneself are the key contribution to achievement. Students in this study possess the same attitude, despite coming from families lacking in both economic and dominant cultural capital, or showing a strong motivation or desire to attend university. Students described themselves in ways consistent with socio-cognitive theory (Zimmerman *et al.*, 1992), stating that they were self-motivated, goal-oriented learners. Three key goals were identified that underpinned their decision to further their education to university: academic goals, career aspirations and personal development.

Figure 4.2: Decision to Enter University



4.3.1.1 Academic goal

Despite coming from families lacking in both economic and dominant cultural capital, some students first showed academic potential in primary school and continued as they began secondary school. Attitudes towards higher education or knowledge about higher or

university education are primarily not well developed or something even discussed at this stage. For example, as described by Tino:

I always have high ambition, to achieve high grades in my study, and the teacher always said that one day I will enter the university, but at that time I don't know what is the university.

However, expectations of university increased when they progressed to secondary school and, based on student responses, 10 of 16 said they became interested in going to university when they were in lower secondary, although unsure which course to study (between Form 1 and Form 2), while the rest were in their upper secondary (between Form 4 and Form 5). Transition to secondary school, especially upper secondary, is a highly significant move for all students, and is especially challenging since not every student makes a successful transition. It is generally a challenge when students fail to demonstrate expected progress at the Form 5 examination (SPM examination).

In Malaysia, student performance at the SPM examination is usually considered an important level for students to evaluate their academic competence for study at the post-secondary level since those who perform well have greater chances to take university preparation courses, Matriculation or other post-secondary education options. Thus, the SPM result operates as internal guiding system for students to plan the next stage of their education journey. However, due to competition, not every student in this study who was awarded high grades qualified for any of the options mentioned above and sixth form had to serve as an alternative pathway to university entrance. This is clearly articulated by Abby, who was determined to do well in sixth form after she failed to get onto the Matriculation programme. Students' strong self-determination to do well at sixth form is also a way to overcome any weaknesses and demonstrate satisfactory academic progress in Form 5. For example, Nissa, Prema and Mirul turned to arts subjects at sixth form when they did not perform well in science subjects at SPM level, and the decision was also relevant to their particular career or course interest, that is, Law.

Meanwhile, for Avin, the opportunity to enter sixth form was perceived as a second chance for him to improve on his previous performance. Working hard meant exerting more effort than previously and Avin showed signs of positive change after realizing he had not paid much attention to his studies in the past, especially when he had unexpected

and disappointing results in his SPM examination. Thus, he described his decision to put in his best effort and worked consistently and reasonably hard at sixth form, not only to overcome his past experience of failure but not to disappoint his parents again. According to Avin, he put all his effort into studying, mainly to fulfil his father's expectation of him becoming a lawyer.

Strong self-determination to change previous performance and attitudes towards education is further elaborated in Azif's narratives. The change in Azif from being a low-profile student to someone with high self-determination in sixth form is summed up as follows:

I was a very low-profile student when I was in form one to Form 5, but when I entered to sixth form with the target that I wanted to enter to university, I think I need to expose myself. Thus since lower form I tried to expose myself like I was head prefect in the school. I was also actively involved in extra-curriculum activities. Through this it helped me to build up my self-confidence.

Azif's transformation highlights two key points. First, students are more determined when they have a clear direction and goal they want to achieve. Secondly, with a goal students are aware of the changes they need to make if they want to become successful in future. Overall, students enter sixth form with the motivation to overcome weaknesses and to perform well in examinations as preparation for university education.

Based on this analysis, individual student's behaviour, actions, thoughts and beliefs are influenced by their inner drive to succeed. It is not surprising that the issue of earning high grades is pressing. Within this context, high school grades are often viewed as representations towards a specific end. Thus, it is not surprising when Nissa mentioned:

you have to suffer and struggle, because everyone fight for the place... so you need high pointer... everyone have potential to enter university, however the advantage only for those with high pointer.

Nissa's belief in 'hard work' to achieve a certain goal is supported by others. This is a common process, and it is an open competition where individuals from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds and academic ability compete for same objective.

The importance getting high grades is not limited to meeting the entry requirements for university, but to secure a place in a public university and, further, to qualify for a scholarship. The following notion presented by Tino represents not only his personal view

but applies to his entire cohort, as a public university is the main target. It relates to his family's SES. Students are certain their parents cannot afford to support their study at private university or colleges. This was Tino's and Ting's situation when they failed to be chosen for their preferred course at a public university, and their attempts to continue their studies at a private university failed because of their parents' financial situation. Tino had an ambition to be a medical doctor. In his case, the desire ended when his application at public university was not accepted because he failed to get high grades and when his single mother was unable to finance his education at a private university. Thus, Tino had to forget this ambition and accept an offer from the local public university in Actuarial Science. Ting had to sacrifice her decision to study Statistics at National University of Singapore because she had to consider her family's economic situation and her father's concern for her two brothers, who are still studying.

Furthermore, as the first child in the family to attend university, as are 11 participants, their achievement in entering university would have a positive impact on the decision of younger siblings to study at university. They wanted to set an example to their brothers and sisters. For example, as Mirul said:

I want to be a role model for my little brother and sister by showing them that just because our parents not educated, that is not going to stop us from making our dreams come true.

In this analysis, the overall understanding of the students presented here is about strong self-determination to increase their academic performance to achieve their goal. High academic motivation is important an attitude presented by the students, who are optimistic about the actions needed to be taken to help them secure a brighter future. Regardless of background, each student believed they would be able to access university, be admitted to the course in which they were interested and, finally, to get a scholarship if they achieved high grades.

Students' academic goals persisted after they began university. Based on student feedback, most of them wanted to get higher pointers, be on the dean's list and perform well academically. This is articulated at early entry points, when students were not engaged or truly experiencing the process of learning at university.

4.3.1.2 Career aspiration

Secondly, studying for a degree was primarily motivated by instrumental/vocational goals, reflecting on their motivation to increase their levels of economic and socio-cultural capital. Students consistently concurred that the need for university education is universally accepted, especially within the context of a credential-inflated labour market. Higher education qualifications were perceived as essential aspects of their future lives, as described in some of student interviews: 'have a comfortable life', 'I aim for a higher and better job' and, 'earn better income'. Student motivation to perform academically is supported by their clear career goals. In this study, eight students exhibit a positive and proactive approach to their academic pathways when they have well-articulated ambitions and plans. According to Schneider and Stevenson (1999, p. 6), 'students with aligned ambitions know the type of job they want and how much education is needed to get it'. Students' university plans developed from a range of factors, for example Tino's interest to become a doctor began when he was a small child, however his results in STPM limited his chance to be admitted onto the course, and instead he was selected for the Actuarial Science programme. In Avin's and Mirul's case, fulfilling their parents' ambition was their reason to choose Law. For Abby, her interest to become a lawyer developed after she visited a Law Faculty at the University of Malaya when she was in lower-sixth. She felt challenged when the lecturer said the academic admission for the course is very high and the course was tough. Abby described herself as liking to take a risk and had a strong belief in her academic ability. Thus, she selected Law because she wanted to challenge her academic ability. So, with clear goals in mind, she started to concentrate on her studies when she was in lower-sixth. Apart from that, she actively participated in school activities because she wanted to build her confidence and personality.

Furthermore, Azif's intention to study Law emerged from his idealistic interest in political issues and administrative practices in the country. He believed that having knowledge of Law would contribute to better practices, as in future he was interested in becoming a politician. From a different position, the reason Nissa chose Law was the 'status' the course brought in what is apparently an elite subject within the arts. She clearly stated that selecting this kind of course would automatically increase her status in society: 'better position and high status in society'. She believed that she was honoured as a first-generation student from a working-class background to enter a programme dominated by

students from high- and middle-class backgrounds. Her desire to improve her SES also fits with the discourse of leaving behind one's socio-economic background, 'trying to get away from where I came from'.

Furthermore, Emma's goal to become an English lecturer was a main reason why she chose TESL and this interest developed through her aunt, who is an English lecturer. For Ying and Ting, their interest in becoming a statistician and chemist was driven by their interest in these subjects.

The other six students decided on their courses after they received their results and during the selection process. For example, Gary, Alin, Milly and Harn decided to apply for teaching, driven by their temporary teaching experiences after sixth form and while waiting for their results. In Gary's situation, for example, choosing Teaching in Sports was a combination of his talent in sports and experience in teaching. For Dan, his decision to choose Sports Education was because he felt he was more active in sport than academic subjects. By contrast, Awwa's decision to choose Sports Education was partly because she wanted to experiment with new interests and it had no relation to her background as a student from a religious school. Besides, her decision to select the course was based on her belief that the sports course was less competitive than the Islamic Education course, so she felt more confident and secure with her decision.

Furthermore, students felt it was not a barrier for them to choose a certain career different from parents' backgrounds, believed that their education pathway depended on academic ability. The notion that the child inherits its parents' occupation is clearly argued against by Azif in his comments below:

It is common to see children inherit their parents' occupation. Like me, from working-class backgrounds should change that kind of mentality. It is doesn't mean that if there is no-one in the family success, we could not to achieve that job. If we want something, we should get it. Background is important but doesn't mean if we don't have backgrounds in Law, no family member doing Law, so we could not do it.

The general consensus was that having a degree was a route to better job prospects. The students' statements demonstrated that, apart from individual targets, surrounding factors have a great impact on student career decisions, ranging from parents' expectations,

a desire to increase social status, family role models, political interest, working experience and a desire to explore new opportunities. The limitation that surrounds them, especially their class origin, is not a constraint for these students in their aim for a professional occupation, such as a doctor, lawyer, teacher, chemist and statistician. In conclusion, the students in this study used their future career goals and aspirations as a way to stay focused, and they used these goals to fuel their internal motivation.

4.3.1.3 Personal development

As well as having instrumental aspirations, the students' accounts revealed their motivation to improve additional aspects of their lives. Students expressed a strong belief that university education is an opportunity for self-improvement. Personal development is perceived as an important aspect to develop after they began university. In particular, students highlighted four main skills they intended to develop: leadership skills, self-confidence, self-independence, and communication skills.

Developing leadership skills is highlighted as one of the important aspects that students expected they would develop. This is mainly driven by the positive leadership opportunities and experiences at school that they intended to build on and is consistent with Azif and Tino's account. Gary was previously a head boy at school and actively participated in school activities. This expectation related to student career expectations and is what has been mentioned by Mirul and Azif, whilst their personal interest in becoming politicians links to the skills that they need to develop. The rest, such as Harn and Prema, hoped their involvement in extra-curricular activities, such as holding a post on any particular committee, would help them to build their leadership skills.

Secondly, students mentioned they wanted more self-confidence. This is particularly important in an independent-living context. For example, building up self-confidence was crucial for Awwa, who was not confident in making her own decisions. She hoped the learning and living process at university would help her to be more confident about herself. Similar expectations were shared by Prema, who was very close to her parents to the extent that in many cases she would depend on her parents to make decisions for her. Although for Awwa and Prema being independent was tough, for Abby a desire to be independent and get out of her comfort zone combined in her decision to attend university, as she stated,

Since Form 1 until sixth form I stayed with my family, I feel comfortable, but now I want to get out from this comfort zone.

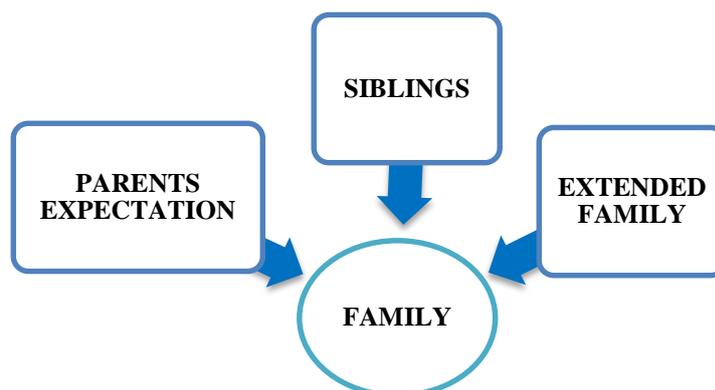
Furthermore, motivation to improve additional aspects emerged, and the importance of developing good communication skills. Even though communication skill is a broad concept, students try to direct the concept to their ability to communicate in the English language. They realize that they lack the ability, particularly those from a family environment where speaking in English is not daily practice, as in schools teaching and learning is mostly in the Malay language. Harn, for example, recognized that she wanted to acquire some skill to enable her to communicate more effectively in English and is the reason she chose TESL at UKM.

Students express the idea that university is a way of ‘bettering oneself’. Students’ remarks on the personal benefits of higher education reflect a view that university education is an opportunity for self-discovery and development.

4.3.2 Family-based motivation

The analysis in this section is to understand the role played by the family as a contributing factor for their decision to enter university, by parents, siblings and extended family. This will be further expanded in following sections.

Figure 4.3: Family-based Motivation



4.3.2.1 Parental influences

Parental influence is consistently identified as crucial factor in university decisions by students (Hossler *et al.*, 1999). External sources of motivation reported by almost all students were their parents. The ways in which parents contribute to students’ higher

education aspirations has three aspects. The first that arose from the data relates to parents' low SES, which is invariably associated with parents' low educational level, low occupational status and low level of income. Secondly, the results demonstrate a connection between parental expectation and student personal motivation to attend university. Finally, their encouragement supports students' educational process.

The initial push to attain a degree is perhaps the best way for students to support their families. The desire to help their parents is more apparent when they had previously helped their parents in farming, as a night market hawker or small retailer. They realized their parents had to work hard to earn income to support their families. For example, Dan symbolized his family's poor living conditions by saying that 'they don't have much to eat and wear'. The reality faced by these students makes them more responsive to their obligation to support their family in future. This is associated with great belief in the importance of success in academic study and obtaining a degree and then finding a financially rewarding career to provide a good life to support themselves as well as their families. The desire to help their parents is perhaps best expressed by Avin, whose parents are employed as estate workers:

I always wanted to help my parents, because I got to see them working, helping them to do the work, and I know how hard it is, and my father only earn little income to support us.

Furthermore, the obligation to support the family becomes more pressing, especially for the eldest in their family or the child of single parents. For example, as mentioned by Avin: 'I am the eldest in the family, and I am responsible to look after my parents in future'. The pressure to support the family was more intense for those brought up by single parents like Tino and Gary. Tino witnessed the struggles and obstacles his mother underwent to raise him and his brother due to her status as a single mother. Thus, his mother is a strong motivation for him, and he believed that by being a successful person academically and being awarded a degree would give his mother a sense of accomplishment.

The value of academic success is not only associated with a sense of duty to support the family but indirectly increases their parents' status in society. In the cultural context of society, especially in working-class families, success in education is highly

valued. A child's educational attainment is a symbol of status; for example, according to Ting's notions, motivation to increase her family's status was not limited to attending university but, more importantly, being awarded a first class degree:

I don't want people to look down on my dad, so I want to prove to them, I want to get 1st class degree. I know it needs hard work. I want to prove and show to my parents that if they could not do it, they don't have chances to do it, so I want to do it for them. I want to succeed.

Ting believed she was fortunate to have access to good education, compared to that which her parents experienced. Thus, as their child, it is her responsibility to be academically excellent as a practical way to pay for what her parents had sacrificed for them. Ting further explained in the interview that her father felt proud to tell his friends that two of his children were already at university.

Parents' expectations significantly motivate student to enter the university. They value educational achievement and have expectations for their children to continue their study beyond high school. Students reported that their parents' expectations for them developed since they were at primary school; as Milly said: 'my father always expected me to go to university'. Parents' expectations indirectly act as a pushing factor for students to perform better in their studies.

Students become more focused with their university decisions when parents show some level of job expectations, and six students mentioned that their parents have occupational expectations of them. According to these students, this is based on aspects such as career prospects, income and status. Emphasis on these three aspects tends to reflect the dominant conceptions of achieving social mobility. In Harn's case, for example, her parents wanted her to become a teacher because they felt it was more secure in terms of a job, while for Avin, Mirul, and Prema, Law was chosen to respect their parents' wishes for a career that is valued and respected in society.

At the same time, even though each child respected their parents' decision, some students were more willing to focus on what they believed was the best for them. For example, Gary exercised more autonomy about his choices, selecting teaching as a profession even though his mother did not agree; she wanted him to be an engineer, perceiving this as having more status in terms of career, salary and value in society.

Actually she don't want me to become a teacher, because she thought that becoming a teacher is like... people look down on teachers, something like that... not professional enough, she ask me why don't go for engineering.

On the other hand, some parents were more moderate in their expectations and simply wished their child to pursue university education without attempting to direct what they should study or should become. For example, Ting said her parents did not want to put too much pressure on her to study, saying: 'my parents don't expect me to get high pointer, they said as long I can enter the university is enough'.

Parents' expectations for their child's educational attainment and future career generally showed positive attitudes towards education, and parents highly valued education as a means to upward mobility and success. Meanwhile, for a child to fulfil their parents' expectations is perceived as a way to value and respect them.

Along with high expectations for educational attainment, the analysis has shown that parental support and encouragement is one of the most important indicators of students' university aspirations. This supports previous findings from several studies (eg Auerbach, 2002; Hossler, Schmidt and Vesper, 1999). Students in this study are strongly encouraged by their parents through: advice, informal family communication, a positive learning environment at home, and the provision of additional resources for study.

Findings from this study give insights into the importance of advice on a child's psychological well-being. According to Avin, without the support and belief from his parents he would not have achieved high pointer of 3.85 in his STPM examination; as he said, 'I don't think so that I can make it, because my academic achievement drop when I was in Form 3 and Form 5, but with the support, believed and trust they give on me I manage to makes this dream come true'. With his hard work, Avin not only managed to get a high pointer but enter the Law programme. Advice to do well in their studies is also revealed in other students' accounts.

Parents also support and encourage their child through informal communication. This was identified in Abby, Emma and Milly's narratives. Normally parents will use dinner or free time to get up to date with anything to do with their studies.

My mum very particular about education, even though she is a housewife but education very important for her. Every night she gave a talk. She told me what

university education is. Why I need education and how my future career is going to be. She always said if I have strong education people will respect me.

Emma's mother's comment is an example of how acutely aware parents were of the value and status university education and professional qualifications would bring to the family and the individual, irrespective of their own education or background. Apart from that, through this communication process students know that their parents are concerned for their studies and academic performance.

Furthermore, the home environment has a significant impact on student academic motivation. For example, in Milly's case her parents read newspapers or books while she and her siblings do revision. According to Emma, her mother accompanied her as she studied.

Some parents overcome their limitations by assisting students' academic learning, supporting their child with additional resources such as extra tuition and book purchases. For example, from the total sample participating in this study, 11 attended extra classes; only five did not.

The students' accounts offer information on 'How does parents' background influence their decision to go to university? It is clear that parents' education and occupational status is not a barrier to success but dramatically affects students' motivation to perform better in their studies. Interestingly, parents' expectations and beliefs, including what type of support is given to students, enhance academic success.

However, parents in this study were not directly involved with their child's university preparation and planning. First-generation parents are less likely to have access to the necessary information on university preparation and planning than non-first-generation parents, because of their unfamiliarity with the higher education admission system—mainly caused by their educational status (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006). However, this notion is perceived differently by Ying, who describes her mother as being involved in her university education plans and trying to be helpful by gathering information about universities, courses and scholarships from the teachers at her workplace by asking what they have planned for their children and what is the best she can do for her child. According to Ying, her mother will discuss with her this information from her colleagues at school. Ying's mother is confident and wants the best for her daughter

because of the academic potential shown by Ying since primary school. According to Ying, she was impressed by her mother's expectations and aspirations for her, and this motivates her. Ying's mother efforts demonstrate the level of awareness and trust they hold for their child; even though their lack of cultural and social capital could be passed down to their child, instead access information around them to deliver the message and to help with their education success.

Given the lack of prior knowledge as well as access to information about university, it is not surprising that most of the students said they did not get help from their parents during the planning and application process. Students appeared to depend more upon school teachers and counsellors to provide the requisite guidance for course selection and university in general. This will be further explained in **Section 4.3.3.1**.

In some instances, the success of family members such as siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins with university education offer students guidance and resources on university education. This becomes parts of the reason why students want to attend university. This will be discussed in the following sections.

4.3.2.2 The role of siblings

Literature has placed considerable emphasis on siblings' perspectives of the transition to university student (Shields, 2002). In this study, five students referred to being partly motivated by their older brother or sister studying or graduating from university due to seeing them being successful. Older siblings embody various roles for younger siblings. First, the older sibling with university education is a strong role model for a first-generation student. According to these students, their university education expectations become more real when one of their family members attends university. Older siblings provide a potential example of educational achievement and career aspiration. This influences the educational aspirations of the younger siblings. For example, according to Ting her sister's success was a source of motivation, as she said: 'she is at university... she is in final year now... and she always motivate me'.

Normally the student has a personal educational plan that they would like to achieve and they should like to be appreciated for the qualities they have and their differences from their older siblings. Therefore, not every child likes it when their parents

compare them with their elder sibling or propose they follow the same pathway. This was experienced by Azif, as his mother always compared his academic achievement with his elder brother's and he was under pressure to perform well to compete with his brother academically. Finally, Azif proved himself when he was admitted onto a Law course.

Furthermore, an older sibling is a role model in terms of a younger sibling's career aspirations. For instance, Awwa's decision to choose teaching as a profession was influenced by his brother, who is a teacher, who he considered to be his main resource and reference for information about the teaching profession.

Secondly, older siblings with university education provide invaluable insights into university and educational matters. According to Shah (2007), in a working-class family the older siblings generate cultural capital for the family. Students with older siblings who have attended university were expected to benefit from the experience of their older siblings about the university. For example, Harn's decision to enter UKM was directly influenced by her eldest sister, and for her having a sister at the same university provided emotional support, especially in the early socialization process:

My sister influenced my decision to go into UKM, because easy I have someone to guide me, all my friends' in sixth form went to another university, only I am here; at least I still have my sister to accompany me.

In a similar vein, Azif's decision to enter UKM was made because he feels more comfortable and familiar with the UKM environment. This is because his brother previously studied there and currently worked at the same university. For Azif, the opportunity to visit his brother at the university gave him the experience of the university prior to entry and enabled him to establish a sense of the place and the lifestyle and finally choose it as a place to study.

Even though elder siblings have a potentially great influence on sharing information, it would not be effective if siblings do not spend much time together. According to Abby, the information that she can share with her sister is limited because her sister took another course and now studies far from their hometown at a different university from that she planned to attend: 'my sister didn't share much of her experience, because she studying at Sabah, and we hardly meet'. Due to the distance the relationship was not close, because they did not spend much time together.

Previous studies do not report widely on the findings that look at the other aspects of their older siblings as a source of motivation, such as non-academic achievement. For example, Prema admired the success of both her brothers in business, even though they only had diplomas. Their strong courage and success was taken as an example for her to be successful academically and as a career she chose to be a lawyer. On some occasions students said their brothers attended parent-teacher meetings at school and discussed their younger brother's or sister's education progress, bought revision books and motivated them to study. According to Prema, both brothers gave full support to her education.

In contrast, the failure of older siblings can be an incentive to work hard. As Ting explained, she learned something from her second sister who was unsuccessful in her examination and failed to be admitted to university. According to Ting, her sister used herself as a negative example to encourage Ting to aspire to university education and advised her to not make the same mistake. Students also found the living status of their elder siblings who did not gain higher education qualifications to be more difficult. This situation is common in working-class families where children who not succeed academically normally choose to work to support the family, and it correlates with parents' limitations in financing their education at private colleges. For example, Gary mentioned his eldest sister sacrificing her studies because she felt responsible for her single mother supporting two younger boys who were still studying. Thus, even though Gary thought about going to work and helping the family, this was not a decision that was supported by his mother and sister. In this circumstance, a student's determination to get a degree to earn a better income and support the family grows stronger.

The findings presented above support past research findings that older siblings' success has a positive impact on the decisions of younger siblings to study at university. At the same time, the analysis also reveals new themes not widely discussed in the fields of sibling influences. For example, older siblings' success in non-academic fields is seen as motivation to succeed in the field in which they think they have most strength. In different circumstances, elder siblings' positions of lower success in academic studies or sacrifices to be made to support the family indirectly contribute to students' aspiration for a degree.

4.3.2.2 The role of extended family

This study focuses on the potential impact of other family members such as uncles, aunts and cousins. Seven of the students reported that their relatives studying at university, or who had graduated and had a successful career, formed important social networks and act as a role models and provide information about the university.

The success of relatives is not only an inspiration for individual students, but influences what parents want their child to become. The extended family members acted as what Crozier and Davies (2006, p. 685) describe as 'high status role models'. Cross-ethnic networks (Shah *et al.*, 2010), through family networks, had allowed them to acquire some degree of dominant cultural capital.

Social connections offer information and other resources necessary for getting students to university. For example, Emma's university educational aspirations were inspired by her aunts and uncles who became engineers, lecturers and teachers. She had even considered becoming an English lecturer because of her aunts and described one as her main reference, whereby she receives information related to university education and the preparations for entering university. Below Emma narrates her view:

during the family gathering, normally my uncle and aunts will discuss about education, they always encourage me, they telling what course to take, which job has prospects right now... because they have the knowledge...

The extended family and student university education aspiration includes cousins. Normally they used them as a resource for information about university or the course or as a role model. Nissa contacted her cousin to ask about the Law course at UKM, and through this developed some expectations. A similar situation is also mentioned by Tino and Avin, where their cousin closely guided them through the university education process. For Prema, attending her cousin's graduation ceremony was described as a memorable event that inspired her to pursue her study at university.

This situation was perceived differently by students from families with no higher education background. For example, Dan was from a family with no relatives with a university degree, and he described the environment as less encouraging and motivating. For example, his decision to enter sixth form with the aim of university, instead of accepting an offer from a polytechnic, was undervalued by his uncle. He was disappointed

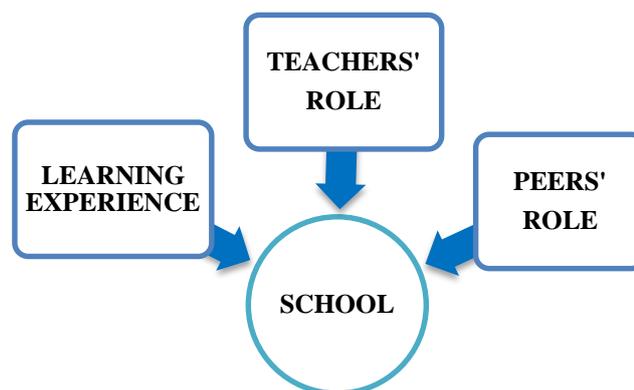
when his uncle told him that not that many pass the STPM examinations because of difficulty, but this did not affect his motivation to proceed with what he think was best for him.

For first-generation students, the social networks that develop with relatives enable them to share information and resources about university and help navigate the pathway to university.

4.3.3 The school habitus

The way schools prepare their students may also have a significant effect on pathways to higher education (Arum, 1998; Bragg *et al.*, 2002). School is considered an important medium to provide the social and cultural capital that is limited in the working-class student home environment. School is considered to be effective, based on the assumption that factors at school level such as resources, leadership and the teaching and learning practices help to cultivate student academic potential and soft skills, the range of activities offered, the medium of interaction, and expected pass rates, possess not only direct but indirect effects. Relationships between school and student university decisions can be identified in learning experiences and teachers' and peers' roles.

Figure 4.4: The School Factors



4.3.3.1 Learning experience

Learning experience at school is another important factor that influences the academic achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Students described their experiences at school from aspects such as the school culture, classroom-level factors, school activities, and student involvement.

Students are more motivated to do well and achieve their full potential in schools that have a positive school culture. For example, Tino's schooling was in a school located in a major city with a good academic reputation and a high number of its students progressed to university. Good resources and facilities helped him to develop his academic potential and socio-cultural capital. Tino performed well academically and mixed well within the community; he was chosen as head boy and a class monitor when he was in sixth form. He also actively participated in clubs and games and become chair of the badminton club. Without feeling he was judged or being seen as different, Tino mixed well and was sociable with teachers and peers.

In accordance with Tino's experience, students feel valued when they can show their talents. For example, Gary's talent in *Wushu* (traditional Chinese martial arts) caused him to be selected as a state player and indirectly made him an idol at school. According to Gary, his involvement in tournaments at state level helped him to build up the confidence to interact with people of different levels and backgrounds. In a similar vein, Milly established good rapport with the teachers and was well known among the pupils at school because of her ability in debate. The three examples presented here are an overview of how school provides chances for students to develop their potential, which indirectly increases their self-confidence.

Students also describe educational system practices at school that indirectly affect their academic attitudes. According to Ting and Ying, they became accustomed to the Chinese school emphasis on the importance of knowledge, competitiveness and achievement. Thus, not surprisingly, both these students mentioned that they always aimed for good grades. Students also agreed that the academic orientation of the school to prepare them to pass the competitive entrance examination to university may be the significant factor that pushes students to strive for high educational goals.

Apart from what is emphasized by the school in general, the different academic practices encountered at sixth form are a new learning discovery. The transition to sixth form is an important turning point for a number of students, marked by such events as transfer to another school, another class or a different stream that provided them with opportunities for new experience and conscious change.

Transition to sixth form is very much a transition from traditional learning to independent and self-motivated study, as well as being a tremendous opportunity to achieve academic success and important pathways to university. Thus, not surprisingly, some students said their learning experience in sixth form is to be an important or interesting period of schooling different from their previous academic experience. For example, as noted in Azif's extract:

In my life the most interesting period is sixth form, even though I was in same school from Form one to Form 5... I am not very motivated in my study... but I am more excited with my study in sixth form, the academic practices different.

Similar feelings were noted by others, who felt the sixth form was one of their great schooling experiences. They were excited by the more comprehensive and adult learning environment. However, this was not the case for all students involved in this process. For both Milly and Dan, for example, the move to a different school contrasted strongly with their previous one. In Milly's case, the transition was to a Chinese school wholly unlike her previous school, 'a culture of school that were different'. For Dan, the transition to sixth form from a school in working-class neighbourhood changed his academic attitudes. The learning environment of the classroom contributed, as did peers' attitudes towards academic study and encouragement from the teacher for students like him to be more open-minded about university education and to believe that it is achievable.

School helps to increase student awareness on university education also through school activities such as: a university visiting programme and seminars and talks by a former student. This was identified as an excellent opportunity for students to developed early expectations of a university education. For example, five students said a university visit was a reasonably strong influence on their early aspirations for university and in particular on their preference for a particular institution and field of study. According to these students the visits helped them to experience university life from several aspects: 'the environment'; 'students' lifestyle'; 'the lecture'; and 'the course'. For example, as shared by Emma,

I visit UKM when I was in Form 3. Since then I aimed that I really wanted to enter the university, I put in my mind that I really wanted to enter this university and I worked hard for it. I never thought that I will study here... yea maybe because of my first visit

For Emma, this first visit to university made her decide for and continue with university studies. For Abby, it helped to be more focused on the course she wanted to study and the university she wanted to attend. She had clear information about the course requirements such as a high admission pointer and good English proficiency. This clear expectation helped her to prepare from the beginning. It is apparent that, for these five students, the visit to university had had a positive impact on their attitude towards higher education and had helped to raise students' aspirations and motivations to achieve at school. Also, the school invited former students to talk to the class about their experiences in university and this was considered to have been important. For example, Mirul found listening to senior's experience was helpful to develop some early knowledge and information on university.

4.3.3.1 The role of teachers

In comparison with parents, siblings and extended family, teachers seem to hold a pre-eminent position in students' early conceptions and expectations of university. Teachers shared experiences about their university life with students and this gave them some early information and expectations. Teachers are perceived as important agents for a working-class student in several ways: motivation and academic support, and knowledge about university.

Teachers in school are important role models for students. They explained that teachers have a pervasive effect on them, and from overall views students perceived that their teachers are important, particularly in terms of providing motivation, encouragement, and assistance through their education. One student noted with regard to her teacher,

Besides my parents, the second motivation for me to enter university is my teacher. I close with them... they share their experience on university, so I also want to go through the same experience. (Milly: First Interview: First Semester)

Teachers have a major impact on some students' educational development. In Gary's narrative he explained how he changed from being a misbehaving boy in Grade 2 to a well-behaved student, with support from the teacher. Since then, his academic work improved. According to Gary, this experience was also a starting point for him to choose teaching as a profession. He believed through education he could assist many students.

Students' aspirations to attend university are greatly affected by the encouragement and support received from teachers. In this study, it is found that the level of encouragement to prepare for university received from teachers is greater for students with higher levels of academic performance. For example, teachers always had high expectations of Nissa's academic achievement, and one even identified her as one of the students most likely to get the best grade point average in the school. For Nissa, her teachers' expectations and belief in her academic ability affected her achievement motivation,

the teacher always support me, they always motivate me and tell me that I would enter the university... because I am one of the best student in school... so they always give attention to me... so their expectations give me big inspiration.

This is supported by views from Stewart (2006) and Benner and Mistry (2007), where teachers' expectations affect students' academic success.

Additionally, teachers support students by assisting them in their studies. The teachers help them to undertake extra work and are easier to access and more willing to help, even if they no longer teach them. This pattern was pronounced in those entering the sixth form of the same school; it was an advantage for students to continue in contact their former teachers, as in this comment by Avin: 'whatever I don't understand I will do the exercise and I'll give it to them. They don't mind how much I give; they will check and give me feedback'. From the support and encouragement received, these students feel more supported. As Alin said: 'I feel like there is someone take care and someone that I can rely on.'

As is evident from prior research (Ceja, 2001), students in this study rely heavily on teachers for university information. According to the students, their teacher or counsellor is their main reference for university education, ranging from help with university and course selection, to sharing their experiences of university education. This is clearly articulated by Tino, as can be seen below:

I consult with my teacher like give me guidance, he has more experience, so based on my pointer he guided me with the application process, he will advise me which course is better, which one is the 1st choice and which one not to put and they will suggest scholarship because they know more. I followed the teacher's advice.

Almost all students contacted their teacher or counsellor to get advice about their decision on which course to choose, entrance qualifications, selection process and career prospects. Students consult teachers because they perceive them as more experienced and with more knowledge, and thus able to assist them with the selection process.

In some cases, students relied totally upon teachers' suggestions for both course and university. This is what was experienced by Dan; according to him this is because he had limited knowledge, and his restricted IT knowledge curtailed his ability to access the information through the internet.

Conversely, advice was not always positive. For example, Nissa perceived as discouraging her counsellor's suggestion to apply for courses other than Law, because her pointer was low due to the admission grades. However, determined to carry out her decision, Nissa did what she felt was best for her. At this point, she showed some level of confidence on what she thought she could achieve, and the suggestion from the counsellor was taken as one possibility that she might face.

This is differently articulated by Abby, who took the counsellor's advice to choose UKM instead of University of Malaya (UM), even though she was keen to attend UM. First of all, Abby was not confident because her grades were low, and then, when the counsellor told her UM had a large number of non-Malay students and the medium of instruction is English, it undermined her belief that she would fit in. She inevitably felt disappointed when she learned that some of her friends were indeed admitted to the Law programme at UM with grades lower than hers. However, listening to their experiences and hearing of the competition between Law students, she felt her decision was right.

In this context, to some extent teachers play an important role in advising on what they think is best for students based on their knowledge. However, teachers or counsellors impart advice and knowledge based on certain predispositions and in some cases their advice and suggestions undermined student potential and downgraded the individual's ability to perform. Potentially, a teacher at school should prepare students with some level of relevant knowledge about the course and the university, because for working-class students with reduced access to this kind knowledge at home, they represent the preferred source of information and so it a matter for concern that they give transparent information

on all aspects of the university. Their previous experiences may not necessarily be relevant to the context of students nowadays and they may inadvertently provide incorrect information.

4.3.4.2 The role of peers

Furthermore, some students sought guidance from peers at school or older friends who had successfully continued their post-secondary trajectory. In this context, Gibson, Gándara, and Koyama (2004) posit that peers can be ideal sources of university college knowledge and social capital through social networks and value orientations; however, they maintain ‘this requires that students have friends with the requisite social capital to share’ (p. 6).

At sixth form, usually every student comes with the same aspiration to enter university: as Abby said: ‘every one of us in same level, and everyone has one target to enter the university... and there is no feeling I am better or you are better’. The peer effects have a significant impact on educational outcomes and operate by a link between academic achievement and university aspiration.

In a similar vein, Emma described:

friends at school, we always motivate each other... we know that this is our last chance, if we miss it we’re in trouble so we really want to make it to enter university.

Being within a group of student with the same goals is the best opportunity for students from different socio-economic backgrounds to share information and preferences for universities. Through this process the information provided can lead to more informed and better choices. For example, Ying’s knowledge about post-secondary education is diverse as most of her friends, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, were considering pursuing degrees overseas or at local private universities after they completed their SPM.

Another medium for information is students’ seniors, whether from same school or tuition centre, studying their particular course at their particular university. These experiential sources, as described by Dyke *et al.* (2008), are based on their personal experiences at the institution by ‘word-of-mouth’ (James *et al.*, 1999). The information from their senior helps them learn about the course in terms of the admission process,

course structure, learning process, medium of instruction, exams, the pointer, and the lecturer, felt Nissa, Avin, Tino and Prema. For students without direct access from their home environment, a senior's experience at university helped to build some early expectations about university education. For example, as commented by Nissa:

my senior which studying at this university give me some information about the course like the language used, the assignment... so I came here with some information, even though not in very details.

These findings help us to understand the role played by the structural forces that shape the educational transition of a first-generation student from a working-class background. A number of points emerged, suggesting that the school structure and practices make differences to students' educational and personal development. Motivations to enter university are found to reflect on individuals' academic ability and this is further developed by the school culture, reflected in the resources and guidance provided. Students also highlight the important roles played by teachers and peers that contribute to the academic process of development, motivation and decisions about post-secondary education.

4.3.5 External resources

The external factors identified in an earlier section focuses on other influences that helped to increase student awareness of higher education or to make decisions about which course and university to apply to. Different factors were identified by students such as mass media, Higher Education Exhibition and the community. The form of mass media most well-known among students is the internet. Students normally used the internet to access information about the university and the course, and some also read blogs to get a closer picture of how students experience university life. Abby read blogs by a lawyer to get some experience about university life and the profession.

Other students mentioned the importance of higher education exhibitions. Tino and Mirul had attended this exhibition and it helped them to make decisions about the course and university.

The role played by the community in raising awareness of the importance of education is highlighted by Prema in her interview. According to Prema, the tuition centre organized by the Indian Community at her home town helped them to develop knowledge

about university. The centre helped through weekly seminars about university education, the courses and the admission process, provided a free magazine about the universities and the course and also organized visits. Furthermore, Prema explained the tuition centre arranged a talk by seniors studying at university. Students were later divided into groups based on the course they intended to apply for, and discussed matters in further detail. Prema's narrative explained the responsibilities of the community alongside the school in assisting students with higher education planning. The Indian Community has a community mission aimed at increasing the SES of this ethnic minority and help raise higher education awareness, as only a small percentage attend university.

4.4 Conclusion

First-generation students, those of working-class status or children from a single-parent homes all possess positive attitudes towards education. Based on the analysis, a strong commitment to personal change coupled with an aspiration to change their family's status appears to be a forceful motive. As presented in previous studies, first-generation status explains why a student might lack tacit knowledge about university, which indirectly impacts on their expectations of university study.

Thus, within this context, this study confirms the importance of considering the multi-dimensional reasons for embarking on their studies such as: parents, siblings, families, school and external resources. As suggested by Davies (2003), 'education decisions result from a complex relationship between different factors' (p. 15). Students realize that they do not have direct knowledge and information about university from their parents, therefore decisions about the course and university are an interplay between an individual's agency and strong influences of third parties, providing a new category for the school and higher education institutions in considering the best medium by which to increase student awareness of higher education. This interplay has an important role for these students who lack material and role models at home. The data presented show student knowledge about the course and the university are limited to the admission requirements and which universities offer their preferred course.

CHAPTER FIVE: FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES

5.1 Introduction

As demonstrated in Chapter Four, the most consistent theme that emerged from interviews with the students who participated in this study was that they wanted ‘to be the best’—they wanted to become successful people and believed this could be achieved by going to university. The analysis went beyond a focus on individual and familial habitus and found school context and external resources informed the choices of both university and course. An overview of pre-entry attributes of these first-generation students should yield further insights into the complexity of transition, in conjunction with their institution, academic and social experiences.

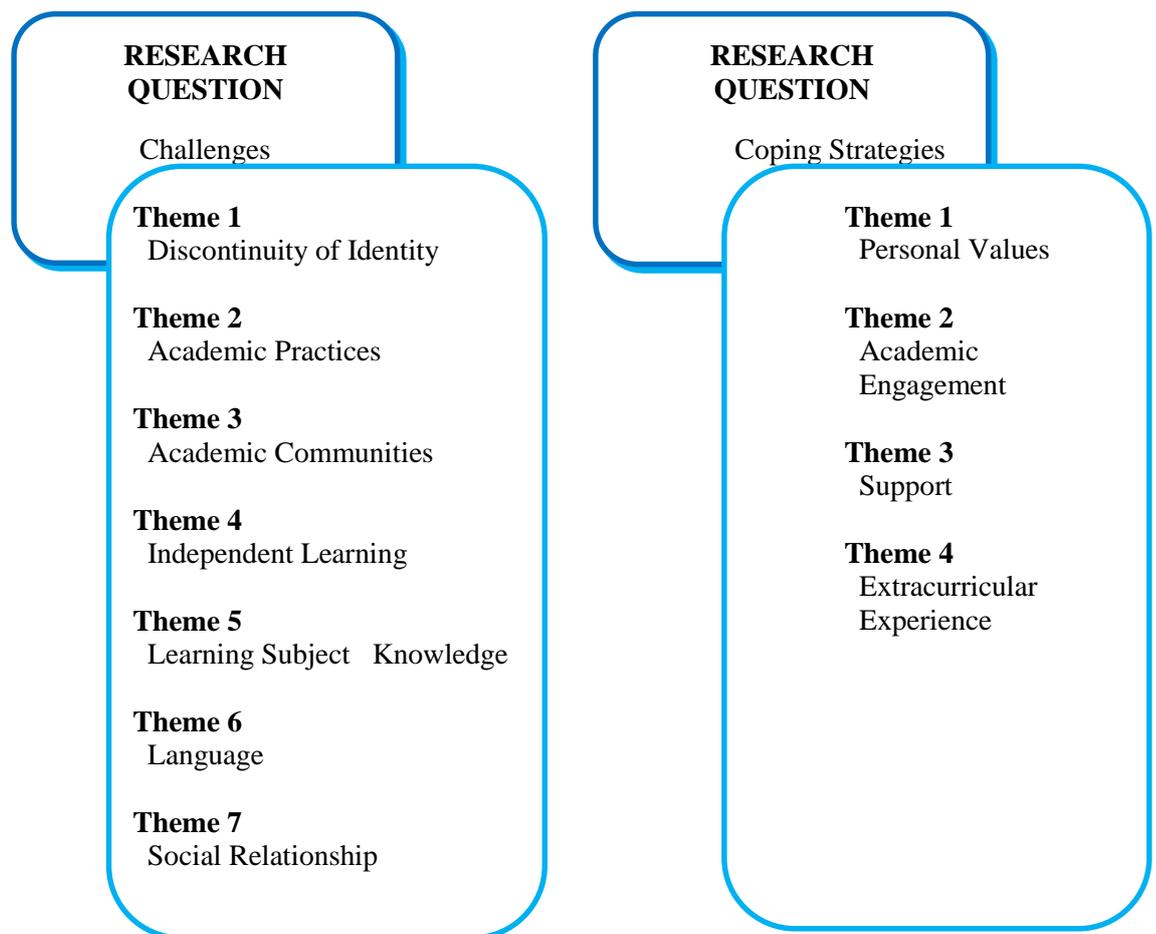
In this chapter, the analysis will explore the actors shaping students’ learning and development in their first-year of university. The analysis is divided into two sections. The first presents answers to the research question in relation to challenges faced in negotiating the academic and social experience. The research question is: What are the challenges for first-generation students during their transition into first year at UKM? The challenges that many students face are presented under seven sub-headings: a) discontinuity in identity, b) academic practice, c) academic communities, d) independent learning, e) learning subject knowledge, f) language, and g) social relationships.

Engagement starts when students try to connect themselves with learning communities and to meet the expectations of their new academic culture. Thus in this data analysis the focus is to understand how students fit this new environment. The adjustment process is analysed within the context of the interaction between student and institution and explores crucial factors that help students cope with and adjust to these changes. How students negotiate experiences, challenges and opportunity at this level is identified through the outcomes of academic and social integration process.

Change and adjustment in order to function effectively in the new culture appear to take place across the different domain of adjustment, and the analysis is presented under four sub-themes: a) personal value, b) academic engagement, c) support, and, d)

involvement in extra-curriculum activities. The central concern of data analysis in this chapter is to identify the connection between individual and institutional factors in student academic and social integration process. Figure 5.1 shows the analysis presented in this chapter.

Figure 5.1: Research Question



5.2 First-year Transition Challenges

For these first-generation students, the transition to university is described as a tremendous opportunity to increase self-potential. Students arrived with high aspirations and held a range of expectations for undertaking a degree at UKM. Alongside the excitement, the initial transition experience of these first-generation students into UKM was marked by fluctuating emotions as they dealt with a new learning environment with different systems,

cultures and people. The analysis below provides a comprehensive analysis of data from student interviews and journals, focusing on identifying the challenges faced by first-generation students in adapting to and engaging in the new learning context.

5.2.1 Discontinuity of identity

There are many complex challenges facing by first-generation students when they begin their first year at university. They are likely to experience ‘culture shock’ because of differences from prior education experience, roles, personal resources, and social environment. They are required to adjust the way they think about themselves to their new role and distinguish it from the one they have left behind. At this point students voice a sense of uncertainty, especially when they try to make sense what is going on in the new place and how to adopt to it. According to Cassidy and Trew (2004), this is normal because they are in a new situation with a new set of social and intellectual challenges that may raise questions about who they are and how they see themselves. The following quotes from Abby could sum up the view of many: ‘I am wondering how university life is going to be, I feel bit worried as well...’

Uncertainty about a new life at university underpinned Mirul’s extract, ‘you are going into the situation you have never been in before’. As this excerpt suggests, the key area of concerns for all students seem to be the idea of what they will encounter at university. Therefore it is not surprising when students initially express this move from the known role of a student to the relatively less familiar context as ‘cultural shock’.

The changing experience is characterized by a profound disjuncture between students’ prior knowledge and experience with new academic expectations and social adjustment. The feeling of adjustment to a new physical environment and needing to master the unfamiliar academic environment is described as ‘a different world’ from what they were accustomed. The differences in expectation and disruption from their familiar setting prompted a range of emotional responses such as: ‘I feel strange’, ‘feeling lost’, ‘unhappy’, ‘scared’, ‘stressed’, and ‘feel lonely’. Students’ early feelings were nervousness at the disparity between expectations and reality and uncertainty of what next to expect (Tierney, 2000). These feelings were normally associated when students were not ready for the new learning environment, new academic expectations, a more complex social relationship, and new interactions with the academics. As expressed by Mirul, ‘in a first

week I... feel like don't want get out from my room'. Students' experienced some anxiety and sense of alienation, and disorientation during the initial stage of enrolment. Some researchers termed this process as 'disequilibrium' (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007).

This study found a contradiction to exist between university and personal connections with school experiences and accomplishments. This was identified in student self-evaluations of their academic achievement level and involvement in school activities. For example, a student who enters with high entry grades might be confident that they would integrate successfully with university life. However, as described by Avin, earning high entry grades at STPM levels does not have any advantage over those from Matriculation, ASASI and Diploma backgrounds, as academically and socially they are far ahead. The following quote from Mirul captures how most students feel about this matter:

When I first enter came here, my self-confidence very high, after several weeks at university, when I saw other people more confidence than me... I feel quite down, I felt like I am the stupid one... I feel so small and so down.

According to Mirul it is important for a new student not to be 'overconfident' because there are other students who are more competent. In other words, success in achieving high grades during high school is not an indicator that students can manage the new academic demands; the main indicators are clearly their individual skills, and their attitude to take the challenge.

In another instance, a student recognized that it was difficult for students to implement all their excellent achievements at school within the current context. For example, Abby said her active and cheerful character at school had changed when she discovered other students yet more skilful and actively participating in extra-curricular activities despite being only in their first year. It made her feel unimportant and she was more comfortable when isolating herself and spending time in her room.

This experience was shared by Milly, whose transition process was more difficult, because she enrolled as a second intake student after a month of normal enrolment. By the time she arrived, some of her peers were already established, having found friends and become familiar with some university activities. But for her everything seemed still so new and different. She realized she changed from being a talkative person to being very quiet as she came to an unfamiliar environment. As she said:

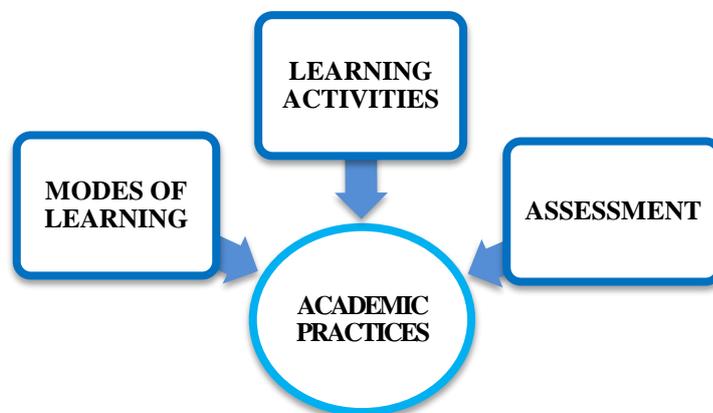
Here first week when I come here I become quite, from a talkative person I become quite... I don't like to talk. I am blur with what happening... even I told my senior I am scared... I realized I have changed.

Milly was identified as emotionally unstable because of the strange environment. At school she was well-known among teachers and pupils because she represented the school in debates and had been determined to continue her talent at university. She hopes through this that she will again be well-known among her peers and staff. In this situation, students expected to bring the same kind of achievements, attitudes, and performance that they had experienced in their school system to being a student, hoping it would be sufficient to understand their new role as an undergraduate in the new system. In most cases they could not find the connection, and they described feeling like a 'fish out of water' when they felt the person they used to be is no longer relevant to the current condition. As far as settling into the new system is concerned, it means knowing how the university system operates and knowing one's role, and adapting to the new life routine and study environment is important.

5.2.2 A difference sense of academic practices

In this section, data analysis focuses student interpretation on teaching and learning practices at university. Students felt that the academic level of the classroom was unexpected, and attention will be drawn to three major aspects: modes of learning, learning activities, and assessment. Figure 5.2 displays the sub-themes on differences of academic practices at university.

Figure 5.2: A Difference Sense of Academic Practices



First is the theme of modes of learning, mapping the range of experiences students encountered in the pedagogical approach of lectures and tutorials. In the second theme, data analysis identifies the learning activities planned by the institution to assist with the learning process. Thirdly, under the assessment theme, is the development of a greater understanding of the challenges students face in completing their assessments. The analysis will further contribute to the understanding by academic staff and institutions of the range of challenges students face.

5.2.2.1 Modes of learning

Students commented on obvious differences, such as dealing with large classes, and for many the tutorial class was a new experience for them. Students understood a lecture is where they will get subject knowledge, but the physical nature of a lecture conducted in a big lecture hall with large number of students in one session was a new experience for students. In this context, students commented they were uncomfortable because it was difficult to concentrate, they felt distant from the lecture and were sometimes distracted with noise from other students. So, it was common for students to say that they felt lost during lectures and it was hard to grasp the content. For example, from what Mirul wrote in his first semester journal: ‘big class, less concentration and sometimes not comfortable’.

A sense of feeling ‘neglected’ was an early impression for students when they entered a teaching atmosphere, feeling strange among a large group of students from different backgrounds, unfamiliar to each other, with inability to make direct connection to the lecturer. Students articulated the difficulties of dealing effectively and efficiently with the lecturing process of some of lecturers. Students bring with them the identity they have already developed and past learning experiences in school, characterized primarily by instruction directed to small groups of students with more time spent on addressing individual needs.

Consistent with this feeling of being ignored, the teaching system at university indeed fails to respond to individual needs as all students receive equal attention despite differences in ability, background education and knowledge,. It can be difficult for new students to understand the subject knowledge if the content is not clearly delivered by the lecturer and when they cannot relate it to their previous knowledge or experience. For example, as one student noted: ‘I heard that during the lecture you would not understand

anything'. Student concluded that this type of learning approach gave an advantage to those with some background knowledge. For example, frustration was frequently voiced by Law students as their colleagues from ASASI and Diploma courses could understand the content better. The lecturer assumed that the whole class understood just because part of the class gave a positive response. For example, as Abby said: 'the lecturers teach very fast, and they don't bother whether students understand or not'. This experience was also shared by Ting and Tino, who took Economics for the first time. As Ting commented:

like the economy subject, the lecturer didn't teach properly, they just ask us to download the notes from the website, and just mentioned which topic is important... and do exercise... they expect you study.

Furthermore, students found the lecturers did not pay attention to them, not considering whether they understood the lecture or not. This arose from the lack of opportunity to interact with the lecturer by asking a question. Normally, most of the students did not ask if they did not understand as they were too shy in front of the whole lecture hall, and preferred to ask their course mates after class. But, for those who did ask, they were disappointed with the way the lecturer responded to their questions when they could not understand the lecture and expected further elaboration. For example, Ting was surprised to get such a response from the lecturer, as described below:

I don't understand what the lecturer teaching, when you said you don't understand the content, the lecturer will said it is normal for student for not understand... but I don't need to explain... as the time pass you all will know...

In some ways Ting thought the lecturer was more focused on finishing the topic rather than whether students understand or not. This was echoed by Alin; ignoring students' questions is not best teaching practice and, according to Alin, the lecturer is supposed to give a response to a question instead of asking the student to find the answer themselves. According to her:

this approach would not solve the problem, but makes things more complicated, because we believed the lecturer would know the answer, they think we university student no need to spoon feed.

There was a misalignment between what students expected from the lecture and what the lecturer offered them. To explain, students expected the lecture to be where they can understand the topic, and try to learn something new, but this student's expectation is

clearly not met. As Milly said, the lecture is the main source for students to get their knowledge and, whether students like it or not, they have to attend and listen.

This is different from the teaching and learning purpose at school, where teachers are more committed to ensuring that students understand the subject. At university the lecturer delivers the lecture under the assumption that students understand or will understand after further reading. The following extracts present the differences Ting experienced between teaching at school and university: ‘this was different with teaching in school, every time after the lesson the teacher will ask whether we understand or not, if we said don’t the teacher will teach again...’ Here again, the differences among the sectors in education are apparent. Ting’s view represented the views of other students on what they valued in their teachers at school and what they undervalued about lecturers at university. Students become victims when the teaching traditional at university views that students are accountable for their own learning, which is sometimes not practical within the context of student backgrounds and their year of study. This kind of experience may discourage students from the interesting process of learning and discovering new knowledge at university. On the other hand, as an extract from Ying’s demonstrates, the purpose of students attending a lecture or tutorial is to learn something new: as she said: ‘we students need explanation’. And she did not expect the tutor just to write the answer on the whiteboard without giving an explanation on how to get that answer. The differences they encountered make them more realistic about the independent learning expected of them, especially for those who learn by giving their full attention in the classroom, and this is made Azif worried:

I am very focus and give attention in lecture, I am able to capture and remember what the lecturers teach, this is my learning style, but if the lecturer didn’t give full knowledge of the subject I feel difficult to understand.

This is Azif’s learning approach, and the practices work well for him. Azif may face difficulties if the lecture is not what he expects, thus he needs to make an adjustment to change his learning approach and fit it to the context of learning at university.

Furthermore, students think academics at university do not really show their actual role, and their academic title and the institutional status do not reflect their academic credibility. This is highlighted by Tino, doubtful about the credibility of a lecturer at a

local high-ranking university, as according to him the lecture does not really show 'expertness' in subject matter. As he described:

As one of the high rank public university in Malaysia, so I expect the quality of teaching also high, for example some of my lecturers they don't seem like having 15 or 20 teaching experiences... sometimes very hard to understand.

Another point that concerned students was that the lecturer is not always at the university, as they are involved with other aspects of their profession, like research. Students said that their learning process was affected when the lecturer was away attending conferences and classes were cancelled. This was worse when the lecturer did not find a replacement for the class and tried to cover twice as much, to catch up, in a single lecture. This is what Awwa perceived of one of the lecturers, 'the lecturer will cover the subjects by doing a summary of the entire topic that the lecturer left, and will teach fast'.

Attending a tutorial is also perceived as a new experience and not every student was clear of the purpose of the tutorial at the beginning. As Abby said, 'when I first enter, I don't understand the tutorial concept'. However, unlike lectures, most students were positive about their experiences. They noted that the small-class format and interactive discussion helped them to understand the topic of the lectures. It was an opportunity for students to clarify aspects of their study. As commented by Gary: 'essential to enhance better understanding of the subject and the lecturer or tutor explain any inquiry'.

Students noticed the tutorial classes were conducted differently and every course had its own terms, activity and practice. But this was not clearly explained to students. For instance, the Law course had activities and approach unlike other courses. Their activity such as 'mini-mode' or problem-based learning (PBL) was a new activity for the sixth-form students, but not for the ASASI students who were already familiar with this activity and had it during their pre-university programmes. For Abby, she and most of other sixth-form students could not engage with the activity because they did not have clear information about how it would be conducted, or what their role would be, as the lecturer failed to find a consensus during the tutorial.

Furthermore, according to Azif the question and answer sessions in tutorials were similar to the teaching and learning approach he experienced at school, where students were given questions they needed to answer. According to Azif, the tutorial supposedly

helped students explain what they did not understand in the lecture. And for Azif, being unable to answer the tutor's questions represented an incentive to attend the class. The preparation students need to do beforehand is a pressure, especially when the subject was new to them. And for Azif, even though the approach was to evaluate student levels of understanding, it was not appropriate and the lecturer seemed to make a standard judgement on all students without considering individual academic backgrounds.

So, once again, new students feel quite unsettled in the changed situation. Thus, for the participants, teaching at university feels quite different in many unexpected ways from school. Most students commented on the teaching methods such as reading from slide presentations without giving a clear explanation, inconsistency in topic order when the information is presented in chunks without coherence, making it difficult for students to follow the lecture. Ying described how the monotonous tones of the lecturer made her fall asleep in class rather than enjoy the presentation. Other students commented that the presentation by the lecturer was like a newsreader; holding the notes and reading through them are among the new experiences student encounter at university. Therefore, the reality of the teaching experience is a new discovery far removed from what they expected and, importantly, far from what they had experienced at school.

The underlying finding by the students about teaching at university was that the lecturers do not focus on them, and students felt there is less sense of promoting understanding of the subject. They found this kind of learning environment unhelpful when the subject is new and when they expect to get more explanation from the lecturer. Students perceived the lecturers' role as less supporting and developing of independent learning and the thinking skills, and promoting interest in the subject. The important point here is that the students' expositions of their perceptions of teaching were strongly related to the culture of the school system from which they had come and almost all expressed significant surprise at their sense of difference. There was an immediate awareness that teaching at university somehow expects student to do more independent study rather than being spoon fed.

5.2.2.2 Learning task

Next, the analysis examines the students' experience of engaging in assigned learning activities, based on a particular course that could have significant and unsettling effects.

Students talked about their experiences of learning activities such as writing assignments, group work, presentations, and discussion. Within these four activities, academic writing is described as the most challenging task.

In academic writing, one of the weaknesses identified in student narratives was that their experience appeared to be elementary and incompatible with the expectations at university level. Students had adopted surface strategies based on using information from a few simple sources generally supplied by teachers or accessed from books and the internet. As Azif said: ‘the assignment that we did at school is too simple, and the teacher will assist us to find the resources and guide us how to write’. As a consequence, it was difficult for them to start writing tasks and when Emma thought about an assignment, the first thing to come to her mind is however she was going to manage it, and would become depressed.

In sixth form, the assignments students have to complete do not prepare them for the skills and performance required at university level, well put in Nissa’s extract about the real demands on students:

For STPM student like me quite hard, because when I in sixth form no assignment like this, just presentation all just simple assignments, like here have to complete 20 to 30 pages assignment, with research statement and everything... you can’t just copy from the internet or book but have to [do] analysis, have to understand, have to do research, really have to concentrate, reading only not enough but have to synthesis the information... it is totally different.

In this extract, Nissa explained her weaknesses and what she perceived as the weakness of the system at sixth form in not giving students enough exposure to academic writing. Students found that they were required to be more critical and analytical in developing their argument, and that there are specific formats that have to be followed. Terms like research statement, analysis, and synthesis will not seem bizarre if these familiarity is already developed in the academic system at sixth form. This means that drawing on their past learning experiences and approaches does not always assist students to negotiate the new learning context.

Students appeared unable to identify and locate potential sources of information or select and use the most suitable materials. For example, Nissa agreed with the lecturer’s feedback on her assignment that she relied on resources from Google and Yahoo search engines, and that her academic references were insufficient for academic writing. In this

context students found they needed high level cognitive strategies to find relevant resources and critically synthesis, understand the information and relate the resources to the context of the assignment. But this expectation is too high when students are not equipped with these skills either before or after they start university.

Thus, students agreed that there was insufficient information and practice available for them to understand the type of academic writing required by lecturers at university, and that this made the process more complicated. As Milly commented:

at university they didn't really tell us a lot about the academic writing format, they just give us the topic and ask us to write according to the university academic writing style.... I don't understand so I will refer to my senior to guide me or I refer to his assignment....

The comments above would suggest that students need more clarity and initial guidance in relation to what is expected from them by individual lecturers. Students experienced this differently depending on who had already been exposed to this type of academic task, in particular those from Diploma and ASASI backgrounds. For example, Harn asked her Diploma friends to assist her with academic writing. On this matter, Mirul in his third journal in second semester journal, said: 'there is a need to familiarize themselves with the research skills, especially in terms of findings resources related with the subject fields'. Furthermore, he suggested that this skill should be developed at sixth form, so students would not have problems when they encounter this kind of academic approach at university. Terms like 'research statements', 'analysis' and 'synthesis' are then not new, but are the skills that the academic system expected already to have been developed.

Other challenges of writing assignments included effort and time; some students complained of the extra work in accomplishing an assignment, when most of the information was not provided in lectures but required students to access journals, books and other resources. This limits their time for other activities such as revision or additional reading. At the same time, even though writing assignments is one of the most difficult tasks students encounter, it is perceived as a kind of learning. Through searching and reading more material, they will understand more about the subject. As Avin commented: '[the] more materials I searched and read through, I found I really learn a lot through doing the assignment'.

Discussion and presentation were another two tasks that students were involved in. Engaging in discussion when the lecturer poses a question is the best opportunity to enhance their understanding of the content knowledge and enhance their integration into a group. Presentation is way to train student to deliver the content knowledge to the class. According to students, it is an opportunity for them to train in communication skills and boost their confidence level. One the themes that was repeatedly presented in student accounts was the difference in student academic behaviour and self-competency. Students found those from the Matriculation, ASASI and Diploma programmes were more ‘actively involved’ with classroom activities. They already knew some basic knowledge, and theoretical and practical aspects of Law, therefore they appeared to be more ‘confident’. For example, Mirul observed regarding ASASI student involvement in classroom that he found them more talkative and confident with their arguments, and Azif also saw the positive response they received from their tutor, who was pleased with their involvement and participation. As Azif described:

I felt pressure in class when the ASASI student even though they are just 19, but they are excellent, more advanced from us... if compare myself with the ASASI student I felt bit down.

The sixth-form students felt isolated in class as they had little understanding of the process of a tutorial, lacked a grasp of the knowledge, and were not confident in the English language. The indications were highlighted by students mostly in their first semester interview and journal. They see those from different academic pathways, even in the initial transition, as exhibiting those characteristics of university student identity that are valued by the university, such as participation, thinking skills and language skills. For a sixth-form student, their previous schooling experience is insufficient and less of a match in navigating the new learning context.

5.2.2.3 Assessment

Assessment is another factor that seems to direct how students experience learning at university. Students find there are significant differences in assessment; at university, student performance is based on multiple aspects, and their grade is not only based on the final exam but a range of learning activities from their participation in classroom discussions, writing assignments, group work, quizzes and presentations. As Azif said: ‘the

grading system at university different, for final only 40 per cent, for PBL 30 per cent and for participation and presentation 30 per cent’.

The summative and formative assessment planned for particular disciplinary areas is a powerful tool by which to measure student learning and development, while for students it evaluates their understanding of the subject knowledge, their performance and skills.

5.3.2 Academic communities

It is widely agreed in the literature that academic staff play a key role in assisting first year students’ engagement with their study (Krause and Coates, 2008; Peel, 2000). In this study, discussions about academic staff at university invariably note a dissimilarity with relations with school teachers. Students made extensive reference to their past learning experiences in school and their relationship with their teachers, whom they described as approachable, dedicated and friendly. What is evident in the comments below is the sense of loss they feel from this familiarity with the teachers.

At university, students find a gap in the relationship between student and the lecturer, a sense of disconnection from lecturers felt by the students’ summed up in Abby’s extract:

I feel scared to see my lecturer, so scared. I feel shamed because they have ‘title’. Once I want to meet them I feel shy... and I think the lecturer hard to approach because they look serious, I feel so different between the lecturer and the students... and I feel time between the lecturer and the student very limited, because the lecturer have their own office, normally just meet them at the lecture hall and tutorial, the relationship not very close and there is distance between the lecturer and the students.

There are several interesting points raised by Abby that may be perceived in the same way as the others, but stated differently in their interviews. First, students felt the distance was due to the formality emerging from titles such as ‘Professor’ or ‘Dr’. Students indicated that this title automatically made them seem ‘expert’ and ‘professional’, and resulted in their lacking the confidence to approach them, creating a gap. For example, one student mentioned that she was scared to ask because she was not sure whether it was appropriate to ask a question, and at a same time she was worried that, if the lecturer asked

her a question, she could not answer. At this point, she was worried to display her weakness in being unable to understand or give feedback.

Moreover, opportunities to meet lecturers were very limited as usually the lecturer left straight after the lecture. Students noticed lecturers were busy, so could not access them whenever they wanted but needed to make an appointment. In terms of space, each lecturer had an office and the student needed to know the location and room number, unlike their school teacher whom they would find in the staff room.

Even if students find the email address and room number in the directory, this does not guarantee that lecturers will be in their room, or will reply to email or even return telephone calls. This is what Ting experienced when she tried to approach the lecturer:

Actually I don't know how to contact the lecturer, at the website there is their contact details, but I don't know whether they will answer or not.... I phoned some of the lecturers... mostly they didn't answer... I don't know how to find them.

A lecturer at university has an important role in supporting the transition process, but from this analysis of the encounter phase, the evidence does not show that students think lecturers have an important influence in their early transition process. What they expressed is a gap, instead of a close relationship.

5.2.3 Learning subject knowledge

One of the chief goals of a student entering university is to enhance their subject knowledge and professional skills. The interview results revealed that basically students had a lack of detailed knowledge about courses and how their course and subjects would be structured and delivered. Beginning a class is a new start for them, introducing the subject. In explaining this aspect of students' experience, the data analysis examines students' early impressions of the subject they are learning and the impact of previous subject knowledge on their learning process. This will be discussed under the sub-themes of discovering new knowledge, and demands of the course.

Most students described learning at university as more integrated, various module contents and study skills being developed within a course. For instance, Dan thought he would only learn subjects related to sport, whether in theory or in practice, but what he encountered was totally different. He did not expect subjects like information technology,

anatomy and educational psychology to be offered within the programme's structure. In this context, students have to learn many subjects in a short period of time. As described by Dan:

Academic experience at university very different, like here have to take many courses, I never heard before, never thought before, like at school only take four subjects, and most of the subjects already have some basic knowledge on it... like here I never expected that I am taking many subjects and never expect I will learn all those subjects.

Some students suffered setbacks when they had to engage in challenging academic activities, understanding and dealing with the new subject. It was perceived as intensely challenging when students had to take a subject of which they had no previous knowledge. For this student, the learning was in more depth, and needed more time to understand. Most Law students at the beginning of the year did not understand much, which is one reason for their low motivation at the beginning of the academic year. For example, Abby commented that her first to two weeks of her learning Law subjects were like attending an ABC class, starting from A: she wrote in her first semester journal: 'when I first enter the class, I was blur, and I could not understand anything'. Students discussed about commitment, efforts and time needed to spend, especially when the subject is new and challenging. For example, for Law students, Arabic Language is part of the course requirements. In a different situation, as a former science student who had never studied it as he was in a different stream, Tino did not expect to have to take Economics yet, as a student in Actuarial Science, he had to start to study from scratch without the basics.

Thus, students' experience about learning or discovering new knowledge aligns with Ying's notion that teaching and learning at university is not what they expected:

The teaching and learning in the university is not really what I expected for an example for my analytical chemistry until now I am not really sure what the subject is about actually.... (Ying: Journal 2)

Most of the students found it was difficult and required more commitment and the time was limited, especially with not just a single subject and most being new introductions for them. The process becomes more complex when knowledge they received from the classroom was limited and it depends on students' own initiative to make the effort to understand the subject. Thus Harn's expectation to improve her English during

the TESL programme was ill-founded, as the course expected her already to have high language ability.

Students found the learning process more interesting when they could relate what they learned previously to the subject they were currently taking. Students who had prior knowledge in some subjects had a strong foundation on which to build new knowledge. For example, Tino felt more confident when he could link what he is studying with his previous knowledge, as described in below comments:

Like for Maths and Calculus, actually what I studied now already what I studied when I was in sixth form... but more advance level, it is a continuity from what I studied in sixth form, so it is helpful because I have some basic

Students in the Law faculty agreed. For example, on the subject of ‘constituency’ and the ‘Malaysia Legal System’ the sixth-form students were interested because they had some early knowledge, as Azif said:

I feel more confident, because I have some background knowledge and I could understand.

The learning process at university is revealed as progressive in terms of academic knowledge and skills, and this is significant as those from ASASI and Diploma backgrounds studied this course before they entered university. Based on what ex-sixth-form students in the Law faculty said, that group of students already grasped better in the lectures and understood the terms and concepts introduced by the lecturer. This put them at an advantage in terms of knowledge, and they looked more confident and were actively engaged in the learning process while, in contrast, most of the sixth-formers struggled to familiarize themselves with the new terms and language of the subject.

5.2.4 Independent learning

The assumption and expectation of the new role as an independent learner is evident in every student interview, yet overall they have not been deliberately prepared for the responsibility. This is due to lack of knowledge on what need to do, where to start or how to negotiate the norms and practices of the university’s undergraduate culture. This seems to support Lowe and Coke’s (2003) view, which suggests that these feelings normally occur when students distance themselves from their existing social support of family and friends. These students agree that this is tough start to engage with a new learning

environment and new academic expectations, more complex social relationships, and new relationships with academics. As Nissa said: ‘I knew it was going to be different from school... but I wasn’t sure how different....’

The conflict between readiness and expectations of the new role is evident in this section. The students articulate the difficulties of dealing effectively and efficiently with the competing demands of their new role. Two areas of concerns highlighted by students in this process are academic skills and time management.

5.2.4.1 Academic skills

Students generally agreed they were from a ‘spoon fed’ system, with academic processes that provided them with help and made expectations and requirements explicit. The resources were straight from the teacher or the *Tuisyen* centre, with an exam-oriented system geared to preparing students for university admission. For example, as Ting describes, ‘teacher said we must get good result, get good pointer in order to get into the university and in order to get the course we apply’. Another example is by Emma in her first journal, ‘at school the learning approach more exam-oriented, teacher teach student on how to get good grades’.

Such practices prohibit independent learning. There was a strong sense expressed by most of the students that their previous academic skills were not compatible with the new learning process, and clearly they realized that they would be ‘left behind’ if they did not find a solution to this problem. This is clear in the student interviews from the first semester, where at this early stage students still continued their same study methods as they practised at sixth form. As mentioned by Nissa: ‘one of the challenging parts is how to change your learning style’. What concerned most of the students is they were not sure of the best practices to apply. Even though at some level they felt that their sixth-form experiences exposed them to some kind of independent learning such as self-study, assignments, presentations, and group work, this was school-based learning where in each process of ‘independent learning’ the teacher was there to assist them.

I am the type of person depends on teacher notes, *Tuisyen* notes. Normally the notes is based on the exam format, more on assisted learning. I am not self-regulated learner. When I come here, I realized I have to change here no more *Tuisyen* class... here no more teacher that will guide you and teach you carefully.

So I am the one that have to change, I have to be more consistent and be more flexible in my study, not depends on the lecturer.

Nissa's extract explains how in the assisted learning system the student depends on teachers' notes or in addition from what they get from the tuition centre. The skills of self-regulated learners are not fully trained or developed.

Students need to change their learning style from what they practised at school. Normally students found it difficult to adopt a new learning approach. According to Milly, when she was studying at school she would do her homework at the weekend and normally do her homework while watching TV or listening to radio. She found it difficult to maintain this familiar learning style in the new environment. The problem for Milly is that this made her feel more discouraged than stimulated to overcome it. The approach to suit the learning demand at university has no single, standard approach, and depends on the individual to find a way to suit them. As Azif mentioned in his journal:

Here at university, more individual skills to adapt with the new learning environment, compare to school get more direction and guidance from the teacher. (Azif: Journal 1: First Semester)

This is in accordance with Schilling and Schilling's (1999) thoughts that learning behaviour established at primary and high school tends to persist into higher education. Therefore, some of the approaches mentioned by students such as memorizing, studying at the last minute, less reading and referring only to lecture notes are no longer suitable or practical in the learning context at university. Overall, students were more likely to report that sixth form did not prepare them for the amount and difficulty of the work expected at university.

5.2.4.2 Personal organization and time management skills

Apart from adapting learning skills and developing new techniques, managing time and being more organized were the most popular themes highlighted by these students and were considered to be some of the most challenging parts of university life. According to student findings, effective ways of managing their time helped them to adjust effectively through the transition process. These were also highlighted as key techniques that students needed to develop if they want to be successful academically and at a same time be involved in university activities. However, there was still a concern about the lack of 'best

time management'. According to Tino: 'the most challenging parts of my first semester is learning to manage my time... I have to allocate my time well, time for study and time for joining university and college activities and entertainment'. An important point highlighted by students was how to split time effectively between study and non-academic activity. This is major change for students from a structured timetable learning environment and means students have to be flexible in filling the gaps between classes and other academic tasks such as assignments, group work, preparation for tutorials or presentations, while in the evening they have *kolej* activities. In this context, two main problems mentioned by Dan in his narrative represent how other students feel about managing their time:

I don't know how to divide my time for study and for assignment and for college activities at one time;

I don't know how to do a schedule that exactly fit my activity.

Lacking personal organization and time management skills obstructs students' involvement in university and consequently generates negative emotional responses to the university experience. Students were emotionally stressed, voicing the difficulties of dealing effectively and efficiently with dividing their time between competing demands of academic and extra-curricular activity. The level of stress was higher for students with subjects that needed more time to concentrate and understand. This is demonstrated in Nissa's comments:

In my second and third week I feel so stressed because it is near to mid-term exam, but I still don't know how to manage my time. I finished my class at seven and then, I have meeting at night at college. I cried every day, because I know I have to study, but don't know when I going to study.

The problem cited by Nissa is common. Students were usually stressed when they felt they could not give more time to their study, and under pressure to achieve well in the mid-term exam, or have deadlines for assignments. The process is complicated when participation in extra-curricular activities, whether at college or university level, is compulsory.

Inability to manage their time systematically had consequences such the inability to complete assignments by the deadline, as explained by Dan:

I only can complete one assignment and I could not finished the others, I could not manage when I have too many things that I need to do at one time... and sometime I will stop from doing everything, I am confused.

The same concern was shared by Milly who completed her assignment in a single day because she forgot the deadline. Students fall behind with some work and cannot not complete on time. Failure to manage the workload makes them feel stressed, incompetent and frustrated.

Time management also becomes complex when students devote more time to the things in which they are interested. This problem was faced by Gary, who spent 75 per cent of his time on extra-curricular activities and only 25 per cent on academic. According to Gary, he was more passionate about experiencing new activities that he found interesting than listening to a lecturer in a classroom. As a result, most of the time he worked at the last minute to complete his assignments and sometimes skipped class. For example, as he noted: 'If I have assignment to submit in two days or quiz in two days, I will plan in today, within this two days I try to settle the things'. According to Gary, he understood what was required as a university student such as 'managing time' and to 'change way of studying', but the problem was that he does not like to follow the rules: as he said, 'I don't like to do what I forced to do'. One of the pitfalls at this level is that the student leaves things until the last minute and it has a significant impact on the quality of work they produce.

Another drawback student's face especially in their first semester is that they do not clearly understand the amount of time they should spend on study. On average, students said they spent between three to five hours a day doing assignments, preparing for tutorials and for revision. Unable to manage time wisely reflects on student performance. Milly agreed, as she felt regret that she failed to manage her time wisely, even though she had time in the first semester, and said this was one of the reasons why she failed to get a good result.

Many students arrive at university with little idea of how to manage their time and be more organized. From the data analysis, there does seem to be an issue with unexpected workload, how much time and work is required and still a lack of awareness of the quality and quantity of work expected of them. Resulting potential negative effects are when students fail to meet challenges related to time management, submitting work last minute

and not achieving the grades they believed they are capable, and feeling disappointed when they get lower grades in their first semester exams.

5.2.5 Language

Language proficiency is one of the important academic skills demanded at university level, whether in academic study or in the socialization process. Issues about levels of English language proficiency required in academic process were highlighted as one of the main challenges in the transition process. Students come under pressure when their circumstances change, when they suddenly find themselves in an environment where English language is highly emphasized, and they were not prepared for this. Students participate less in classes conducted in English because they do not feel confident.

English is a second language in Malaysia. Differences in English language competence relates to students' socio-economic background, ethnicity and academic achievement. Within this group of first-generation students, variations in their language competence can mainly be differentiated by their ethnic group and academic background. From the interviews conducted with the student, the Indian and Chinese respondents appeared more confident at conversing in English than the Malay students. Secondly is academic background: students from science backgrounds were more exposed to English language as science and mathematics subjects are taught in English. In comparison, students in arts classes have teaching and learning conducted mostly in Malay. This is related to the educational policies of the national education system implemented by the Malaysian government, whereby English is the language of instruction in schools only for mathematics, science and technology subjects.

Apart from that, the Malaysian government has introduced a standardized measuring test or MUET for tertiary education admission to assess new first-year students' language proficiency when they enrol at university. However, from student narratives it seems that, despite achieving a high band in the test, students do not perceive it is a real measure of their language competence. The need to improve language ability is obvious when the reading materials mainly in English are prescribed for each course. Below is an example of how Azif felt about his language competence, and how it has impacted on his confidence:

My English is bad, even though I get Band 4 in MUET, but I still ‘poor’ to communicate, I have no confidence... like here I take Law, most of the subject materials in English... even the tutorial is in English, and in third year will be fully English, so I have to start now.... I need to improve my English...

For Azif, the need to overcome his weakness is crucial and perhaps will take more time than for peers who have already developed these skills, whether inherited from the family or their education. Other students such as Abby, Mirul, and Harn also expressed these concerns.

Low levels of proficiency in the language of learning have been highlighted as one of the reasons for students having difficulty in engaging in classroom activities. For Harn, from an arts stream in high school, taking TESL at university is a big move especially when the teaching and learning is completely undertaken in English. Harn voices concern that her ability does not match the course expectations and she struggled with less self-confidence to speak in the class and to the lecturer. To some extent she avoided communicating with the lecturer, because she was ‘shy’ (lacked confidence to speak up) and worried she might pronounce words improperly or speak ungrammatically.

According to Abby, this is one of the drawbacks for sixth-form students, especially arts students who will have had little exposure to teaching and learning in English, and impacts on them at university. It is different for those from Matriculation, ASASI and Diploma backgrounds, as their English competence is far higher. This was obvious among the Law students, where this group of students seemed more confident to participate in classroom discussion, and could more easily understand the lectures and subject materials than those from sixth forms. It is unsurprising that some first-generation Law students said they felt isolated in class because they found it hard to engage in classroom discussion when the lecturer expected them to speak in English. For instance, Abby, Mirul and Azif mentioned that they were disappointed when the lecturer did not pay them any attention when they tried to converse in Malay, and devoted time to those speaking English. The following example by Abby was a typical feeling of the anxieties being articulated:

you’re afraid to participate in the discussion because you are not sure about the answer and your English not good compare to your friends, I was scared of being judge... so you feel better to keep quite even though you have something to share or to ask, but you have no confidence...

In a different situation, students mentioned about the inconsistency in the language policies adopted at school and university level. This was a disappointment mainly highlighted by those from science streams who were educated in English at school in science and mathematics subjects. What disappointed them was that the policy was not extended to university level, in particular at UKM, where the university policy emphasized using Malay as the medium of instruction. For example, Ying voiced her disappointment when she found the lecturer would teach them in Malay. As she wrote in her journal: 'I thought that everything will be in English at this tertiary level'. One of the common comments student voiced is they found it difficult to translate into Malay the concepts and terms they have developed and understood in English.

Proficiency in English also matters greatly in social relationships. It was noted that students with fluent English may be able to build social networks more easily with their learning communities. For example, Abby noticed that some of the seniors in the Law faculty were uninterested in interacting with juniors conversing in Malay.

From the analysis, students strongly indicated the importance of English as the language of learning at university level. Student noted that those with a high level of English language proficiency adjusted better, both academically and socially. Issues related to student language preparedness appeared not to be restricted to this group of students, and are discussed at international level. According to Zamel and Spack (1998), the number of students is increasing who are unprepared for tertiary education with regard to language proficiency.

5.2.6 Social relationships

The importance of meeting the right people and building good relationships enabled students to feel settled. A significant number of students said they found it difficult to make the initial approach to establish friendships in a new learning context when students are more diverse in terms of educational background, ethnicity, socio-economic background, religion, language, and state, compared to school. The nature of social contact partly changed and a greater challenge became establishing new friendships and building a sense of trust. As described by Tino, setting up a social relationship is not an easy process when both are strangers to the other:

I came here, I didn't know anyone, my schoolmates no-one studying in UKM, so it is like you come here and you don't know anyone and you start to find friends...

Not knowing each other personally involves some students meeting people where neither party understood the other, and some emotional distress occurred. For example, Ting was bullied by her friends physically, emotionally and verbally in several different incidents. She was depressed and shocked because it was different from what she been told about a friendly environment at university. For example, she was surprised when a student suddenly came to her room and said she was ugly, and she later was forced to carry a bottle of water up the staircase to the fourth floor. In another situation, her room-mate just ignored her and talked on the phone even though Ting was crying because she was in pain. A most disappointing moment was when she was 'scolded' by a lecturer during a lecture, in front of the student, when one of her 'friends' provided wrong information about her involvement in a piece of group work. None of the other students in this study had had such negative friendship experiences as Ting and it had emotionally affected her, as she said,

I am not enjoy what I gone through here, I quite suffer... like I am having some friendship problems... some of them are quite weird...

To overcome her problem she went to the counselling unit, but was disappointed as she could not find the help or support she needed. Ting decided not to go there again, because she did not want to be labelled as a problematic student if her friends saw her there. To overcome her sadness she writes a blog, as a self-release approach, to help her reduce her stress and sadness. Similarly, in her first interview Nissa had described how she was anticipating having many friends at university and being very outgoing and friendly. However, she found it hard to find such friendship.

Apart from the issues mentioned above, students noted a group culture at university. Student tended to be within a group or individuals who shared a similar socio-economic background, academic pathway, course and ethnicity. Students noticed a 'social hierarchy' in their peers' relationships. Students from high status backgrounds tended to behave differently and preferred to have friends among their own group. The differences were noticed in communication, some terms they used which were unfamiliar, or from the way they dressed. Abby admitted that some of her friends asked about her background and looked at her physical appearance before they really wanted to build a friendship. For Azif,

he prefers to ignore rather than mix with such students because they made him uncomfortable. Azif tried to explain the feeling that he was proud of his own background and identity, as he said,

even though they felt they have status and have more advantage, it does not mean I have to 'feel down' with them, I have my own status, if they felt great or high class, I have my own strength too.

For Azif, coming from a disadvantaged social background is not a drawback for him, as he has strong self-confidence which makes him proud about himself.

Apart from the class issues mentioned above, it is unexceptional that students tend to form a group with peers from same school or academic pathways or they knew each other previously. Students found those from Matriculation, Diploma or ASASI programmes tended to develop stronger relationships because they were already acquainted. For example, from Tino's observations:

some they tend to be in group... where they know each other before, they just like to be in their own group, they don't like kind of accept some one outsider...

In comparison, sixth-form students, even though from same academic pathways, are still unfamiliar to each other because they came from different schools.

Students also observed social relationships at university were bounded by ethnicity. They found it is more comfortable to be friends with individuals from same ethnic background because of shared language and culture. Two students spoke of the challenge to be a minority within the majority in a class. For example, for Tino and Emma, being the only Indian student is a daunting experience. According to Tino, when he first entered the classroom he observed that students preferred to be with their friends from same ethnic background. The grouping culture was obvious, and he said:

It is bit hard at the beginning to see people tend to with their own ethnic group... like in my course I am the only Indian... so it is bit hard for me to join the other... but we're try to understand each other as time goes on...

What Tino encountered in his classroom was not a new experience, as a similar situation had occurred when he was in sixth form, yet then he did not feel the difference as his friends accepted him and they became close, and he expected the same thing to happen at university. For Emma, being the only Indian female in her class made her feel special.

According to Emma, her friendly character allows her easily to mingle with students from different ethnicities and she did not feel any gap between them.

The difference and diversity that emerged at university was a unique experience for these students. Feeling strange with each other is a common feeling and they found it difficult to build trust in relationships in the early process of building social networks.

What students noticed here was that students are comfortable being with something they are familiar with. For example, students feel more comfortable being with the friends they know before they enter the university, or feel safer to be with their own ethnic group because of their similarity. This is the process students encounter at university and, while they may not feel comfortable with it or it is not what they expect, they have to accept and adjust.

Based on these results, the stress experienced by students seemed centred on the first semester when they felt that they have limited skills, knowledge and social capital with which to meet the academic demand of the university.

5.3 Coping Strategies

When students begin their first year at university, they are required to reorganize the way they think about themselves, as learners and as social beings. The first important task is to identify the characteristics of their new role. As described by Bennett (2007), students must articulate what is new about teaching and learning at university, and develop relationships with new peers and interact with faculty members.

This theme is developed to explore the role of personal self-efficacy on students' goals and aspirations to overcome the challenges and negotiate with the academic process. Adjustment or coping strategies started when students negotiated with the new learning expectations, embraced opportunities, and achieved recognition throughout connections with the learning communities. Behind this fact were certain factors helping successful transition. These related to students' beliefs regarding success being achieved by their personal determination to change, translated into engagement with the learning communities. Changes to function effectively in the new culture appear to take place across the different domains of adjustment. The students' accounts are discussed under the following headings:

5.3.1 Self-directed learners

Students show strong evidence of the role that personal values play in overcoming the challenges and making them more positive and able to undertake the transition with an open mind. Self-directed learners are associated with behaviour and motivations to engage in the learning process. A self-regulated learner continually engages in four activities: planning, organizing, monitoring, and evaluating their learning processes (Zimmerman and Paulsen, 1995). Two important factors that greatly influence individual effort to become a self-directed learner are self-motivation and study skills.

5.3.1.1 Commitment and attitudes

Personal commitment to overcome challenges is identified as an important contributory factor for students' university experience. Successful students are always positive about the decisions they have made, evident in comments such as: 'I will try my best'; 'I will learn' and 'I need to change'. Students understand that their socio-economic backgrounds do not provide them with the full advantage to negotiate the expectations of the new learning environment and, in relation to this, Avin believed 'hard work' is a key ingredient to adjust quickly to the process, or be left behind, as he said in the interview:

everyone who enter here with high qualification, so to be the best among the best is quite difficult... some have background, some like me don't have... so for student like me need more hardworking.

Students overall reported they underwent motivational changes between the first and second semester. Students at the early stage had some level of disappointment, clear from actions such as thinking of changing courses, and feeling that they selected the wrong course. At a same time, an unexpected result received by some in the first semester exam made them more proactive and able to positively approach their academic problem.

Eleven students reported their first semester exam results were a shock, especially when they did not perform well in examinations and received low grades. Abby felt most disappointed with her results, as she said:

Very disappointed, I never get that pointer like that before, but I am not surprised to see my result because I know because I feel very difficult to understand this course, I feel like I am studying ABC, it is like starting point for me, trial for me.

However, all this did not stop them consistently working hard and feeling positive about what their results. As Avin explained in his journal:

I know life at university quite challenging but I never think too quick from this, I never give up in any sense. (Avin: Interview 3: Second Semester)

The most important thing is to make use of the opportunity offered to them; as Avin said, 'I've worked really hard to get here, so I don't want to waste the opportunity'. Most students had started to demonstrate their commitment to higher education when they were in the sixth form, and worked hard, and now feel they do not have the same momentum, the same motivation and the same aim as they had in sixth form. In fact, they had made significant sacrifices in order to attend university, and say they have tended to approach any academic problems early on, looking proactively for solutions instead of ignoring them. This willingness to take confront problems is often expressed as individual responsibility. Students realize individual responsiveness is important in learning for, as Harn said, 'if I don't force myself I won't be able to improve and then I can't catch up, what the lecturer said in class... so I need to study'. This is what makes some students successful—they take study as their responsibility, and feel it is a wasted opportunity if they do not make an effort to learn and perform well. The focus on early apprehension of academic demands generally needs a positive and goal-oriented approach. For example, Avin tried to overcome his disappointment after his first semester exam and to become more confident, commenting: 'I become more positive and look things differently... that has helped me'. The strong determination of this student is because of his learning environment as students compete with each other and is evidenced too in their interest in the subject of study, for example, Mirul's determination to overcome his weaknesses:

I know Law subject is tough, it would be interesting if I try to make it interesting, I need to be more focus... more positive and motivated (Mirul: Interview 3: Second Semester)

As Nissa says, 'It is more on how much effort you put on your study, it is not about which background you are coming from'. Abby elaborated that student background is not the crucial element in the learning community, but rather individual achievement, commitment to studies and achievement in the subject.

Students' strong self-determination is related to interest in the subject and overcoming weaknesses. Meeting the challenges and being open to criticism are important

in encouraging students to participate in class discussion. For example, Mirul's determination appears to be influenced by his early experience in a tutorial and discouraging feedback from the tutor. Instead of remaining discouraged, Mirul takes the critique from the tutor in a positive sense and resolves to overcome his inability to present his idea clearly in English, as explained below:

The feedback I received does not discourage me, but I challenge myself and more determined, I bought dictionary and I try to communicate, and as a result in the next class I try to involved and try to interact, even though I used broken English but the lecturer praise me because of my determination.

In this context, motivation and willingness to take action are important explanatory factors in whether a learner wants to engage or not in the academic process (Ainley, 2008; Schuetz, 2008).

The need to overcome weaknesses and find ways to approach the learning process more effectively was also perceived by Harn. She realized that she needed to engage actively in the academic process not only to improve her language but to become more confident. Expressing her feelings, she commented that these efforts are important to her future career as a teacher. Thus, instead feeling upset, she hoped as follows:

I want to be more confident to speak in front of my course mate, I want to overcome the feelings such afraid, nervous when I stand in front of the class... in future I will be teacher, I need to be confident in front my student.

Intrinsic motivation and enjoyment of a task is another contributory factor in engaging in the learning process. A number of students talked about changing their learning approach, such as preparing for the lecture before class, reading more books and searching for additional information on the internet. Providing them with the optimum level of understanding makes them feel confident to participate in class discussion. For example, Mirul reflects on the changes he has made from his previous approach:

I am more positive about my study, I took a new way, I've take a new approach in that I have started reading and looking over the chapters before the lesson itself, which has been really useful, so I've actually understood it more.

When students succeeded in overcoming their weaknesses, they felt competent to work to a higher standard. The learning outcomes of the university are found to be progressive in terms of academic knowledge and skills, to a point where students can

understand the content and are able to contribute to class discussion. It is interesting to see that once Abby had managed to overcome her fear of being involved in the class discussions and the level of the subject difficulty, she regained her enjoyment. Her statement reveals that when students become proactive, their perception of the learning environment changes. Her notion is that lessons are more enjoyable when they become more understandable as a subject, and it is similar to Mirul's assertion that learning is 'enjoyable' when you 'understand something'. The transformation from passive to active learner is shared by Avin:

I am quite good this semester, because if the lecturer ask me the question, I am one of the student will try to answer the question, I will put my hand and give the answer, so I feel more confident.

Overall, students emphasized the need to overcome their weaknesses and find a way to approach the learning process more effectively because of their motivation towards the course, feeling challenged and being determined to success. Abby was excited and prepared to move to second year and make things work far better:

I have challenge myself to face all these... and I hope I am going to be stronger and confident in future, and I will improve all my weaknesses in the first semester and in the second semester. (Abby: Journal 3: Second Semester)

5.3.1.2 Study skills

Implicit in their decision to attend university and choose a course is a response to personal interest, and the following analysis seeks to gain more knowledge and understanding of first-generation students' response to the challenge of university. The following narratives illustrate how personal interest in specific aspects of the subject makes them change the way they cope with the process.

The first semester is a critical period that gives students useful information and feedback about the changes they need to make. Students mainly began to learn how to learn, usually after feedback from their final exams, or when they had results lower than they expected, and also when they observed how other people studied. Students voiced huge concerns about their academic work and most had raised their awareness of improving their academic performance, 'I have to improve on my academic, put more efforts compare to now' (Nissa); 'Actually I learn that I need to study a lot' (Milly), 'I have to study a lot, and stop studying last minute' (Avin), 'I need to spend more time to study'

(Awwa), and ‘My academic performance still low’ (Mirul). Most of these reactions are reflections based on their examination performance in the first semester. None was happy to receive poor assessment results. A feeling of inadequacy led these students to feel they constantly had to do more and work harder.

The findings show that reflection is an empowering process for students who had had no previous thoughts about the differences between learning at school and university. At this level, in second semester students normally begin to be aware of their learning preferences. For example, as Abby said:

I learn from my experience in last semester. I work hard but it is not enough, or maybe read less or I read but I could not understand anything... so every time I read I don't understand I just memorize for the exam... even though I feel I can answer the exam but the results not good...

Abby's extract presents an important change that she needs to make from her previous approach with the new learning and answering techniques that were given by her lecturer. Students felt more positive once they found the best study practices that they could adapt for university.

In an environment where students were less guided towards the learning skills and techniques they should develop, it still depended on individual creativity to explore and to match what is best for them. Also it depends whether students find their own way of learning or follow another student's approach. As Tino said, students are accountable for their own academic process and progress:

If you want good results it is up to you, your efforts, you can't count a lot on the lecturer only, that's what I learn. It is not like in Form 5 or Form 6 where the teacher feed you... but here everything on you.

According to Ying, adaptation into the new learning context is an adjustment from old methods to new skills. At this stage students need to think of finding suitable ways to help them to become more organized and effective in their work. In this regard, Ying proposed several tips from a newspaper that she thought practical: ‘be confident’, ‘get organized’, ‘keep with your routine’, ‘avoid over-training’, ‘think positive’, ‘have a plan’, ‘get support’ and, finally, ‘be focused’. For Ying, these are additional skills that she can apply to advance her traditional practices such as: ‘go to library’, ‘do more exercise’, ‘continuous revision’, and ‘mind maps’.

According to these students, being consistent, flexible, and managing time more effectively are the key to success in learning. As proposed by Tino, it is important to study regularly, and engagement with the academic task should start at the beginning. This is among the factors that helped him to achieve a grade point average of 3.56 in his first semester exams. As he said: 'I will start with the revision after lecture finished... and normally I depends on the internet because they are various kind or notes and it has more details and helpful'. Ting also preferred to find further information from the internet to solve her maths problem, and thinks this more effective than asking the lecturer. Students also realized that learning at university is about flexibility, as students study whenever they are free. Because activity and time are not structured, they need to be flexible in completing their tasks.

The transformation from passive to active learning helps students to overcome the level of challenge in the subject. Many of these students talked very positively about their course and how learning has become a more pleasurable and fulfilling experience, even though they experienced constant struggle in their first semester. This is because they understand better the context of the subject they are learning. For example, according to Abby, the lessons are more enjoyable because she became better able to comprehend the subject, similar to Mirul's assertion that learning is 'enjoyable' when you 'understand something'. For example, Mirul spoke about the changes he made and his progress from his previous approach to his current practice:

I am more positive about my study, I took a new way, I've take a new approach in that I have started reading and looking over the chapters before the lesson itself, which has been really useful, so I've actually understood it more.

According to Mirul, this time the changes he made were to be more responsible and disciplined at work. In the first semester he postponed and delayed work, but now he starts straight away, so he has more time to improve if he made mistakes and has more chance to discuss the work with the lecturer or friends.

The same hope is expressed by Harn, who did not feel down after her expectations of the TESL programme differed from actuality. Instead of feeling upset, she hoped to overcome weaknesses: 'I want to be more confident to speak in front of my course mate.... I want to overcome the feelings such afraid, nervous when I stand in front of the class... I

need to be confident'. For Harn, her intention to overcome her weaknesses important relates to her future career as a teacher.

In the final interview, when asking students whether there was a need for classes to provide guidelines about managing time, there were two different views. In total, 12 students agreed that university is responsible for introducing remedial courses for first-year students. As Nissa said, 'it is something compulsory and necessary things that university should considered', and for Avin, differences in student backgrounds need to be considered. Ex-sixth-formers only encounter the real process, expectations and demands of university after they arrive, unlike their peers from different educational backgrounds. Even though by the end of the second semester he had learned to manage university life, the process was long and most go through same experience. Reflecting on his own experience, he did not want the juniors facing the same difficulty as he had faced, thus he said, 'I don't want my junior be like that, so in future I want to guide them... I don't want them to struggle like me'.

Avin's views make sense: students should not go through such a hard process, and if they should have been prepared, the institution should provide clearer expectations of them, or should help them in the early transition process rather than thinking it totally an individual process.

Other students view a remedial course as unnecessary because managing time is a basic skill, students may not interested or may not practise it. Tino thought knowledge about managing time and study skills was already developed during schooldays:

you will automatically learn to manage your time if you are commitment and willing to learn... and it is ongoing process.

According to him, demanding that students attend such a course will place yet more burden on the students. It was agreed by Ting that students might get bored and think it just a waste of time, if the course's purpose is to ask students about managing their time. Finally, as Dan said, the skills are already with the student, it is just how they going to use their skills in the new context. The last student raised the practicality of the programme:

If student didn't use or practice the information they get not use at all... the matter is whether student apply or not. Like how to be more organized, how to manage the

time, I already learn when I was in school... thus the issues is whether the student want to apply or not. (Ying: 3rd Interview: Semester Two)

5.3.2 Academic engagement

Quality of student experience in university is positively enhanced through greater participation in academic activities.

5.3.2.1 The classroom experience

Overall, students agreed that classroom involvement was a crucial aspect that helped them to overcome their low self-confidence level and easily grasp the subject knowledge. Constructive learning theory assumes that students are their own learning agents and have their own interest, goals and values. In the context of classroom experience, students talked about an effective pedagogical process and the collaborative learning process.

Students noted that the lecturer's attributes are instrumental in boosting student motivation and engagement in class. Students valued lecturers who were passionate in their teaching and showed great subject knowledge. Students identified that lecturers with great knowledge level were more focused on delivering the subject content with clear and in-depth explanation to make sure students would understand their topic. The class was more interested when the lecturer could relate the subject knowledge with a real world context. As Ying said:

I like my Physical Chemistry class, the lecturer will make sure we understand about the topics, he will show some examples, even sometimes he uses the bottle of the students... it is funny and enjoy being in his class... at least he is trying to interact with us and be sure we are with him.

Students' expectations of the lecturers were in line with their status as academics at higher learning institutions, and this is what Avin said in his comment: 'the lecturer must show their charisma in terms of knowledge that makes student impressed'.

Students also found involvement in classroom activities an important part of learning process, especially in the feedback they received from the lecturer. Students described the question and answer sessions, both in lectures and tutorials, as a form of active learning that they perceived as an excellent way to understand the subject. According to students, this process will encourage them to think through the questions given or asked by students and stimulate student thinking skills. The sessions helped to

evaluate the extent to which they could understand and relate to the subject knowledge. Through this approach they will immediately know whether the answer they gave was correct or not, at the same time as feedback from the lecturer enhance their understanding. An interactive learning environment is found in a small classroom environment. This is based on Azif's experience for his Syariah class, as only a few students take this course. According to him, the small class allows them to understand better the subject and interact closely with the lecturer.

Students also commented on lecturers who are organized and structured in their teaching. Lecturers who are prepared with good teaching materials and interesting presentation skills are seen by students as delivering high quality teaching. Students were interested when the lecturers used video clips and graphics as it makes the learning process more appealing.

Students also said that lecturers with a friendly character or having a sense of humour made them feel more comfortable interacting with them. According to students they feel more relaxed when the learning environment is less stressful. For Emma, some lecturers like to share their experiences with the students. Emma, who was interested in becoming a lecturer, became more excited when the lecturers did so, while Milly described how she was impressed with some of her lecturers' great personalities in terms of appearance and communication skills. According to her, this was an attraction.

Approachability and encouragement were described as positive aspects of lecturers' ways of working with students. The capacity to enhance the quality of student learning is inextricably linked to the lecturers' capability to provide appropriate guidance and expectations for their students. For example, Nissa's efforts to see the lecturer and discuss her low performance in Arabic Language, and the difficulty she faced in understanding this subject, made the lecturer get to know her personally. During the class, the lecturer would mention her name and ask whether she understood or not. The attention from the lecturer helped her build a positive attitude towards the subject and prepare for the class, so she can understand better in the classroom. As she described:

every time in class the lecturer will call my name and ask me question... through this I feel like I involved in that class, I feel like I don't want to miss even one

class... I feel if I didn't introduced myself to him and discusses about my problem, maybe he would not knowing me and the way he approach me different...

Maybe things would have been different if she had not discussed her academic problems with the lecturer. Nissa now felt more responsible for her study, because she felt the lecturer was concerned and gave her the attention she needed.

Students' sense of confidence was high when the lecturer recognized their changes in classroom from passive to active learner. This was mentioned by Mirul, Avin, Nissa, Abby and Avin. For example, Abby was overwhelmed when the lecturer noticed the change in her. According to Abby, through her participation the lecturer recognized the student, and it was a privilege to be known by the lecturer in such a large number of students. Sharing a similar feeling, Avin described his motivation to change from passive to active learner with the full encouragement of the lecturer:

last time in tutorial sometimes I don't open my mouth, because I don't know anything, I didn't talk, but then I realized that I could not be passive forever, therefore I decided to do something about my situation. What I did was I started to read more books and get involve myself, I raise my hand and give my opinion, I don't bother whether the is right or wrong, even my lecturer realize that I have change, actually they more on encourage us to talk and participate in class, is the answer is wrong they will correct me.

Even though students highlighted several aspects that create a barrier between the student and the lecturer in **Section 5.2.2**, once they had made contact with individual lecturers they felt that support was available. Students hoped they would get more direct assistance from lecturers, because they felt the support would be more accurate and reliable, as lecturers have better information about the demands of the academic work. According to Azif, he expected to have more direct support from the lecturers because they understood the expectations of university.

Student also mentioned the pedagogical approach of some of the lecturers had an impact on them, making it easy to understand the subject. For example, on a Law course, Nissa commented on one of their lecturer's use of drama as a method of teaching. As she described:

the lecturer ask us to do theatre.... I like this kind of activity. I mean you learn the subject through the other method, not only going to lecture and take notes, but also support with other activity, but must be relevant with the subject.

A similar notion was shared by Mirul who talked about the ‘mini-mode’ in Law helping students to make links between theory and practice. Many found it a valuable approach to learning. Others, like Awwa, Dan and Gary, also found the learning process more interesting when they had to practise their theoretical knowledge during a game in the fields.

In the classroom, opportunities to collaborate with experienced students helped students to understand the subject and the academic practices and to engage with academic communities. In this study all students perceived that the development of positive peer relationships provided useful support networks in terms of study, as resources of discovery and sharing, as well as group communication and discussion.

Learning occurs when students from different academic pathways exchange differences in experiences and level of knowledge. Seven students in this study agreed that their peers from Matriculation, ASASI and Diploma backgrounds were more experienced in terms of academic process and academic subject and therefore always a reference. As Abby said, she was grateful to have friends from ASASI who helped her to understand thoroughly and familiarize her with the terms and practices on the Law course. In a similar vein, Ying described how knowledge was transferred in classroom activities when doing lab work.

I learnt from my friend... sometimes some of the steps I am not clear about it, but my friends who did before at her school she will explain it to me and tell me how to do it based on what she did at her school, as told by her teacher... she did have more knowledge compare to me.

Knowledge only transferred when students were willing to share. In a similar vein, students themselves found that by helping others they become more assured and understood the subject better. For example, according to Azif, having some foundation in Syariah gave him an advantage in the subject and helped his course mates.

Furthermore, students discussed the impact of group work, being the kind of activities that required students to work effectively in teams to complete a common task. The effectiveness of these learning activities matters. Lambert, Terenzini, and Lattuca (2007) found that active and collaborative experiences have a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement. Working in a group is considered as a new opportunity and also

a challenge for these students when they had to work with people who seemed to be different in terms of socio-cultural background, previous education and subject knowledge, even though they were on the same course. It was challenging when students had to bring together their differences and work as a team.

Students voiced mixed feelings about group work and identified both advantages and disadvantages. First, students noted it was a good opportunity because students can share resources and opinions and this contributes to a collective decision and better solutions to problems. Working effectively in a group is, moreover, important because it is part of the assessment. According to Mirul, the working attitudes and commitment of each member in a group is the key to success. This is proven by his final semester group presentation project, where every member of his group gave full commitment to the task. Mirul was proud of being the group leader, and managed to organize the group work consistently from the start and ensure that all members contributed to the group work. Being one of the best groups and well presented, this presentation was a great achievement. Mirul felt the group work was motivating, provided there was full cooperation from team members: ‘my group I think it was good... we’re quite organized and we start our work early....’

At the same time, students commented on negative aspects of group work, especially the difficulty of engaging all members to complete a task. Students encountered individuals from different ethnic groups who preferred to remain within that group, rather than share their knowledge and materials with the team. This could cause interpersonal challenges or even conflict. For instance, according to Abby not every team member cared to contribute their ideas to the discussion, which was most frustrating when some group members took her ideas and presented them when the lecturer asked for their opinions. She concluded that every student in the faculty tried to show off and get attention from the lecturer. In this kind of unhealthy competition in the class, Abby did not feel that she needed to share everything that she knew with the whole class.

It is no surprise that in some situations, even though considered to be group work, the final work is actually only individual contributions. In this case, students feel other student have the benefit of their personal effort. This was experienced by Ting:

It is hard because not all members will do the same amount of work, at the end I am the one that have to complete the assignment... and the only reason they are busy... but at the end the marks were equal to everyone.

In some conditions, it was even more disappointing when a student's efforts in group work were ignored, as when Avin's contribution to an assignment was denied by group members. As a result he was awarded no marks for that assignment.

5.3.2.2 Out-of-classroom experience

In this following theme, out-of-classroom engagement examines the nature of students' learning process beyond the classroom setting that helped students with their learning. The collaborative learning process experienced by students ranges from: collaboration in assignments, study groups for exams, sharing lecture notes, study groups with a mix of students from different faculties, discussion of the lecture topic in social settings or seeking assistance from a more senior student. Students emphasized that working in groups where they collaborated with each other helped each other to be more confident, increased their self-esteem, developed communication skills and helped the adjustment process, problem solving, and the whole learning process. According to Emma, this informal learning process helped them grasp more of the subject, as she described:

If I understand the topic I will discuss it with my friends... normally we will meet after class, and then we discuss, we eat together, and during the meal we will discuss about what we learn today, what we understand and each of us share our opinion.

The process also extends beyond the academic trajectory, and this was further elaborated by Emma when she perceived that it was a good opportunity for her to have friends taking English Literature, and she took this opportunity to further expand her understanding with her friends:

I will explain to my friend what I studied today and she will teach me what she understands, so through this it helps me to understand better the subject.

For Emma, the discussion she had among her course mates and also with her friend is not totally about sharing knowledge and further enhancing their understanding, but also improved her communication skills.

Students also found that they were motivated to learn and the learning becomes more interesting when it can be accommodated within a group. Students initiated groups

from different backgrounds and disciplines that worked together to reach a certain goal. Avin perceived this as a good opportunity for everyone to exchange ideas and to ask the views of other students with more knowledge on a particular topic and subject. Importantly, Avin commented on the academic and emotional support from such groups; ‘we gave each other motivation and encouragement’. Furthermore, Tino elaborated how he sought help from his friends to understand Economics after it was not well explained in lectures. According to Tino, apart from personal study, friends play an important role in helping him to understand the subject and complete the academic task. This informal process of learning shows that student felt more comfortable learning with peers as the communication process is easier. As Avin summed up the views of many: ‘it is hard to work alone’.

Working in groups helped some students feel more comfortable and confident. This was the case for Awwa, who described how she needed company when learning. She was not confident in what she was studying and doing; for example, when completing an assignment she preferred to discuss it with friends, so she could be more confident when other students agreed with her ideas and contributed their opinions.

In the same process, students also mentioned the important role of seniors in the student learning process. As one student described, it is important to have a positive relationship with seniors, because the junior gains an advantage from their experience. According to Avin, one of the first steps he took when he entered university was to approach his senior and build a relationship, so that whenever he has a problem he could consult them. The senior normally became a source of reference, and this student normally preferred to look for a senior from the same ethnic background and same course as him. According to Abby, she was lucky to have a buddy support group in her faculty where each first-year student was allocated to a senior in their third year. She could refer to her senior if she had any problems related to her studies. Not every faculty has a buddy system, and Milly had to make the effort to contact her if she had any problems related to her study. According to Milly, she was comfortable collaborating with a senior whenever she needed assistance, because the senior could be easily accessed by phone or could meet whenever they were free.

Every time if have any problem in academic or other I will asked my senior first... I feel satisfied, he will give me suggestion and by listening to the suggestions I can solve my problem.

As shown by the analysis above, interaction with others is important to learning process and contributes to academic adjustment to university. The extracts presented above show that learning is not totally an individual process, but it happens through communication and exchange within or outside academic trajectory. Students believe learning is not achieved exclusively in a classroom; instead they view it as something that occurs in a variety of contexts in which student interact in everyday life.

Achievement for these students is described as gaining confidence; getting positive feedback from lecturers and more understanding about the subject. The exchanges by some of the students reveal that when students become proactive, their perception of the learning environment and the learning task changes and links into an interdependent relationship between their level of intrinsic motivation and the learning context (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

5.3.3 Support

Literature on the first year of university has paid great attention to various positive outcomes associated with support. The support students receive can be identified at two levels: institutional level and interpersonal level.

5.3.1.1 Institutional level

Students constantly described facilities and resources provided by the institutions as positively contributing to their academic engagement, such as the wireless connection at campus and residential hall, library facilities, computer facilities and on-line materials. For example, the SPIN website is a site where students can download lecture notes directly, before or after the lecture.

5.3.1.2 Interpersonal level

At an interpersonal level, relationships with people were the interactions that developed within and outside the university that had the greatest impact on the student adjustment process. At university, three main resources highlighted by students were peers, lecturers and seniors. Outside the university, the support they received from parents, sibling and relatives and school friends was continued. The support students derive from this formal

and informal relationship ranges from emotional support, practical support, information support, to social companionship.

5.3.1.2.1 Peer support

Acquiring and adapting to a new group of friends was of profound importance in the first year and helped students to adapt quickly to the new learning environment (Giovanna *et al.*, 2005). In this study, all students perceived meeting the right person and building good relationships to be important factors. The growing sense of confidence was aided by a sense of connection to other students at the university and is especially noticeable in their reflections. In this study, all students perceived the development of positive peer relationships as important to their establishment, both inside and outside the classroom. Being far from family and friends, students find their peers at university are their primary emotional support. In Milly's case, she felt more secure and confident when her room-mate was a school friend. She found it more comfortable to have someone with whom she was familiar, so they easily accompanied and supported each other, 'I become comfortable with the environment when I have a friend'. The great value of friendship also appeared in Emma's narrative. As she stated, 'when you feel down, they will give you motivation... they will support and encourage me'. Furthermore, Emma emphasized the importance of peers as social companions at university because, as she said: 'at this stage friends are closer than parents'. At this stage, students needed someone close to share their experiences and, as Emma said, not everything can be discussed and shared with parents.

The growing sense of confidence is aided by a sense of connections to other students at the university and is especially noticeable in their reflections. Abby's perception about friends changed and she realized that it is a problem to survive alone at university, and she need friends in this process.

when I enter here I thought I can survive by myself, but when I enter here, I admit that I could not survive alone... I need friends which can help each other.

The emotional support of peers is more crucial for students personally when they have no confidence to survive alone. This is the most case for Awwa, who personally admitted that she had no confidence to be independent and she needed someone to accompany her and help her to make decisions; as she said: 'I afraid to be alone... I could not make my own decision, I need someone, I have no confident...'. For Awwa, her low

self-confidence means she wants to have someone with her at all times, and she admits that she relies too much on her friends.

For some students, their ability to establish relationship relates to their previous life. For instance, Tino, Azif, Emma and Gary show more confidence because of previous experience at school as a leader and active involvement in activities. In Emma's case, her friendly character makes it easy to build social relationships, and she felt that it helped her to adjust quickly during the transition process. Avin's ability to establish relationships was seen as related to his home environment: he grew up an environment where all family members stayed together in one big house and made him more sociable, and it was important for him to have friends since he needed company and did not want to be alone.

Peers provide an important source of practical support and material assistance, and it is perceived to be one of the most important supports students need; sharing materials and resources such as notes in the study group or group work, borrowing books from friends, or in some instances, a laptop. For example, Mirul described the support he received from his room-mate, who was not only from the same faculty but also an ASASI student, as the best opportunity for him, especially when he was worried about his ability to understand the subjects that were new to him:

My room-mate same course with me, he is ASASI student, he help me a lot, he help to understand the key terms in Law subject, which he understand it and have done it before... whereas for me it is new and confusing.

Students frequently described how they shared materials when they were in a study group or doing a group assignment; Abby borrowed books from her ASASI friend, and Alin from the lecturer, because lecturers know more specifically about the material that is suitable, and shared it with friends. Gary supported his friend by lending him his laptop; Gary said, 'I also support the other friends like those who didn't have a laptop lending laptop to them... feel grateful to help each other'.

Overall students agreed that great friendships developed when students found similar characters, and Gary described several aspects such as common interests, being easy-going, open-minded, helpful and friendly. According to Gary, being open-minded and mingling with everyone without thinking of individual background and race is what makes him feel more comfortable.

In this study it is evident that students who build strong social networks feel more secure in the transition process. Thus the findings of this study support the importance of students establishing social contacts and relationships in order to adjust quickly to new communities of practice. The sense of connection with students is important emotionally and practically, for information and companionship.

5.3.1.2.2 Senior support

In this category students highlighted the support they received from seniors as being a critical beneficial factor in terms of familiarizing students with the system and generating a sense of confidence. Strong supportive community as shown by senior students in helping the juniors to adjust to the university in the early weeks of the transition process is one of the important findings in this study. The support provided by seniors from the Indian student society in helping juniors to adjust to university life is perceived as very helpful by Emma and Milly. Activities organized by the seniors such as weekly informal meetings between seniors and juniors is an important platform for them to share their experiences and problems and also meet other first-year students. The meeting is also an opportunity for seniors to update juniors about activities at university and information about scholarship. For Emma and Milly, strong community support is highly beneficial:

here the senior makes me don't feel lonely, they treat us like family member... when I feeling stressed, I will shared my problem with my batch mate and my senior, so I feel released.

In the meetings their feelings were normalized when others reported similar experiences and were there to listen to and assist with their difficulties. Student organizations' role of helping students to adjust with the transition must not be underestimated. Students see these organizations as providing a resource network within a community, shared information, knowledge and experience.

Apart from developing a valuable social network, it is important to have a positive connection with the senior because the student gains an advantage from their experiences: As described by Emma:

we have to build good relationship with the senior because they are experience they can help us, they can advise us about university life.

In another example, the involvement of the senior in the student's adjustment process becomes more formal when a faculty has a 'buddy system'. In the Law faculty, the first-year student will be assigned to a senior in third year, where each senior will assist between two and three students. Through this process, students feel more comfortable as there is someone to whom they can refer if they do not understand or need further assistance with their study. Students also receive information support from the senior, such as advice and useful tips about studying at university.

5.3.1.2.3 Lecturer support

Lecturers' roles are less visibly supportive of the students' learning adjustment, and this relates to the accessibility of academic staff. Students highlighted interaction with lecturers as fundamental to their learning identity formation because it is through this interaction that they begin to understand the learning expectations at university. Students seemed willing to approach faculty members to ask for help and information. Readiness to seek support is a valuable effort in enhancing their attempts to meet the challenges associated with succeeding in university. The support that students identified that helped them in the learning process were: study skills, academic writing, and exam answer format.

Lecturers helped students by giving guidance on assignments and academic writing. Harn felt more confident when she received feedback and guidance from the lecturer about doing the assignment, as she said: 'I feel better, because it solve my assignment problem'. Furthermore, there was guidance on the study skills, for example when Nissa went to see the lecturer and asked for help when she failed to perform last semester. The tips given by the lecturer about the study skills on that particular subject such as, 'cannot memorize but need to understand and synthesize', helped her to understand an approach that she should apply in studying the case. The support received from the lecturer varied from: providing help with academic writing, to understanding the level of expectations of lecturers in writing.

The feedback students received from lecturers' helped them to identify their weaknesses. As Nissa described:

I am satisfied with the feedback, it help me with the further assessment, for example for one of my assignment, the lecturer told me that I use more general material from yahoo compare to legal resources.

This feedback helped Nissa realize that with academic writing it is important for students to refer to academic sources and show high academic awareness, and this will help her to improve her future academic writing.

The experience of study and assessment in the first semester has given students some feedback about their learning method, and students reported their anxieties that their academic approach, their learning styles, the answering techniques might not match what the university expected from them. At this adjustment level, students are more aware about the aspects that they need to improve and make an effort to meet the senior and lecturer to guide them with the appropriate methods and techniques. Not every single student made this effort but, for those who did, it helped.

5.3.1.2.4 Parental support

Families had an important impact on students' first year experience. Even though parents were not involved directly in the academic process at university, the support students receive from their parents remained a positive indicator in student psychological well-being. Students seemed closer to their families, and were more likely to view their families as a source of emotional support. In this study their parents particularly provided motivation and encouragement. In earlier findings it was agreed that these parents' educational background appeared to prepare their child less for their university experience, but ironically this it does not prevent parents maintaining attention to their child's life at university and their study performance.

Results show that parents followed their child's transition process by contacting each other. This relates to the Asian culture where parents and children are closely bonded. On average, students call their parents every day or up to three times a week. According to students, they felt closely attached when they could share their experiences with their parents; even if they gained no solution, they felt a release when someone was listening to them. As described by Milly in her journal: I will share experience with them although sometimes they could not understand what I am talking about. Abby called her parents daily, and commented 'they are most trusted people I have, and most convenient friends is my mama and my papa'. For Abby and others the close relationship with parents at home continues even though they were now at university.

Some parents show concern about their child's academic progression by asking about their performance. For example, Harn's parents will get some updates about her study and her results and, according to Harn, 'my parents worried if I fail the course'. Parents encouraged and supported even though they might not have performed well in an examination. As Ying said:

My parents always support me... I am not doing really well in my mid-term's exam and I told my mum... and she said what is done is done... and advised me to work harder from now on... my dad also advised me to study hard...

Parents are concerned about their child's education because they have high expectations of them. This is agreed by Mirul, as he said 'my father always asks me about my study, and always advise me to study hard... their expectation on me is high'. For Mirul and others, also, meeting parental expectations makes them more responsible for their education. In Mirul's case, for instance, fulfilling his father's expectations is one of his academic goals and he is always thinking of how he should work or improve to meet their expectations; as he said 'I don't want to disappoint them, but I want to make them happy'. For this group of students, success not only reflects personal achievement but manifests their parents' hopes and wishes.

The findings from the analysis confirmed that their parents' expectations and encouragement were fundamental to students' emotional being.

5.3.1.2.5 External support

Students also obtained information support from external resources. This can be their peers from the same school, or their sister. In Ting's case, for example, she asked for help from her sister to assist her with Economics as she has no background knowledge in the subject. 'I will call my sister and will her and ask her every time I don't understand'. In a different case, Emma will contact her aunt who was also a lecturer in TESL to assist her with the assignment. Emma was fortunate to have a close reference she can consult on any problem relating to academic work, and in other senses the support she receives is quick and convenient.

5.4 Involvement in Extra-curricular Activities

Students agreed that involvement with the activities in the university is an important way for them to familiarize themselves with routines and accustom themselves with their new

start into university life. Involvement in university means students' physically or psychologically taking part in non-academic activities, whether at faculty or at college level. Through this students develop a sense of belonging and feel they are closely attached, and see their potential.

Here the extra-curricular activities refer to activities beyond the students' daily academic routines. Atkins (1999) discusses the value of extra-curricular participation as a mechanism for learning, arguing that:

it is likely that many of the gains in confidence and maturity reported by students as a consequence of being at university can be attributed to their lives outside the formal curriculum as much as their learning experiences within it. (p. 276)

Atkins' (1999) view was significant within the context of this study, when students described how their involvement had an impact on their personal development. For these students, engaging in extra-curricular activities is considered as a new experience and a valuable opportunity to explore or broaden their interests.

Student involvement in extra-curricular activities is considered as formal social integration process. Findings from this study suggest that involvement in extra-curricular activities has a great impact on the student adjustment process into university. One student mentioned the importance to have a 'balanced life' at university; apart from academic work, they also wanted to participate in student activities. As Avin described, university provides many opportunities for students to develop their interest and skills so he wanted to make use of the whole process. Avin has the option to be like his senior, who gave full attention to academic work and was on the dean's list, and well-known among lecturers, but he refused to be like that. He had already given his full attention to academic work at sixth form, and university was a stage when he wanted to experience more new things at the same time as excelling academically. This is also supported by Alin, as she described:

Life at university is not all about studying, involvement in clubs also important, because it developed our soft skills.

Decisions to participate in university activities are motivated by previous experiences at school. Students' former life at school and their involvement in school activities made them anticipate similar opportunities when they arrived at university. For example, one of Gary's expectations about entering university was to be actively involved

in extra-curricular activities, because he believed that at university he had more chance of joining diverse activities. Gary personally described how he was interested to learn new thing and believed that he could achieve this expectation through engaging in university activities.

The relationship between level of engagement in extra-curricular activities and the experiences they gained is highly meaningful and important. Two main areas are described: personal competence and social networks.

5.4.1 Personal competence

One of the important effects of engaging in extra-curricular activities is that it helps to build confidence. Abby's decision whether or not to participate in an activity changed when she observed how other students benefited and enjoyed the process. The transition she experienced from being negative about herself when she felt that other students had higher potential and ability made her isolate herself and concentrate on academic work. However, it changed when she was in second semester, endorsed by social motivation. According to Abby, her decision to become involved in activities helped build her confidence. Abby remarked:

I feel more comfortable and confident; I get back my confidence like I was before. Previously at school I am more active... but when I was in first semester I felt lost, because I didn't involve with any activities and I just stay in my room.... But I realized that I could not hiding in my room and be passive...when I see other student they are active and do something that can benefit them I feel challenged, and I ask myself why I could not be like them... so I decide to join extra-curriculum activity... but I make sure it will not affects my study.

Involvement in activities and their influence on individual self-confidence was also described by Mirul and Awwa in their interviews. According to Mirul, through participating in the extra-curricular activities he felt more confident in giving opinions and asking if he does not understand. Awwa, through her involvement in the activity, improved in self-confidence and became more assured to talk in public:

Through this involvement it increased my self-confidence, before this I was nervous to talk in front many people, but after involved in few activities I become more confident to talk at public.

The current findings also suggest that some students choose particular clubs because they want to build a strong character. This is the objective underpinning Dan's

intention to join the *Palapes* or Reserve Officers Training Unit, because he wants to build self-discipline. Dan personally described how he is the type of person with low self-confidence and can easily be influenced by others. He believed the strong self-ethics behind the activities in the *Palapes* would help him to beat his own expectations. Dan joined this activity in his first semester, and in the following interview with Dan in the second semester he said he had made the right decision and it had helped him to be more self-disciplined and straightforward person.

It is also plausible that students' engagement in extra-curricular activities is to develop their leadership potential. This is a continuity from what they developed at school. For example, Azif wanted to develop his leadership qualities, measured by his experience in leadership positions such as being head boy or head prefect at school. Thus, from the beginning, he had a clear target to join activities at university level and he wanted to achieve a high position in an organization:

I am more active in activities at university level, I join the convocation program and I am the secretariat for that projects, secretary for Johorian student society, and at faculty level I am selected as an 'exco' for the Law's club

Furthermore, students described how involvement in extra-curricular activities helped them to learn many things, for example, new knowledge and skills like computer skills, and technicalities like setting up lighting or sound systems. More importantly students described how they learned to organize a programme when they were given a post as a project leader. According to Abby, being appointed as project leader for one programme taught her how to organize an event, the formality in dealing with university administrators and how to manage the team. According to Abby, being successful in conducting an event made her feel more confident.

The soft skills that students developed when they organized or became involved in an activity were perceived as a long-term investment. According to Azif, the knowledge and skills that he gained from this process is different from the knowledge that he learned in the lecture hall. What he learned now can be used in future or to teach others, as he commented:

I am positive with my experience, it is very useful. Like in lecture you just learn what in books, but through the involvement in the project the knowledge and skill

you gain can be used for other purpose, or you can teach other on how to organize an activity, I think that skills very important.

It is also acknowledged that involvement in extra-curricular activities help to build a student's thinking skills, problem-solving ability and also made them more mature. According to students, thinking skills were nurtured when they had to think how to plan an activity, how to organize it and how to structure it well, while problem-solving skills developed when they had to overcome challenges. Through this process of managing the activity and the people involved in the projects, Azif became more mature, and he concluded that it helped to ease the adjustment process.

Besides portraying it as a personal development process, students also expected that their involvement in extra-curricular activity would possibly be a long-term investment, especially when they entered the workforce. In this respect, Lan perceived that his future career as a teacher will benefit from the skills that he gains from the activity, as he described:

In future I can use these skills when I teach at school, for example in organizing student society. Because at school have club and society. By having this input through my experience at university, I feel more confident.

Similarly, Gary said the experiences and challenges he had faced in preparing for the programmes were good preparation for him to deal with future pressure. These beliefs underpinned Gary's enthusiasm to actively involve himself in extra-curricular activities:

Prepare for any circumstances, cannot predict the future, I do so many things because I want to prepare with any problem in future. I hope it will be useful.

In Gary's view, academic achievement is not the only evaluation of individual success. Gary perceived that being a multi-tasking, well-rounded person is more demanding and important within the workforce nowadays. Even though he will become a teacher in future, he believed that through the skills and knowledge he gained from this involvement he would become more versatile.

For those involved in a group project, it was a major experience and taught them to work under pressure and use communication and leadership skills to manage group members, build confidence and develop motivation. According to this particular student, this is a chance to show potential and ability to manage an activity and people on the

project. This helped to develop various skills such as organizing a meeting, and thinking about the activities and how to get each individual member of the group to work together.

Furthermore, the social networks mentioned were not limited to students but involved the administrative staff, especially when they needed to approach the administrators to ask for permission or to handle protocol procedures. Being first-year students, this was a challenge as well as an opportunity to get closer to the university community, something they had never before experienced. This, according to the students, trained them to interact more formally and improved their communication skills. This is what Nissa and Alin experienced. For example:

I recently join camping programme, and I am in-charge for the gift, I went to the 'Finance Office' to get the cheque, so I need to communicate with them, at first I don't know how to communicate with them but I feel like to be more formal. Through this experience it helps me to approach other people.

My involvement in college activity gives me chances to deal with the management staff and makes me to know them better.

Students were overwhelmed with pride when they were given the task of securing sponsorship for particular projects. For Milly, even though it was a challenge, she was impressed with her ability when she managed to get sponsorship from one company:

I am under the marketing team, so my job is to find the sponsor. I learn I really don't know I can talk to the company manager and request for a sponsor.

Participation in extra-curricular activities was seen as synonymous with social integration, which in turn had benefits for students' emotional well-being.

For Milly, participation in extra-curricular activity is an opportunity for her to be recognized by the university communities. As she stated: 'everyone should know me, so one of the way by active in family day, faculty dinner... if there any activity I will take part. In college people know me better compare to my mates in faculty.'

5.4.2 Contact with the community

Students talked about their social contacts in relation to involvement in extra-curricular activities, representing an opportunity to meet students from different faculties, academic

years and backgrounds and the broader community. This is a chance to build up their social networks:

I get myself involve in society and in 'kolej' activities; I am active in 'kolej' also in faculty. I join Indian Student Society, so from there I get to know people, interact with them and get close with them.

Through this involvement, social networks are not only developed within the campus community but extended to students from different universities when activities they participate in involve participation from different universities.

During this stage of transition, the students' overall energy is divided between the demanding academic adjustments cited above and the socio-cultural and development changes occurring in their broader lives. Fundamental to this stage is an increased awareness of themselves academically, an exploration of the role of university student, and a fundamental search for a balance between academic and social life. By the end of first year, the students become increasingly comfortable with their roles and responsibilities as students.

5.5 Summary

The analysis in this chapter presents the first-generation first-year transition experience to university. What these students go through may not be so different to other students adjusting to university life. The first phase of data analysis on the challenges faced by these students found that they were uncertain about what was expected of them in terms of their role as a student. This is the time when students experience a mismatch between expectations developed before they enter university and what they actually find. Students consciously perceive the academic practices at university as different from what they previously experienced at school. The individualized nature of undergraduate study needs students to develop autonomy in learning. Students also lack basic academic skills for studying at university.

The section presents results for Research Question 3 in relation to the factors that students perceive help a successful transition process. In the second phase of analysis, transition to university involves a readjustment in student thinking, actions and feelings, and only through this can a student adapt to the changes and the challenges. At this point students try to identify their role and identity in relation to the learning communities

comprising their peers and faculty members. Students begin to understand their role as undergraduates and at the same time try to meet university expectations. Based on the analysis, three key factors that help student to engage successfully in university are strong self-determination, a supportive environment and social interaction.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

Previous chapters have discussed the research findings of this study. The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the main findings emerging from the analysis and discuss the results of the analysis in accordance with the objectives of the study and the research question to be answered.

This chapter begins with the discussion of students' backgrounds and higher education aspirations. Of interest is an examination of how students viewed the contextual features of their family backgrounds, schooling experience and structural factors as influencing their process of deciding to go to university. In this section, I highlight disparities and tensions between students' previous identity and their current status as students at university. Finally, the last section discusses how students overcome these challenges and differences to engage successfully with the communities of practice and form their learning identity.

6.2 Discussion of Main Findings

A transition is a period of change in self, role and responsibility, living situation and relationships that cause individuals to alter the way they act, live, and work. Shifting from sixth-form to university is experienced as a period of rapid and intensive change. The way first-generation students in this study experienced transition may be identified in two identical aspects, first, in the way they planned the transition, commonly associated with academic achievement, personal preparation and motivation to succeed. This involved self-reflection and self-evaluation, which helped them to plan ahead for anticipated demands. From another perspective, transition can be defined as the differences that students experience in transferring from one setting to another and adapting to a new environment, learning and building new relationships with students and academics. The transformation in student attitudes relates to the transition process they experience at university. Thus the transition is mentally processed and transformed by action.

6.2.1 Motivation for university education

Addressing the study's first research question on students' motivation to attend university, analysis of interviews found that their intention is a multiple intersection between personal motivation and socio-cultural factors. As described by Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides (2011), the higher education choice is a multifaceted process. This indirectly answers the question about whether there is a relationship between students' social class and higher education aspiration and choices. Student background characteristics include individual attributes, family background, schooling experience and other external factors.

6.2.1.1 Ambition and desire to succeed

As an important theme detected in interview, first-generation students were defined as having realistic goals and aspirations along with a strong sense of being in higher education. The degree to which they were committed to attending university was based on personal interest, intellectual curiosity and a desire to attain a rewarding career. During the interview, several participants talked about characteristics associated with perseverance or having persistence, dedication and the willpower to continue even through testing circumstances. They felt that standing on their own feet and the sense of 'being what you want to be' was enhanced. For Malaysian first-generation students, these findings are worth mentioning because they may reflect the ability to become an active agent and could mean that they have overcome many of the obstacles, such as viewing certain hardships as challenges or having an internal drive to succeed (Gasser *et al.*, 2004; Grayson, 2010). In other words, the personal missions and goals of these students appeared to influence the development of a university education and overshadow some of the challenges that place such students at a disadvantage.

This study provides evidence that academic attainment of first-generation students at an early age helps to shape educational trajectories. These findings indicate that first-generation students' early school performance impacts on academic performance in the later years of school and affects their higher education aspirations. Consistent with findings by Marjoribanks (2003), Cardak and Ryan (2006) find that academic performance at the beginning of secondary school has an impact on the formation of adolescents' educational aspirations. Most of the 16 students interviewed were able to express an intention about future educational goals starting at lower secondary stage (at the age of 14), consistent with

Hossler *et al.*'s finding (1999) that most students develop aspirations about post-secondary education attendance by the end of the ninth grade. This contrasts with Archer's view that going to university is not always the first choice for working-class students (Archer, 2000). In this study, whether it develops from the start or comes later, students stated they saw university as a next step in their educational pathways. They show a middle-class child's attitude, where entering higher education is perceived as natural progression (Ball, 2000).

Participation in higher education has always been highly competitive in Malaysia, and access to university is based on performance in national university entrance examinations. Even with the current economic downturn and increasing unemployment among graduates, the belief in higher education qualifications in increasing social mobility is strongly embraced by the Malaysian government and society. First-generation students in this study strongly believed that education is a key to social mobility. This group placed high value on educational credentials, as emphasized by Shavit *et al.*, (2007, p. 1); a university degree is the 'gatekeeper of managerial and professional positions in the labour market'.

Most students' perceived that opportunities to attend sixth form and to continue with their plan to enter higher education appeared to enhance their self-confidence. Many shared how they changed their post-secondary plan, based on their performance in the SPM examination. Six of the 16 with high attainment had expected to enter the Matriculation programme and go on to university, but failed because of intense competition. Some looked on it as a second option after failing to achieve high grades in their previous examination. At this point, students started questioning what opportunities were available to them, what they were good at and what they wanted to do. For example, three of the students re-oriented their focus from science to the arts stream, two from religious school to normal school. These comments indicate that students had made an assessment of their own abilities and qualities, personal preferences and opportunities available to them. Therefore, this study would suggest that students already experienced a sense of identity and autonomy at sixth form. Students have more realistic expectations at this stage. Such findings support the need for schools in Malaysia, in particular sixth form, to guide students towards post-secondary opportunities and career planning information (Hooley *et al.*, 2011; Gale *et al.*, 2010).

The results of this study also show that students consistently mentioned the importance of achieving good results and future aspirations. At this level students appeared anxious but optimistic about their target into university. Therefore, students are more oriented to preparing themselves for the grades required for admission than any other aspects. The motivations embraced are a belief that individuals have the chance to be educated to any level, based on their performance and achievement. As described by Archer *et al.* (2003), an emphasis on qualifications and credentials clearly reflects dominant conceptions of achieving social mobility. Therefore, failing to achieve high grades or not succeed would be an immoral failure, bringing shame to them and their family. An assumption can be made that first-generation students are more worried about educational failure as they realize their parents have fewer resources to support them. In this study, only 11 students were accepted to study their preferred course, and the rest voiced disappointment that they did not have their first choice. For example, Tino had to accept the course offered in Actuarial Science after his four choices for Medicine at different universities were rejected. But he was pleased with the chances that given to him; as he said, ‘not everything you wish can come true, so just look at it positively and concentrate with what you have now’. Even though he was offered a place to study Medicine at a private university, he had to reject it because of family finances. Similar circumstances were shared by Ting when she was offered a different course from what she applied for. Her narratives show enthusiasm to study statistics; she even considered study at the National University of Singapore, but because of her family’s financial situation she had to accept what was offered. These two stories demonstrate a relationship between higher education choices and socio-economic background (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003). It shows that financial restrictions have an impact on choices (Pugsley, 2004), so they had to take their families’ circumstances into consideration while, for others, getting accepted onto a difficult course was considered as a challenge to their academic capability to study a course dominated by middle-class students. Results suggest that attaining high grades in school helps first-generation students to overcome some of the obstacles, so they can enrol at high-ranking public universities and qualify for scholarships or loans. Students in Malaysia are fortunate to be eligible for financial assistance, so they do not have to take paid employment.

The results of the findings provided clear evidence of first-generation Malaysian students choosing their studies on the basis of their career plans (Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco, 2005; Stephen *et al.*, 2013). At this stage, students found they were more motivated when they had a clear objective. This is particularly significant for eight students who knew from early on what they wanted to become in occupational terms. As a result, students were clear on which course and university, the entry requirements, qualifications and skills they needed to qualify for admission. Students' career directions developed from their personal interests and parental expectations, such as becoming a doctor, lawyer, teacher, chemist or statistician. Students presented a range of factors that motivated them to choose those careers, formed by different intentions, goals and interests, even though no-one in their family was in those professions. There was strong agreement from all the students that studying would increase future earnings. Students also choose their course based on awareness of the prestige and job security provided by the career. Overall, student decisions on their course were linked with getting a good income, security and also status. For example, job security is a prominent reason why some parents expected their child to choose education. It was considered that a job as a teacher in public school is guaranteed and permanent. In this respect, student decisions about the course were similar to middle-class educational choices characteristics (Reay *et al.*, 2005).

Overall, the findings reflect that first-generation students with positive attitude, in other words factors like motivation or self-efficacy, help them to be consistent and positive with their decision to enter the university. This overshadows some of the challenges that place these students at a disadvantage, in opposition to the view that first-generation students aspired less to attend university because of their socio-economic background (Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001; Inman and Mays, 1999; Vansteenkiste, Lens and Deci, 2006). The students challenge these findings since they held high aspirations regarding their education and professional goals. Apart from cognitive ability, resiliency characteristics and educational expectations of students and parents should be included as important variables when studying first-generation Malaysia students.

6.2.1.2 Parental and family influence

Parental involvement is a positive factor in children's educational experiences (Jeynes, 2007; Lefevre and Shaw, 2012). This study suggests that parental involvement may be

even more beneficial for first-generation Malaysian students. In fact, parental support has been found to be the key predictor of first-generation student achievement, beyond the effects of teachers', peers' and other family members' influence and other demographical factors such as parent educational achievement, similar to some other studies on first-generation student academic achievement (Alfaro *et al.*, 2006; Behnke *et al.*, 2004; DeGarmo and Martinez *et al.*, 2009; Saenz *et al.*, 2007). This study found that parental expectations of their children's university education attainment has an impact on children's aspiration formation (Felliciano, 2006; De Graff *et al.*, 2000; Goldenberg *et al.*, 2001; Mistry *et al.*, 2009; Rowan-Kenyon *et al.*, 2008; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999).

Literature on first-generation students suggests that these students often come from homes where parents do not encourage them to excel academically or to pursue higher education (Choy, 2001). However, an examination of the findings illustrates that first-generation students in this study may have come from homes where parents stress the importance of education and believe that their child can attain higher level of education than they did themselves. Nearly all the working-class parents had high expectations of their children's higher education, and parental socio-economic background would seem to be strongly associated with these high expectations. The unsuccessful educational experience of working-class parents seems to be converted into high expectations of their children's higher education. Additionally, this study has revealed that many working-class parents whose children have excellent academic results prefer to adopt a pragmatic approach in relation to their children's university choice (Hossler *et al.*, 1999). They tend to encourage their children to apply for high-ranking public universities and choose a relatively popular subject in order to ensure their children's future career. They saw education, especially a university degree, as the means to achieve social mobility or escape from economic and social disadvantage. This attitude matches Pike and Kuh's (2005) description that parents want their children to go to higher education to gain the knowledge, skills and credentials that lead to good job opportunities.

This is mainly supported by a belief that education is important to upward mobility through education. University degrees lead to intergenerational social mobility: 'the changes in class or status from parents to their children' (Katsillis and Armer, 2000, p. 756). Therefore, entering UKM is a great achievement, for the student personally and also

for their family. This resonates with Bui's (2002) research that demonstrates that first-generation students often take pride in bringing honour and respect to their families, especially for being first in the family to be awarded a degree.

Many parents in this study had high educational expectations of their children. Some simply wished their child to continue to university without being directional about what they should study, while some parents were more directed and hoped their child would obtain professional roles such as lawyers or teachers. Perceptions of parents' expectations influence children's educational drive, Feliciano maintains (2006), and is significant in this Asian culture that values parents, emphasizes family bonds and prefers collective to individual goals. This is a possible explanation for why students want to achieve their parents' expectations.

Although parents encouraged and directed their child to a course or future career, there was no strategic planning and no conversation highlighted about the course or university selection, apart from in one student's account. Parents were less engaged because they never had access to higher education information themselves, and lacked familiarity with the university system. This result is consistent with other studies (Ceja, 2006; Choy, 2001; McCarron *et al.*, 2006; Pallais and Turner, 2006; Pascarella, 2004; Penrose, 2002). Even though first-generation parents are often viewed as being uninvolved, in this study the students reported that parents often provided informal education support for their children. The findings illustrate that human capital was the strongest form of influence because it related to the behaviours that parents engaged in, regardless of their educational backgrounds, such as: encouraging students to do their best academically, encouraging scholastic activities; providing a comfortable homework setting, or discussing future plans with their children. Students in this study mentioned how their parents realized their potential when they were young and, according to these students, their parents were consistently involved during the elementary school years.

Even though parents lacked the cultural capital to cultivate or to prepare better cognitive and non-cognitive skills to enter successfully into university, first-generation students' parents support their children's education through creating a learning environment where they read books or newspapers while their children revised, discussed their children's study progression, and also advised their children about achieving or

entering university. At one level, Milly's and Emma's mother accompanied them when studying until late at night. Other than that, parents sent their children for extra classes and bought books for them. Only Ying's mother showed more proactive efforts in gaining information about higher education options and other related information. Through this, Ying and her mother discussed universities, the courses and the scholarships available. This findings show that parents' involvement as a supporting factor for attending university (Saenz *et al.*, 2007). Therefore it is necessary to acknowledge multi-methods of parents support and to encourage informal first-generation parent involvement.

In addition to above results, students' academic endeavours were supported by the role played by extended family. In this context, older siblings still studying or having graduated from university generated cultural capital for the family. As reported in the findings, having a brother or sister with experience of higher education means that a student has a close relationship with someone who is more likely to be familiar with the system. Their success at university impacted on how students' desire to continue to a degree course. For example, in this study, Azif had wanted to achieve better than his brother since when they were at school.

In another example, extended family members acted as what Crozier and Davies (2006, p. 685) call 'high status role models' for the students. Some had a number of uncles and aunts who were well educated and in professional jobs. Parents encouraged their child's modelling other individuals' success within the family. For example Emma, who wanted to be an English lecturer, talked about the influence of her aunt who was a TESL lecturer in one of the public universities. She was clear about academic demands at university through the support and guidance she received from her aunt. This relates to the concept of 'network-oriented forms of support' that Schneider and Stevenson (1999) used with high SES parents. The role played by extended family is not only a role model but also a competition. A competitive spirit also drives parents to encourage their child to pursue university degree (Archer and Francis, 2006). This is the situation that makes Avin, Dan, Milly and Ting more motivated to attend university, because some of their family members look down on their family for not having any university experience and to prove family capability. The evidence underscored the importance external factor in student higher education aspiration, supporting the evidence found on Hossler *et al.* (1999) and

Wentworth and Peterson (2001) that encouragement from significant people in students' lives was likely to increase first-generation student aspirations.

At the same time, intergenerational resources identified by Crozier and Davies (2006), such as older siblings, cousins or older friends, uncles and aunts, were all implicated in student decisions and choices of university, especially if they had been through university themselves or were still studying and able to share their knowledge and experiences. In this way, knowledge about university and early expectations about university were transmitted. Such different role plays by older siblings and other family members acted as a network serving to overcome the limitation of parents' social capital in preparing their child for university education. Normally this extended family advised and supported each other in many ways in which their parents were unable. Thus, this study also proposed that it is not a totally negative situation for a child to come from a disadvantaged background, as there are many factors surrounding them that could assist them towards social mobility. Even though students in this research did not inherit 'habitus', it developed or was influenced by their surroundings (Reay, 2004).

Based on these results, this study finds significance in 'ethnic capital' proposed by Crozier and Davies (2006), Modood (2004), and Shah, Dwyer and Modood (2010) in transferring norms and values related to education. Following Zhou (2005), components of 'ethnic capital' such as familial adult-child relationships, dissemination of values and aspirations related to education, are among characteristics shown by some of the students' parents in this study, and for this reason students were more determined to attend higher education. This proves the importance of social networks of family and friends that operate as resources to direct transition to university. In this respect, Coleman's sociological concept of social capital is relevant to describe the strong connections between members of a community, which are perceived as powerful resources (Morgan and Aage, 1999).

The findings of the study show there are aspects of the first-generation and class background and identity such as academic potential to exceed parental educational level and occupations for social mobility. Those disadvantages may actually motivate certain students to succeed and progress through the educational channel. Combined with parental encouragement and home support, this can be seen as one of the potential factors in first-generation students' academic success in Malaysian culture. The need for family support

and home involvement among first-generation students should be acknowledged, encouraged and viewed as a strength. The result fills a gap in understanding the complex web of factors that underpins parental expectations regarding children's higher education.

6.2.1.3 The influence of the school

The results of the study found a possible influence of positive schooling experience on the first-generation students' personal, academic and social development. In this study it is shown that when a child has above-average intellectual ability he or she will probably overcome the effects of a deprived home environment with the support obtained from school. This matches Cabrera *et al.*'s (2003) and Adelman's (2006) findings that high quality academic preparation in high school can overcome the effects of a low socio-economic background. School is the main platform where most of the parents from low- to working-class families expect to develop their child's academic capability and to transfer important cultural capital that is limited in their own environment. Students are connected to their schools through the teaching and learning process, and co-curricular activities, university advice and guidance are the key to motivate them towards university education.

It is important to highlight that the performative school environment, together with individual competitiveness, will contribute to individuals' educational development (Khattab, 2005; Michaelowa, 2007). For example, Ting and Ying are from a Chinese school where the academic orientation towards achievement and high performance and hard work is consistently emphasized to the students. The ethos (culture and philosophy) of the school emphasizes excellence, reflected in the structure of learning, the teaching approach and the curriculum that appear to stress going to university. In a similar vein, Tino's schooling experiences at one of the more prestigious schools is dominated by students from high- to middle-class families and is advantageous for him. The chance to interact with other students helped him to build a strong personality; even though a child of a single mother from working-class background, his background was not a barrier to his becoming excellent both academically and in other aspects. Tino's idea of going to university as part of the next step could be results of his personal aspiration, and his academic attainment and the positive confirmation from the school. Findings from this study agreed with Reay (2009), Cabrera *et al.* (2003), and Adelman (2006) how the

specific effects of attending a particular educational institution can overcome the deleterious effects of low socio-economic backgrounds.

This study found that the first-generation students who attend sixth form are more likely to be influenced by schooling experience and the surrounding environment. Transition to sixth-form is perceived as one of the most interesting schooling experiences. Considered as a pre-university programme, students feel personally accepted, respected and supported and especially the teachers and peers contribute to academic motivation. Dan's experience as an average student changed when he entered sixth-form; according to him the learning environment changed him and made him more positive about attending university, which he had previously described as impossible. In this aspect, increased motivation is an outcome of the sixth-form class environment. The effect of students' peer groups is strong, with some research finding that having friends in high school with college plans is the strongest predictor of college enrolment (Choy *et al.*, 2000). These students are influenced by other students who plan to go to university and appear to encourage one another to continue on to university (Speirs-Neumeister and Riker, 2006).

Furthermore, this finding reflects the support and encouragement students received from teachers at school. Teachers at school may have reinforced positive values and encouraged first-generation students to strive for high academic achievements. They felt that the encouragement they received from certain teachers about their abilities motivated them to enter university. For example, one teacher was confident that Nissa would achieve the same result as his senior, who was the best student in that school. Apart from support and encouragement, teachers were considered as a main point of reference for information related to higher education. Students obtained information about university based on their teachers' experience as university students. Obviously teachers also had an adverse effect on some decisions made by students, who noted that advice from them and counsellors had contributed to their decisions about universities and courses, in particular for those with little information about higher education. Based on results, even if they had already selected the course they thought would suit them, they also listened to their teachers' advice to make sure they made the right decision. This mutual decision was taken based on the teachers' experience, information and the students' grades. This supports Horn and Nunez' (2000) suggestion that first-generation students have less access to family social

capital and that sources of information about higher education come from the school setting. They are more dependent on teachers to assist them with academic planning for higher education (Engle, 2007). This is an example of the role that the teachers play in compensating for social and cultural capital absent from a student's family.

Student involvement in co-curriculum activities, such as holding a post in a club or organization, or being a student leader or a representative in a debate competition, are attempts to develop non-academic potential. According to the students, this participation and involvement helped them to build their leadership skills, communication skills and confidence. The school context gave them access and exposed them to resources and activities that are important and facilitate students' success in education. School can make a difference to students from disadvantaged backgrounds if they are given the right attention. It can be concluded that motivation is positively correlated with programme characteristics and teacher beliefs, also peer motivation. Students' intrinsic motivation is likely to increase when the environment is perceived as supporting, encouraging and motivating. Both Abbott-Chapman (2007, p. 286), and Alloway *et al.* (2004, p. 56) stress the significant role that positive educational experiences play in the formation of young people's aspirations about their post-compulsory education options.

Taken together, the results of the analysis reveal that personal desire, belief in their intellectual ability and motivation, early educational experience and early educational achievement and ambition should be regarded as important variables in the study of first-generation Malaysian students' decisions about university. Even though some studies look at these separately, these results suggest that the psychological and sociological variables are interrelated and co-founded. This study provides evidence that the socio-economic background is less powerful in shaping student entry into university, and that what has been confirmed is that the school and academic attainment of these students is crucial. Therefore this study would suggest a greater focus on high school experience and achievement.

6.3 Students' Learning Identity Formation Process

The first-year experience at university is a period of transition; it is a 'growing up' process (Galton and Morrison; Hviid and Zittoun, 2008) that evolves, developing a new identity and an enhancement of pre-developed identity as a student at school. Baesley (1997, p. 29)

states that ‘university has cultural values and norms to which new students must adjust, and students come with unique but varied cultural values’. Students need social and academic integration into the cultural and expectations of the higher education setting (Tinto, 1993).

The period of transition can be both challenging and exciting. Many factors need to be considered when examining the transition period, such as the challenging nature of the process, feelings of unpreparedness, motivation to change, the need for support and socialization into the role. Thus, it is important to facilitate students’ academic and personal adjustment to university life. The following discussion highlights some of the key issues that students encounter in the early stages of their transition process, which most students framed as ‘challenging’.

6.3.1 Disjuncture

This study confirmed that the first semester is considered as a critical development period for students in adapting to their new academic roles. However, serious attention was not given by the institution, and by the faculty in particular, to assist students with the development process. The students reported that the institution’s emphasis is on independent norms and this presents a cultural mismatch for first-generation students from a structured school system and thus less familiar with this practice at university. As a result, this context often required individuals to regulate their behaviour according to university expectations.

Students’ initial response at moving from sixth-form to UKM was mainly framed as ‘transition shock’ or ‘culture shock’, when they experienced feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and uncertainty (Devlin, 2011). These emotional responses may be attributed to feeling unprepared and lacking confidence and support. This finding resonates with earlier studies (e.g. Christie *et al.*, 2008; Dyson and Renk, 2006; Phinney and Haas, 2003) on first year students at university. Uncertainty about their new role related to a mismatch between their expectations developed prior to entering university, based on third party experience and what they actually found when they started. This uncertainty may hinder students’ ability to navigate the university experience effectively and to take full advantage of all the opportunities that university has to offer (Johnson, Richeson and Finkel, 2011).

As often described, transition is perceived as a three-phase process that everyone encounters in new environment (Van Gennep, 1960; Bridges, 2003). It is clear from this study that the shift from one stage to another is perceived as slow and not progressive. Students in the early transition felt a ‘loss of continuity’ (Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007, p. 237), especially when they left a familiar learning context. The findings suggested that they had not been incorporated into the new system, and were unable to let go of their past identity so deeply embedded in them. This indicates that the first-generation students were still caught between the separating and transitioning stages (Van Gennep, 1960). From student narratives, this study found transition between the two systems likely to lead to changes in a variety of aspects of everyday life, and the common challenges identified from the data analysis may be grouped into three categories: identity, academic practices and social relationships. When students start at university, they begin by coping with their entry experiences. Some of these experiences are expected but not easily adjusted to, while other experiences are surprises caused by unmet expectations, which lead to stress and frustration.

6.3.1.1 Identity

Dislocating oneself from the familiar environment to a new place is perceived as a daunting experience for many of these students. For most of these first-generation students it is the first time in their life that they are away from their family. The dislocation to a new physical context and distance from existing social support, family and friends makes them feel lonely and unhappy. The first two weeks of the first semester were identified as a tough period for these students to relocate themselves within the new academic and living environment (Johnson *et al.*, 2011; Pascarella *et al.*, 2004)

The challenge students encountered at this point relates to how they viewed themselves as university students. Students are left on their own to make sense of their role, to familiarize with a new place, the social environment and also the academic tasks. This conflict disproportionately affects students who fail to find connectedness between their previous identities in the current context. Students who established a strong identity at school level academically and socially and entered university with high grades see themselves as being reasonably competent to meet the academic expectations at university. The qualifications achieved allow this student to study at one of the high-ranking research

university in Malaysia. The extent to which students believed they were competent was influenced by the information they received from others who claim that STPM is a tough examination, and when they start university it will be easier than what they have studied. This belief was a totally contrast to what they experienced. Nearly all students reported a crisis of self-confidence on arriving at university (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009).

There was a sense of ‘frustrated agency’ when students found other students were more competent academically, socially and culturally. The presence of students from a wide range of educational, economic, and social backgrounds made them feel they were not competent and were challenged. Their expression of feeling unease in early week experiences reveals a sense of being a ‘fish out of water’ (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009). Students began to isolate themselves and at this point they thought they were different from mainstream students. The differences they perceived are typically caused by a mismatch in expectations. This clearly relates to students’ socio-economic backgrounds and prior educational experiences.

At this point, Abby mentioned that university is not all about academic brilliance. This is perhaps unsurprising when some students advised sixth-form students not to focus solely on academic achievement but to be prepared for other circumstances. Therefore it is important for students to have more realistic information about university and be ready for those circumstances. Reflecting on the question about what the students would like to offer as advice to their juniors, Abby said she did not want students to think life at university is ‘heaven’ where they can stay up late, wake up late, like the ‘information’ she had heard before she began, but actual facts about life at university being a real struggle. For Law in particular, it is not only required that students have strong cognitive powers but also non-intellective powers. In her further response in the third interview, Abby implied that: ‘it was difficult to adjust thinking when you have developed certain expectation and suddenly you could not meet those expectations’. This is one of the reasons why she thinks the juniors should be given clear information about university. Conversely, Tino perceived transition as a process of discovery or new ways of understanding rather than answering pre-developed expectations. In these situations, Tino believed individuals should willingly open themselves to the possibility of being challenged or undergoing emotional pain,

because these are critical incidents acting as triggers to intensify or change a person's existing expectations.

Furthermore, this research shows that if students concentrate purely on the admission process they will neglect the real challenges they will face. Student felt they have reached their proposed area of study when they have been accepted to university, and that their hard work has paid off. Actually, they began to realize, it is a beginning for a new challenging process of which they are not ready to take charge. Students are normally lost, and not sure what is their next plan. The situation presented by these students is associated with an “in-between-ness”—a betwixt space’ (Palmer *et al.*, 2009, p. 38).

6.3.1.2 Academic experience

These students often feel unprepared for university level work and responsibilities and unsure of their capabilities (Byrd and Macdonald, 2005; Oldfield, 2007). Students expressed anxiety about their readiness to handle university-level work and whether they could meet the demands of the curriculum and the expectations of the faculty. It is clear from the interviews and journals that all students have little understanding of what to expect on going to university. First-generation students reported difficulties in time organization, lack of learning habits, challenging courses and a sense of inferiority when comparing themselves to students from the ASASI and Diploma courses.

For sixth-form students, learning identities established in previous school experiences remain relatively weak and unconfident. First-generation students often expressed strong self-doubt about their worthiness of getting high grades and being at university. When students are admitted to university, there is a tacit assumption that they are capable of successfully completing the course. This is based on their performance in the university entrance examination. However, this assumption was debated by some studies (McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001) that found that entrance grades are not strong predictors of success at university because they do not measure non-intellectual factors such as interest in the course, motivation, self-discipline and effort. Prior achievement is not an indicator that a student will achieve the same success at university, as they will experience new academic tasks.

The academic environment at university is remarkably different from the structured classroom teaching that students enjoyed at school. Among the most challenging process they face is to understand the needs and expectations of being independent learners, to engage with the less engaged learning system, to manage the workload and to find new ways of learning at university. A substantial body of research demonstrates conclusively that the problem is frequently caused by poor preparation, particularly in high school (Kazis, Pennington and Conklin, 2003; Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2003). Even though students appear to have reasonably accurate expectations in terms of becoming an independent learner, where they will have greater responsibility for their own learning, they were less informed, less exposed to and understood less the practical concepts of independent learning such as in their role, how it works and how it should be planned. These first-generation students said they had been left to 'sink or swim'. Students concluded that the independent process at university is not an easy process, especially when students are from a self-assisted learning environment, and their exposure to self-directed learning is slight.

This finding is consistent with the findings of Viadero (2005), that students' initial difficulty in adapting to the role of independent learner was influenced by their previous education experiences in a highly structured and examination-oriented system. In some cases, even after six weeks at university some students were grappling really to understand their role. It appears from the findings that they are still thinking of themselves as students at school, expecting a system regulated by others.

Indeed, a dominant theme that has emerged throughout the study is that students need to get clearer directions about their role as independent learners (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999; Hultberg *et al.*, 2008; McInnis, 2001). A student expects lecturer or tutor contact and wishes to be told what to do. For these direct entrants to become independent learners is an immediate change, especially when their prior educational background placed less emphasis on self-efficacy, independence, decision making and self-regulation. At this important juncture, the difficulty they encountered appeared to relate mainly to time management, self-discipline and academic skills. Managing time effectively and efficiently between academic and non-academic activities is important. They were constantly tired, not only because of their academic commitment but also with social activities. Students

were shocked at the amount of work they had to complete within a limited time. For academic purposes, different subjects required different amounts of efforts. Some subjects were new to students and required more intensive study, as well. Failing to achieve self-discipline made students miss deadlines or do their assignments at the last minute and would have had a significant impact on the quality of work they produced.

Students mainly commented in the first semester that they were applying the way they learned at school, such as memorizing and reading from lecture notes (Schilling and Schilling, 1999). Students noticed the learning skills adopted at secondary and sixth-form level had different effects in terms of facilitating the shift from being a student and meeting the academic expectations at university. Skills such as memorizing at the last minute were not entirely appropriate to the demands of university. The common evaluation by students reflecting on their sixth-form education programmes was that these did not adequately prepare students for the complexity of teaching and learning at university. Even if they did self-study, they still need basic understanding of the concepts and not many students showed that they were willing to do extra study, which they needed if they were to spend extra time searching for materials in the library or from the internet. Student noticed they lacked basic academic skills such as critical thinking and reasoning. For example, students faced a particular challenge in academic writing, where students are required to be analytical and critical in developing their argument, and students were expected to have research skills in terms of finding resources such as books and journals to support their argument.

Students reported anxiety that their academic experience might not match university academic expectations, and this is supported by Shobbrook's (2005) findings that academic concerns are more intense for direct entrants. The findings in this study suggest that the sixth forms need to be examined to ensure that their programmes are constructed and organized to give students the optimum opportunities to develop realistic expectations and appropriate knowledge and skills in order to minimise 'culture shock'. Much more attention needs to be paid in the first semester to engage the students with the new academic culture and deliver clear expectations about the strategy needed at university. Students described frustration with insufficient information on what they need to know to improve their performance. They also described frustration that these were implied, not

specifically articulated and explained by the lecturer, as they struggled to understand their role within it. The struggle seem to be the results of mismatch between students' learning styles and study habits and the study behaviour demanded of them by their courses (McCarthy and Kuh, 2006; Ternal, 2000).

Lectures and tutorials are new learning modes for students to discover at university. Students found learning in a lecture hall to be a passive process where they only receive the content from the lecturer. They did not have the chance to communicate with the lecturer, as the teaching was more likely to be a one-way process. In this context, students found the university neglected personal individual rights to secure good knowledge. This was added to the pedagogical approach by the lecturer that was more teacher-centred, with less interaction between student and lecturer. Not every lecturer aimed to educate their students and this was challenging to find ways and to force them to undergo transformation and find ways to overcome the problem. They did not feel comfortable with this environment. Lecturers identified a lack of responsibility, commitment and poor preparation for class. The problems usually centred on understanding the content of the lecture and the mixed way lecturers delivered the lectures, which resulted in feelings of frustration. Student emphasized that the lecture should deliver the content properly and ensure that students would be able to understand the content. Indeed, a foremost theme that has emerged throughout the study is the desire for greater contact with and support from academics. The students indicated that their beliefs about the lecturers at university were not only challenged but had an impact on their transition process. This is noted in the findings by students regarding the power and authority of the lecturer, and their academic position. Students identified a major gap between students and lecturers. This is in contrast to what they experienced in school, where teachers were friendly, approachable and dedicated.

Student disappointment with the teaching at university relates to the context of the subject they studied for their course. Most students were surprised when they had to study a range of subjects. Some described it as starting from scratch, for example Law students were introduced to unfamiliar new terms and content, and a similar experience was shared by students from a science background who had to learn Economics, or some other subject that they had to learn in more depth. Learning new knowledge in a less-assisted

environment is a huge challenge for these students. This was in contrast to those who already had some background knowledge of the subjects. For example, as shared by Law students, those from ASASI and Diploma backgrounds participated actively in classroom discussion and appeared more confident because they had already studied this subject at pre-university level, so the introductory course in the first semester was a continuation of what they had learned before. Similar notions were shared by some students in this study such as Tino and Azif, who found that those students were more engaged in classroom discussion because they already had some background knowledge. The study believes several factors contribute to the differing transition experiences students had from others, relating to the educational system. They noticed students from the Diploma and ASASI education system that supports existing practice in the university context were different from those learning at a sixth-form, which leans heavily on content knowledge in preparation for university admission. As a result, sixth-form students do not participate in classroom discussion due to fear of giving the wrong facts in English. There is also concern that where there is a double standard in the teaching and learning process, where the lecturer assumes that students have same level of background knowledge, the same level of intellectual ability and the same level of language competence. Students were not satisfied when lecturers assumed students understood the content, despite only a few saying they understood. In this context, it is found that lecturers failed or were uninterested in understanding the students' backgrounds. No student in the study mentioned that lecturers try to approach them personally or are interested in their backgrounds.

Students have to learn subjects in new fields or disciplines, with a vast number of basic concepts. It is difficult for students to engage purposefully in this kind of learning if they cannot relate it to their previous knowledge or see the relevance of learning it. What students encounter at university is that they have to learn many things and cannot focus on one subject only, and things get more stressful when they have to learn a new subject from scratch. Therefore, students need constant explanations to enable them to understand the subject and study in detail (Hultberg *et al.*, 2008; Palmer and Collins, 2006). Students in a classroom are from different backgrounds and experiences and have great diversity of needs. Students less prepared for the class are required to do some preparation for participation in the discussion and attending the tutorials. Rigorous academic challenge required students to rise to high academic standards, for an example for tutorial discussion;

classroom presentations, for example, required students to apply their best efforts to show their level of knowledge and ability.

Language has been noted as one of the issues that impacted on the transition process (Harnisch *et al.*, 2011). The results suggest that the difficulty of understanding the subjects or engaging with academics was associated with English language proficiency. This finding suggests that first-generation student English language proficiency had a strong positive relationship with home environment variables such as parental language skills and education, and school context. However, some students like Avin, Milly, Emma, and Gary show strong language proficiency mediated by school contexts. Results parallel the literature in suggesting that language learning at school is more strongly related to these students' language ability than are individuals' backgrounds (Carlo *et al.*, 2004; Hall and Walsh, 2002; Hawkey, 2006). At the same time, evidence from this study shows that many students do not acquire sufficient levels of academic English to succeed in their study (August and Shanahan, 2006; Short and Fitzsimmons, 2007; Zamel and Spack, 1998). The most plausible explanation is that some subjects studied at sixth-form do not require competency in English. There are two main concerns that students highlight: first, students from science streams were not satisfied with the university language policy of using Malay in teaching and learning. This is related to the policy in teaching and learning, whereby English is the medium of instruction for science and maths subjects at secondary school. This student had been exposed to teaching and learning in science subjects using English at school, a policy that is now abolished, and found it difficult to understand terms learned now suddenly constructed in Malay. The issue is that the student was more comfortable learning the subject in English as that was how they had developed their previous learning. In contrast, students from arts streams, especially in the Law faculty, voiced their frustration that teaching and learning was conducted in English. Students felt demotivated when they could not participate in discussion, or were critiqued by the lecturer because of using Malay.

Students were in difficulty because they had been less exposed to English language. Even though they had taken an English test as a supplementary test for admission, this was not a real benchmark of their competency. As they mentioned, even they were awarded the higher band in English they still found it a challenge to participate in the discussion. In this

context, students found it difficult because the process of communication is based on the fact they had to articulate critically in standard English. This had not been well developed at school level, especially for arts students, for whom the teaching and learning was mostly conducted in Malay. Student realized their low competence in English. Moreover, Abby's and Nissa's decision to enter UKM was based on their belief that the university taught in Malay, whereas other institutions used English, and the situation they now faced was completely different.

The challenges facing students in their first semester may be reduced if the university becomes aware of the differences in student backgrounds. These students wasted precious time, struggling through the term trying to find the best way to engage with learning, to understand the subject needs of academic writing, especially when everything was new for them. This means students missed the chance to take part in activities at faculty and university level. For example, as Abby said, she missed the opportunity the faculty offered such as a workshop and a seminar on Law because she was busy with her study.

This research confirms that first-generation students experience stresses and pressures to meet the institutional and parental expectations. These students have fairly high expectations themselves to be successful because they see themselves as pioneers who serve as positive examples for younger siblings and relatives. These findings support the conclusion of other scholars that first-generation students often juggle the expectations of their parents and other important role models in their lives (Martinez *et al.*, 2009; Saenz *et al.*, 2007). These students must be made aware of the expectations of the university for them and they should be encouraged to have realistic expectations of the university. This would help first-generation students with the transition from high school to university.

6.3.1.3 Social relationships

At university, students are exposed to a larger and more diverse set of students than they encountered in their secondary school. Therefore they feel strange with one another, not trusting and more careful in building friendships during the first few weeks of the semester. The students shared a feeling of alienation in the classroom where students tended to interact with a group from the same background because they shared the same feelings and concerns (Chee-Beng, 2000; Laar *et al.*, 2005; Levin *et al.*, 2003). For

example, students preferred to be in a group with their own friends whom they had known previously, on the same pre-university programme, common among the Matriculation, Diploma and ASASI students. Milly, for example, was regarded as a second intake, having arrived one month after the other students had formed their friendships. She found it difficult to develop friendships when everyone had their own group. Obviously, differences in educational background appears to have more impact in the first semester than socio-economic background.

As a direct entrant from school, even students from sixth-forms are still strange to each other; however, they feel more comfortable because they share similar educational pathways. Some students were less pleased with the quality of the friendship they experienced, for example Ting's experience was an extreme case, and the personal relationship she had with unfriendly peers made her more careful with friends. There were two basic responses among the students to these new peer environments. Firstly, some of the students deliberately distanced themselves from their peer groups when they failed to find common ground. Secondly, a feeling of alienation from peers was associated with poor academic and an emotional, also personal, adjustment.

The findings framed in this section are based on student experience in the first semester. This resonates with earlier studies (e.g., Yorke, 1999) that emphasize that the transition from school to higher education requires preparation beforehand. The issue is whether the support available at school level or at higher education institution enables a student to have a smooth transition from school to higher education. Like the results from other studies (Dennise *et al.*, 2005; Phinney and Haas, 2003), those from this study suggest that those who experience academic and adjustment problems feel the need for someone to provide help, guidance, or emotional support.

6.3.2 Adaptation to university life

This research agrees overwhelmingly that what students experience during their first year has a greater effect on success than who they are or their prior achievement (Kuh *et al.*, 2005). Students who are involved actively in learning activities at university are developing habits that will be applied for the rest of their academic year. The findings at this stage echoed the 'post-liminal' stage of reincorporation (Van Gennepe, 1960), in that the first-generation students would be stable enough and would be expected to behave

according to the norms of the new community. The first-generation students noticed that they had made significant progress academically and personally from the first to the second semester.

The view students had about university gradually changed, shaped by new experiences when they began to be involved and to participate. This idea resonates with Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of communities of practice, through which students begin to understand the practices and roles by participation. This means their early conception of learning at university will change when their perception of their learning environment changes. This is a process of reinterpretation of experiences; in this context, learner identity formation is 'continually informed, formed and reformed as individuals develop over time and through interaction with others' (Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt, 2000, p. 750). It is a result of a dynamic process of person-context interactions, formed through the social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993). At a level that students experience as a person-culture match (Fulmer *et al.*, 2010), students will experience greater psychological well-being, will be more academically engaged with the setting and will perform better (Henderson-King and Smith, 2006). This is also stated by Naumann *et al.* (2003), who found that 'students who believed they were capable of doing academic work were more likely to engage in learning strategies that led to better academic performance' (p. 6).

In the following, the discussion will examine the changes that first-generation students experienced after six months (or first semester) as university students. The findings cover all five overarching themes that helped shaped first-generation student experience, categorized as: (a) positive achievement behaviour, (b) negotiating into teaching and learning, (c) social networks, (d) support and, (e) participation in extra-curricular activities.

6.3.2.1 Positive achievement behaviour

Regardless of individual socio-economic background, it seems that positive personal attitudes are an important indicator for students to overcome the challenges they face in the first semester (Vuong *et al.*, 2010). The first-generation students felt they were no longer seen by other as being 'new' but were already beginning to develop new expectations of their new role. The decision students made is simultaneously a consequence of past

experiences of learning in shaping further action. This concludes that what students encounter and experience in the first semester is more effective in influencing their perception of learning at university than prior educational experiences. Apparent from the research findings is that the appearance of confidence and competence is formed after experiencing one or two critical incidents. For some students, these may be their grades in first semester exams, acting to strengthen or in other ways change a person's existing perceptions and practices about learning at university. The importance of acknowledging students as active agents in their own social worlds is strongly emphasized in Situated Learning Theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As stated by Wenger (1998), identities are flexible and dynamic, an ongoing construction as a result of our participation with others in the experience of life (Wenger, 1998). As first-generation students move through their first year, they come to learn who they are as university students through their experiences in classrooms, in interactions with lecturers and peers and in relation to their anticipated futures.

The change students feel was related to how they viewed themselves as a potential individual; as they become more confident and comfortable in their own role, they shifted their focus to being more active and involved in university activity (Speirs-Neumeister and Rinker, 2006). Therefore they achieved a sense of new self that felt more confident and more connected with the learning communities. This study agrees that students enter university with particular cognitive and non-cognitive capacities (Shulruf *et al.*, 2008). Individual cognitive level is generally used as a predictor for academic success (Dickerson-Mayes *et al.*, 2008) and these students proved their cognitive ability in order to gain access to UKM. However, intellectual assets contribute to only a part of academic performance in university, and non-cognitive dispositions such as personal commitment, a willingness to work hard, and to view success as an individual responsibility are better indicators of how students overcome their limitations (Beekhoven, DeJoing and Van Hout, 2003; Byrd and MacDonald, 2005; Dickerson-Mayes *et al.*, 2008; Naumann, Debora and Gutkin, 2003). Derived from strength perspectives, Saleebey (2002) defines resilience as focused on capabilities, assets and positive attributes instead of individual weaknesses. Therefore it is important for educators to understand how to provide supportive environment at the early stages of students' learning and nurture successful personal dimensions, desirable work habits and attitudes (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

The literature claims that first-generation students drop out or lose interest in their course when they cannot match its expectations, have chosen the wrong course or have been awarded low grades in exams (Choy, 2001; Nunez and Cuccaro-Aalamin, 1998; Thomas and Quinn, 2006). These data dispute the findings in this research; it was found that even though students were offered different courses, or had lower grades in exams, they took it as a challenge to improve their experience. Instead of stereotypical first-generation students faced with many problems, this research would view this group of students as individuals with high self-determination. Their determination to overcome weaknesses increased student self-efficacy raised their self-esteem and made them feel less marginalised from the population. Self-efficacy is identified as a person's own beliefs in their capability to attain certain goals (Bandura, 1997; Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski, 2007).

Students acknowledge the importance of operating autonomously. Their commitment to continue to improve their own learning and take increasing responsibility for their development is perceived by students as a requirement of learning at university. Studies focused on the agentic and constructivist learner (Ainley, 2006; Schuetz, 2008; Yorke and Knight, 2004) find motivation is an important factor of whether learners engage or not. This study supports that motivation and agency are needed for engagement.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that parents continue to be an important factor in student success (Wintre and Yaffe, 2000; Wintre and Sugar, 2000). The role of parents in student development is apparent through the different narratives on how important they are to student success. Their sense of self is powered by parental expectations. One explanation of this finding is that an obligation to one's family is commonly ingrained in Asian family culture. The role of children is to bring honour to the family through their achievement. An individual goal is part of the family goals. Therefore, an individual's success in education is part of fulfilling the family obligation (Fuligni and Tseng, 1999). Students were motivated by the poverty and the challenges their family had to face, and the determination shown by a single mother to raise and educate them. Not being able to be successful means not being able to meet family expectations, and this makes them feel demotivated and led to psychological stress (Nagayama-Hall, Teten, DeGarmo, Sue and Stevens, 2005). Thus, for students, meeting parents' expectation is crucial. Once enrolled

at university, the family continued to serve as resources and sources of support for the students personally, even though they admitted their parents did not always understand what they were experiencing in university. The emotional support student had from the family, their encouragement, motivation and expectations made these students realize why they went to university and their responsibility to the family.

6.3.2.2 Negotiating learning environments

Student engagement is an important concept in higher education (Upcraft *et al.*, 2005) and research shows that involvement is an important component that helps the success of first-generation students. The basic premise of engagement is two-pronged. It relies on the student and the institutions to engage collaboratively. What students do during university has a stronger effect on success than who they are or where they enrol (Kuh *et al.*, 2005) and institutional practices that encourage engagement have a profound influence on success too (Pascarella and Tarenzini, 2005).

The social theory of CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) is helpful in explaining how these students are socialized into academic discourse and adapt into academic practices. Students developed their learning identity through evaluating their performance, learning approaches and observing their colleagues in order to improve themselves and become competent at learning. As a peripheral, students developed their knowledge and skills through attending lectures and participating in class discussions. According to Archer and Leathwood (2003, p. 176), ‘the working-class individual who must adapt and change, in order to fit into, and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education institutional culture’ is significant within the context of this study. To achieve this ‘learning to learn’ is a key aspect for students in becoming familiar with the content and context of university. According to Wingate (2007, p. 395), it is a ‘complex development process involving the change in perceptions, learning habits, and epistemological beliefs. Challenge of unfamiliar brings to creative adaptations and multifaceted responses’ (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009).

Students’ prior learning approaches in the first semester show an apathetic approach (associated with a lack of direction and interest) and surface approaches where student intentions when studying focus on the outcome goals, in this context grades rather than learning goals. The situation becomes different when students are more intrinsic in

their study and use deep approaches, because their learning goal is to understand the subject matter. Students agree that their first semester was more surface and apathetic and this is shown in their low results in the first semester (Cassidy, 2008; Diseth *et al.*, 2006). Students' early achievement in the first year has a significant impact on their future academic achievement (Dickerson-Mayes *et al.*, 2008).

Students also strongly emphasized the role of the lecturer in shaping student learning identity (Van den Berg and Hofman, 2005). This was articulated from three different points: characteristics, pedagogical approach and academic support. The learning experience in both lectures and tutorials is a most significant resource for students to understand their subject and the best opportunity for them to interact with lecturers or tutors. However, not every lecturer was available to students or could deliver the lecture to meet student expectations. The students critically commented on the skills of the lecturer in the class, and were most complimentary to those who helped them to understand concepts and principles with charisma and enthusiasm. Students described that a good lecturer made them feel motivated to study the subject. Their comments indicated that the lecturer should listen and respond to students and try to deal with problems and concerns. Student found the tutorials helped them to understand the subject better. The comments centred on the size of the class, and discussion-based classes.

In addressing the quality of teaching, students described teaching staff's approachability and ability to make a course interesting and challenging contributed significantly to the likelihood of student success (Krause and Coates, 2008; Remedios and Lieberman, 2007; Sander *et al.*, 2000; Upcraft *et al.*, 2005). Teaching and learning strategies affected why students were learning a particular subject, how this linked with course objectives, or how they could link with their previous knowledge and may encourage students to see the curriculum as purposeful and interesting. It is of paramount importance for lecturers to demonstrate competence in their subject. At the same time, students not only expected lecturers to develop their cognitive skills, but appreciated those who are caring and supportive. For example, Mirul described how proud he was when their group presentation was praised by the lecturer. Based on this, it can be concluded that students feel valued when their changes are recognized and their hard work appraised.

The research findings show that classroom experience can be important for student academic transition (Kuh *et al.*, 2008; Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons, 2002; Pike and Kuh, 2005). This is a chance for students to overcome their weaknesses and to show their capability for involvement in classroom discussions, helping them to understand the subject. Students believed in a highly competitive learning environment, with lecturers looking for student who are competitive, have substantive subject knowledge and personal skills, the ability to communicate and to deliver ideas. Students found commitment and preparation for class to be central to success in participating in classroom discussion. This effort, truly from students themselves, indicates that a certain level of intellectual maturity is required to synthesize information from various sources and to understand it. Interaction and participation in the classroom are the key construction of knowledge and learner identity. Involvement in classroom discussion helped them to understand the subject and to show capability. Students were more confident to engage with the learning activity when they had some background knowledge of the subject. Findings from Adelman (2006) are that the quality of a student's high school curriculum was more influential in predicting successful engagement in classroom discussion than their entrance score. Students who could relate prior learning conceptions while studying a particular type of knowledge in a particular pedagogic context are likely to be students who experienced deeper approaches to learning in that subject context. In this context, prior learning is important to students' academic performance in a less-assisted learning context, aligning with Bone and Reid (2011). Through their participation in the classroom they will be recognized by other group members, and this will make others value and respect them.

This finding reveals that, through participation in classroom activities and feedback and guidance from lecturers and peers, students learn to construct a new identity. This is in accordance with the importance of the social participation of learning as emphasized by Wenger (1998). For example, Law students observed their experienced peers from ASASI and Diploma and understood how to participate in classroom discussions. As newcomers, they found interaction with experienced individuals helped them to move into the legitimate central position. The finding of this research showed the legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) theory is applicable to the learning process through the expert and novice relationship.

6.3.2.3 Support

The findings of this research indicate the nature of support and opportunities for sharing and learning through peer interactions is important for personal and academic development (Fass and Tubman, 2002; Lundberg, 2003; Swencon *et al.*, 2008; Zimmerman, 2003). Consequently, LPP theory could be extended to studying the dynamics of learning with whole communities of practice. Students' confidence when they have a good supporting environment and help from peers emerged as strong support for their academic, social and emotional adjustment. Success depends on the interaction and relationship that first-generation students have with colleagues because they feel more attached and closer. There are two key aspects: first, interpersonal skill on how to manage the relationship, and second, interpersonal communication on how to interact with student from diverse backgrounds are the tools of success for some students. Without friends, students have fewer available resources to cope with the demands of starting their first year at university and this undermines their sense of self, preventing students from receiving and giving emotional support.

It is proven in this study and supports the study by other researchers (Dennis *et al.*, 2005; Lisa *et al.*, 2008; Peat, Dalziel, and Grant, 1999; Pittman and Richmond, 2008; Swenson, Nordstrom, and Hiester, 2008) that the value of a strong peer network lies in enhanced study and self-motivation; students feel more supported and secure. Students are more comfortable within their own group or sharing the same background, increasing a sense of belonging. Peers are a resource for academic problems, and it was often said that students always approached their peers or senior first when they had a question about academic matters, not a faculty member. At the same time, seniors also have a significant impact, with a valuable role as a more experienced peer who serves to mentor new students and enhance new students' sense of belonging and involvement (Allen, McManus and Russell, 1999). Social learning as mutual engagement with others and participation in CoPs has a common purpose when students discuss academic matters outside of the academic content of their studies, or share information about lectures or practical details about assignments.

In a multicultural educational setting, the findings of this study identified culture as another factor with an impact on students' social networks. The findings show the students

in this study are believed to have a strong attachment to their own ethnic group. This supports the argument in the literature that sharing a similar culture in terms of ethnicity, language and religion was considered an important factor in creating friendship networks (Kao and Joyner, 2004; Kawabata and Crick, 2008; Levin, Van Laar and Sidanius, 2003). Students found the same way of thinking and understanding cultural values and behaviours created a sense of closeness among students, which led them to form ethnic networks. The finding of this study also confirmed Ting and Shan's (2007) findings, where the researcher highlighted the role of culture in creating support that helps the student to adjust to a new learning environment.

A positive relationship with the lecturer was particularly important at the beginning of the transition, based on the experience that few students reported in this study, where attention from the lecturer boosted their motivation to study. Findings from the study indicate that when lecturers provided students with feedback, guidance and assistance with their assignment, feedback about their performance in exams and attention when they could not understand about the subject, students were encouraged to commit to the education process. There seem to be a link between performance and feeling valued. The more the students developed relationships with the lecturer, the more self-assured they became and the more they participated in the learning activities at faculty and gained confidence.

The literature suggests that first-generation students are less likely to be successful at university because they do not benefit from the same level of support that their non-first-generation peers receive from their own parents (Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco, 2005; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Phinney and Haas, 2003). In contrast, students in this study received a significant amount of support from their parents emotionally. This support was primarily evident in encouragement and guidance as the students considered what to do after high school. It is clear that parents may not be able to be supportive in academic situations (in terms of assistance with undertaking academic work on university assignments, or helping their son or daughter to understand the lecture) but they certainly can be supportive in a variety of other ways that can positively affect a student's university experience.

6.3.2.5 Involvement in extra-curricular activities

Involvement in out-of-class activities through student communities plays important role in promoting students' social and personal development at university, as described by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and Eccles *et al.*, 2005. The findings of this research reinforce these arguments and contradict the view that first-generation students are less involved in extra-curricular activities (Walpole, 2003).

Overall, results demonstrated positive responses regarding participation. Student enthusiasm and commitment for getting involved in extra-curricular activities was strongly connected to previous extra-curricular activities at school (Shulruf *et al.*, 2008a; 2008b). Participation in extra-curricular activities is perceived by some students as way of discovering a new activity. As Gary mentioned, entering university gave him a more diverse choice of clubs and organizations. Students indicated that they were members of student communities of various kinds, active in hall of residence activities, while others reported being actively involved in social events organized by the offices or units of the university.

The students viewed involvement in extra-curricular activities as helping their personal development in three different ways. Firstly, it helps student to show their ability, skill, or potential talent. Four students reported active social engagement experience, mostly through holding a post in a project. According to students it challenges their ability as a first-year student, especially when they had to work collaboratively at team work. Ability to manage a project depends heavily on individual leadership, communication and interpersonal skills. Basically, for some of these students, having had these already developed at school level brought benefits for social engagement at university. The results demonstrated that the quality of involvement in previous school activity, as one representing the school at state level, is an advantage that may have compensated for their background. At university, the students' previous achievement continued to help them to build their potential. Meanwhile, for Azif, participation in university level activities led to high self-esteem, as he has a responsibility to perform. In a different case, involvement in extra-curricular activities helped students to discover new talents, as experienced by Milly. Through her participation in dance performance, it helps her to be known by more people. Similar feelings were shared by Abby, where she described she found back her active and

cheerful identity through participating in extra-curricular activities. It is about finding an inner strength, about an unknown potential, and about interest and discovery of capacities. Secondly, it also allowed the new students to engage with other students from different courses and academic years, which indirectly helped them to form new relationships with people that they may not have known before.

Finally, extra-curricular activities are thought to contribute to individual first-year experience by shaping self-concepts. Students started involvement in extra-curricular activities with lower self-esteem, especially when they discovered other students were more competent. However, after participating in few activities, the activity contributed to the growth of self-esteem. Some students described that it helped to develop a sense of belonging to the campus, and they felt more confident to communicate with the lecturers and to participate in classroom discussions.

This results show that participation in campus extra-curricular activities can be beneficial, regardless of social background. In sum, first-generation students do benefit from participating in these activities as they promote interaction and mutual understanding among students and help them to appreciate social, cultural, and ethnic differences among peers (Milem *et al.*, 2005). An important insight from the findings is that this experience constitutes an important part of their preparation for the next stage of their life. The skills developed are necessary for their future career and students clearly mentioned that life as a university student is not only about academic study but involves engagement with university activities. This finding highlights the importance and impact that extra-curricular activities can have in harnessing and nurturing students in their first year.

The student activities were nevertheless burdened by several major drawbacks such as compulsory college activities, prolonged committee meetings, and clashes with study. Such drawbacks make students less interested in joining social activities.

6.4 Summary

As mentioned earlier, the level of engagement, involvement, integration, resiliency and motivation, academically and socially, determine the level at which students are likely to be successful. The transitions students experienced in progressing from sixth-form to university are an internal and external change process. Students' aspirations for university

are an individual goal supported by family expectations. For these students, transition is a positive beginning despite all the disadvantages. In the first section of the discussion, this chapter concluded that student educational pathways are shaped by individual academic ability, supported by encouragement from parents at home, and further developed and nurtured by school and surrounding factors. In the following section of the discussion, becoming a university student is a major hurdle for students, when the academic culture practice at university is a mismatch with student backgrounds and prior educational experiences. Students were in disjuncture to negotiate between external changes (moving between different education systems) and internal process (dealing with emotional and personal conflict). Such a process illustrates that university fails to meet the needs of students from different backgrounds when universities practise a 'one size fits all' policy. Although universities anticipated individual responsibility in managing academic tasks at university, these were considered by students to need reinforcement and guidance and support to train them to become self-regulated learners.

Even though students face a difficult transitional period in the first few weeks of university, they gradually show positive changes in their second semester. The differences student experience between first and second semester are strongly linked to their personal aspirations and goals in terms of the purpose for coming to university and also their strong interest in their subject. This process is enacted through their interactions with the environment and familiarization with conceptions and learning at university.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This research was motivated by the aspiration to gain greater understanding of the process of transition and adjustment that first-generation students experience as they move from sixth-form to university. The main goal was to examine and understand this process from the viewpoint of first-generation students in UKM. This chapter provides an overview of the research; it brings together the main findings of this study and their contribution to a greater understanding of first-generation students. It also presents the contribution of this research to the body of knowledge and theory. The implications of this research for first-generation students, university practices and sixth-form programmes are then discussed. Finally, its limitations and possible directions for further research are presented.

7.2 Overview of the Study

The principal aim of this research was to study the first-generation student transition experience to university. This study aimed to explore factors shaping students' decision to go to university and to understand how they construct their academic identities in their first year. The main contribution of this study is that it has added to the continuing discussion on transition and first-generation students in a non-western context. This present research contributes to the field of knowledge, as this kind of research is especially scarce in Malaysia. In order to achieve its aim, qualitative research methods were employed. Informed by longitudinal qualitative case study, this study explored the educational journey of 16 first-generation students at UKM. Data were derived through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews supported by student journal writing, undertaken from the point when students entered university until the end of their first year. The design of this research makes it possible for the voices of first-generation students concerning their experience of becoming a university student to be heard and explored.

The transformation from established identity at school to a new learning identity at university is a critical process for most of these students. Thus, the study explored students' early conceptions and expectations about higher education by framing the socio-

cultural context that shapes students' beliefs and values on higher education and ways of acting towards achieving their objectives. Using a socio-cultural standpoint, this research attempts to understand the interplay between first-generation student identity and institutional culture. To achieve the goal, this study used CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to facilitate understanding of how first-generation students understood and experienced these new norms shaping their new learning identity. The data indicate that most of these students entered their first-year programmes with a lack of knowledge about higher education learning. The transformation of their identities as university students was the outcome of active participation in various CoP. Progressively, by the end of their first year of university all these students had positive views of themselves as independent learners. They evaluated themselves as already developing some levels of self and new expectations. The process of becoming a university student shapes and changes their lives (Brennan and Teichler, 2008) as well as forms their identities (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004). Researchers tend to stress competencies, capabilities, qualities found in individual students.

7.3 Key Findings of the Study

The insights collected in this research serve to present a complex picture of the transition journey of a group of first-generation students.

7.3.1 Aspirations and backgrounds

In the first research question, the purpose is to examine first-generation students' personal characteristics as an influence on their motivation to attend university. Optimism about their intellectual ability, along with the impression that educational opportunities are open to every single individual with academic capability, are the keys to success. Some had strategically planned their next education pathways since lower secondary, and these plans become more consistent when students entered sixth-form, particularly those who considered pursuing a higher education degree. A clear vision for a future career and high self-efficacy for reaching those goals are two key factors for students' success in academic study and university (Mejar, 2009). The first-generation students in this study often showed high levels of reflexivity about their own life conditions and as they moved to sixth-form they become more mature in making decisions about their future directions. Regardless of their status as first-generation students, they aimed for secure professional

jobs with a high income and status in society. It was not surprising that students said they gave their full attention to their studies to get high grades and be admitted to university, since examination grades are the key to admission. Students truly believed that only through this could they secure a place at a public higher education institution, thus receive financial support. Even though there are other options, they do not believe that their parents could afford them.

Apart from that, students attributed their academic achievement and university aspirations to the encouragement from parents, siblings and former school teachers. Students totally agreed that family socio-economic background led to their desire for educational credentials and employment stability. Students are well aware of the importance of education as a main vehicle for social mobility. Mainly students reported they had the desire to find a secure job and salary after their degree, which later could help their family. For these students, high parental expectations were not emotional pressure but a motivation to work hard. It could be their underlying reason to study hard and to overcome their failures. Students put a great emphasis on collectivist values such as respect for family and respect for tradition.

Students were also optimistic about higher education through the resources surrounding them. Positive assumptions about what life and work in future would be like with a degree seemed to have had a major impact on student motivation to enter higher education. This study clearly proves that different types of social capital refer to different kinds of support from parents, siblings, extended family members (cousins, aunts and uncles), peers, social media, school and community in providing students with information and knowledge about higher education. Parents show positive attitudes towards their child's education through resources and emotional support. Successful brothers or sisters serve as a strong role model for students. Siblings who are still studying or have graduated are perceived as an important information resource in their immediate networks, and students can ask for information on university, application process, and also the teaching and learning process. This also applies to their extended family and friends.

Furthermore, school structural and social factors are important predictors of academic achievement for a first-generation student. The study shows that individual-level predictors such as student academic ability, associations with positive peers and a

motivating academic culture play a substantive role in increasing students' motivation for higher education. Furthermore, the school climate, teachers and the sense of belonging felt by students are important to successful student outcomes. Teachers and peers at school influence first-generation students' academic commitment and their post-secondary education aspirations, planning and decision making. Working-class parents tend to depend on school to help with student academic and higher education knowledge. School makes a meaningful academic and social contribution for first-generation students. This finding can help expand our understanding on roles played by school to develop students' potential and talents that indirectly contribute to social and cultural capital.

In summary, the research participants appeared to have fairly reflexive ways of making deliberate efforts to change their habitus, by focusing and paying attention to their study. It was not necessarily the parents' cultural capital that determined their university education aspirations as, apart from parental influences, there were other factors such as family members and school that seemed to elevate or direct student aspirations towards education and a particular career path.

7.3.2 Early interpretation and expectation

This study highlights the degree to which students feel psychologically and socially disconnected to the institution once they enter the environment. What these students experience at this stage may not be so different to that of other students adjusting to university life. The sense of discontinuity in identity that the student experiences is to a significant extent due to the way structures and practices in their present context differ from what they experienced previously at school and at home. False assumptions about life at university relate to their socio-economic backgrounds and their previous educational experience.

This study concludes that students have limited understanding about preparation for university. It is apparent that each of these students saw themselves as competent, based on their performance in highly competitive entrance examination (STPM) and their previous role at school. Thus, either the student or the school or both concentrate all attention on preparation for examinations. The issue of being so strongly exam-oriented should be seen in light of the intense competition to enter this highly subsidized and most distinguished

public institution. In that context, only those with high grades are accepted and offered a scholarship, and this is critically important for working-class students.

The issues of mismatch between students' early experience and expectations with their real experience at university should be seen more as an issue of mismatch between the school and university systems. It is apparent that the first-generation students did not feel prepared for university, and they felt that their sixth-form experience did not give them much exposure about life at university. Through the findings, it is possible to identify that an individual's previous personal and academic experience at school and their expectations and understanding of the new role are important in how the student responds to the different environment of university. Students continued to see their relationships through their previous educational experiences.

Inadequate information of university put these students at a deficit from the beginning (Shields, 2002). This study agrees with Collier and Morgan's (2000) views that first-generation students do not possess university-related cultural capital that would enable them to understand or adjust quickly to their complex role as a university student. Therefore, these students take longer than others to adjust to the new responsibility, suitable behaviour, associated class activities, academic tasks and to build social integration (Lowe and Cook, 2003; Pitkethly and Prosser, 2001). First-generation students received information about university from various resources that helped them to build early expectations about university. Most of the information about the expected responsibilities and behaviours are different from what they actually experienced and this caused uncertainty and conflict, which in turn caused stress and dissatisfaction. However, this situation was described differently for students from ASASI and Diploma backgrounds. It was found that most of them found the teaching and learning was similar to what they had been accustomed to previously, and there was no significant disjunction. Therefore, for most ASASI and Diploma students the learning and teaching in university was not seen as problematic. At this level, the effects of social class and family backgrounds were not seen as so important, but what made them feel disadvantaged was associated with their academic background. The differences they felt when they compared themselves with others could reflect actual differences in the quality of sixth-form education that had failed to serve as a channel to transfer values, norms and skills required

at university. There was clear evidence of a range of factors that impacted on student confidence, particularly in relation to self-positioning in educational communities and the issue of connection to the subject discipline.

This study found student expectations and learning skills inappropriate to the requirements of successful study in higher education, and this supports the findings of Lowe and Cook (2003), Cook and Leckey (1999) and Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998). This study found that students' expectations of the teaching and learning environment in university are partly driven by their previous educational experience and their life experiences. They may not have the necessary skills to become independent learners. Students normally failed to understand this expectation and this caused them to allocate insufficient time to mastery of key course skills, or to understand the course content, and that university level coursework was more demanding than what they had experienced before.

In the face of current realities, students noticed that to become a competent learner required them to master the learning, thinking and interpersonal skills. For example, to complete an academic task students needed procedural knowledge in terms of how to do it, when to access the resources, what kind of resources are needed, what are the requirements and what are the standards. In this context, this study found students overall lacked the skills. Students admitted that they were less exposed to this kind of self-regulated learning approach at school. Normally they were assisted by the teacher. Things became more complicated at university where they did not have much exposure to completing it alone. Students said the academics assumed that they were already clear with this and had sufficient knowledge of what they are expected to do. The study found this is one of the major mistakes of the system, especially for this group of students. Students are at further disadvantage when the lectures and tutorials are unlike what they expected or experienced at school. One-way teaching approaches, gulfs between the student and lecturers, poor teaching techniques and challenging subjects are among the scenarios student face when they start university.

Overall, the initial experiences at university strengthened students' determination to be an independent learner. However, this study found it is not appropriate for a university to expect every student to be ready to become an independent learner at once. This is

largely due to the weak regulatory mechanism at university level and a middle-class education system. These are still driven by the old practices and assumptions that students are ready, when in fact they commence university with a particular personality, life experience, cultural and educational background and academic ability. Academics must acknowledge the diversity that students bring to the university by not trying to make ‘one size fit all’. Even independence is a general concept, and this study would emphasize that special skills, attitudes, techniques and support are required to become a successful independent learner.

7.3.3 Engaging into communities of practices

Looking at the experience described by students in this study, involving oneself in university experience is considered as an important step for students to understand the new academic culture. This supports the concepts of ‘situated learning’ and ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that explain learning as a ‘special type of social practice’ linked with ‘co-participation’ through ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 13) to conceptualize transition and participation experiences. In this study, the students were engaged in two CoPs: a classroom community and out-of-classroom community. Both of these influenced the students’ sense of belonging. This engagement process recognized the extent to which students’ personal backgrounds interacted with the structural context in constructing how they perceived university education and how the structural context framed their understanding as a university student.

Prior experiences based on some of the positive and negative aspects of experience in first semester are likely to play a key role in how students perceived their learning context, the approaches they take to their learning and the quality of the outcomes of their learning. Students began to re-evaluate past experiences, re-framing prior notions of their identities in according to their new social and academic roles. They outlined that certain characteristics prevented them from being successful, such as laziness, hesitation, being less open, low interpersonal skills or low self-confidence with their peers. Managing self-identified difficulties is an important step that helps to increase self-confidence. Their capability to make a difference, that is, to exercise some sort of agent power (Archer,

2003) to manage a difficult situation and the strategies they adopt may have an impact on their ability as successful learners.

Students have to adjust their learning styles and develop new learning skills in order to be able to be the independent, self-regulated learner that they are expected to be at university. These academic skills were mastered through the mistakes they made, from the feedback they received after they met lecturers to get some guidance, after meeting their seniors, after they looked at seniors' previous assignments, after they met lecturers, or in some cases after they asked an aunt who was a lecturer or student siblings or graduates. It is shown that their sixth-form experience contributed only part of their preparation for developing their university student identity. In response to the research question of whether it is necessary to have a remedial course to assist with new learning expectations, not many gave a positive response. It shows that not every student wants to make a separate commitment, and this study agrees that instead of a course on writing, students in every class should be given clear information beforehand on how to do it, and they should be supported in the process.

Being and becoming a learner is an outcome of complex interplay between students and the learning activities. As Wenger (1998) notes, the recognition of one's competence by the community is an important source of identity formation. This competence encompasses knowing how to engage with more capable peers and other students, and sharing the resources. This sense of participation as a way of learning of both absorbing and being absorbed in the 'culture of practice' involves not just learning how to understand certain tasks but, more importantly, understanding what it is like to be in the university. This was a very strong finding for the first-generation students, who saw their involvement in the CoP as being important. The students indicated that most of these interactions were task oriented.

Students' involvement in classroom experiences played a critical role in assisting the student to understand the subject knowledge and skills. Furthermore, disciplinary roots or connections are important in their understanding and practice of learning and have significant impact with their engagement with the activities in classroom, such as discussion. Student interest in the course and the connection to individual disciplines seem to be fundamental to student changes and motivation to learn. Students found different

subjects were likely to have different approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and these may also lead to different learning techniques and study skills. In this context, the central driving force in constructing one's identity involves the dynamic interaction of self-motivation with the support and guidance they receive from the learning communities, especially lecturers and peers. These students experienced improvement through their own efforts and also from positive staff interactions and relationships that helped the students to understand academic expectations. This study clearly proves that guidance and positive feedback encourage new students to participate more actively in class discussions.

Learning, as opposed to acquiring knowledge within a classroom situation, also takes place through interacting and working with others in daily life. This is the meaning of learning that is embedded in the concept of adult learning. The students in this study learned that networking was an important activity for their learning development. A key finding to out-of-classroom experience relates to the role that social interactions with peers played in the students' lives. Peer support was particularly important at the beginning of first year, especially in terms of facilitating transition, because this was when the students were dealing with the steepest learning curve in terms of academic and social expectations. At this point assistance from experienced members was perceived as important. Students acknowledged seniors' role in assisting students with the transition process, ranging from the support students received from student organizations to individual relations. Relations with seniors can be considered relationships between the novices or newcomers and experts. It was noticed from student comments that they preferred to interact with seniors from the same ethnic group, perhaps from of a sense of similarity and comfort but also a strong sense of ethnicity. The seniors assisted the newcomers in overcoming several of the perceived barriers in academic life through advice, guidance, and offering books and notes, all of which help the newcomers to understand academic practices at university, learn the skills, and prepare for new challenges. In the psychosocial sphere, the senior offered role modelling, mentoring, and friendship to help the students to reduce stress and uncertainty and to develop a sense of being a university student. Furthermore, students gained benefits from experienced peers, especially those from Diploma and ASASI programmes. Experienced peers appear to have the potential to serve part of the same critical function of seniors in mentoring, sharing subject knowledge, study skills and writing skills.

Student out-of-classroom experiences are also associated with their involvement in extra-curricular activities. They described involvement in extra-curricular activities as new and exciting experiences. A variety of activities exposes students to different social interactions, events and experience, and helped these students to find their lost identity, making them feel more confident, helping them to overcome their weaknesses and be more confident. Students with high levels of commitments were more likely to have high levels of involvement at school. The results from this study found their active involvement in extra-curricular activities significantly contributed to personal development. Thus, first-generation students should be guided and supported to join extra-curricular activities, because it helps them with the transition process and to engage with various communities of practices at university. A significant conclusion of the study is that the students continually learn to understand the academic culture. The predominant view in this discussion centres on what institutions do to fit students into their existing cultures. Two contradictory issues that need to be solved are whether students are required to fit the existing institutional culture, or whether the university adapts, better to fit the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

7.4 Contribution of the Work

This research contributes to the knowledge at both theoretical and practical levels and can be classified as an addition or conformation to current knowledge. It has contributed to understanding the background and transition experience of the first-generation student in UKM.

7.4.1 Empirical contribution

In recent years, several international initiatives designed to help the transition during the first year have identified its importance to long-term educational engagement at university (Trotter and Roberts, 2006). In Malaysia the detailed experience of the adjustment difficulties of students is not comprehensively understood or addressed. When examining the challenges first-generation students face in the transition process, such insights could be valuable in helping the university to think about developing policy, practice and action in the area of learner support and in facilitating the progression of student to university and the transition, which present different challenges.

The present research extends the literature associating the role of student backgrounds on their identity constructions, which is to date underrepresented in Malaysia's higher education literature. In this context, to comprehend the transition experienced by first-generation students it is important to understand their background (e.g., family, education, motivation), because it is vital to operationalize when they enter university. Indeed reflecting on first-generation students' backgrounds, this study identified some unique findings. That is, students' decision and choice are likely to be influenced by parental socio-economic background and prior educational experiences; it also highlighted how students perceive themselves and the degree of agency they exercise. This research found that significant groups such as family, teacher and peers provide an important context to the decision they had made. This research helps us to understand how strong self-belief, together with the support they receive at micro- and macro-level, seems to elevate or direct student aspirations towards education and a particular career path. This is useful in providing information on the reality of how first-generation success is illustrated as interrelated, compared to non-first-generation students, for whom parents are their main role model.

First-generation students are proud of who they are. The evidence from their personal experiences has shown that the students have strong self-determination and continue to face up to transitional challenges. The results of this research provide comprehensive evidence of first-generation students' aspirations for higher education that show a considerable active engagement with post-secondary education planning and preparation at secondary school stage. Evidence drawn from interviews shows that first-generation students have high expectations before they enter UKM and this makes them work consistently hard in order to make their dreams real. Economic, social, and educational factors were among the attributes that influenced the student to study at UKM. The majority of students held the view that a degree qualification was potentially the key to their future prospects. This supported the theory that education credentials increase individual social mobility.

Previous studies usually indicate that first-generation students lack support from family and may not have realistic expectations of university (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Such results do not necessarily reflect first-generation students' experience in this different

educational context. The analysis of this research indicates that the external networking system (the extended family, school, social media and local community) may have a deeper and an even more enduring effect in the formation of higher education aspirations for first-generation students than parental background. Thus, a critical area of study would be an exploration of how these external factors mediate student higher education aspirations.

This study has the potential to enhance academic practice at secondary level, in particular sixth-form education. It has been proven that students have a lack of exposure to autonomous learning. The study programme at this level should emphasize independent learning, guide students in academic writing and encourage thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Evidence from this study suggests that one reason for students' late adjustment to university is that they are not ready to become independent learners. The study confirms the proposition that the lack of accurate knowledge about university and the course causes a mismatch in student expectations. This causes a problem for the early engagement process, when students feel they are not ready and not competent to become a university student within their particular field.

The study has demonstrated that Malaysia's first-generation students are proactive in managing their own learning. At the same time, this research also suggests that the students were not completely free of 'at risk' behaviours. As stated in the literature, while first-generation students are still vulnerable in several ways they do not appear to exhibit the same types of 'at risk' behaviours frequently highlighted in the literature, such as being less motivated, performing poorly in academic tasks, with a lack of friends and involvement in co-curricular activities and severe financial struggles. Rather than feeling discouraged and isolated themselves, these student begin to plan which actions and behaviours they adopt. They learned the importance of hard work by reflecting on their previous experience and consistently identify 'hard work' as necessary to achieve their goals.

Two central issues highlighted by students in this study are the different impacts of students' prior achievement at school and their prior achievement in the first semester at university. Both have different consequences. Students' prior achievement at university makes the most of being goal-oriented. They work consistently hard to achieve their goal,

and continue to hold the same attitude at university; at the same time it has relevance to their learning performance at university. Secondly, student achievement in the first semester has a significant impact on evaluating student performance and the effectiveness of the student learning approach. Many students use their performance in the first semester to make changes or maintain their achievement. This study suggests how students handle a difficult situation and the strategies they adopt may have an impact on their ability as successful learners. Maintaining motivation and having realistic expectations of themselves and a positive feeling about being a university, coupled with a sense of being what they wanted to be, help them to overcome the barrier represented by their background.

Furthermore, this study indicates that prior achievement and participation in extra-curricular activities contributes to student engagement in social activities at university. Student leadership qualities, team work and personal skills lend them the confidence to be involved in social activities on campus. They began displaying their ability and talent in extra-curricular activities through their involvement in serving as president of student organization, project leader and others. Therefore, this study would suggest that transition to university is an enhancement process. Students who are selected for university through the strict admission process bring with them academic and non-academic ability that should be enhanced and developed.

The early weeks of the first semester were perceived as the hardest time. Based on the results, the study found that the key factors facilitating or supporting the adjustment process are self-attitude, motivation, peers, the course and parents. This study illustrates that students adopt several strategies to meet academic expectation and requirements such as: getting help from lecturers, from seniors, from peers, from external resources (family members) and private study. These were reported to be the most helpful strategies to adapt to the new setting. This study shed light on the role of the university for first-generation students.

This study emphasizes the importance of social networks at university. The findings conclude that positive engagement with peers reduces student background disadvantage. Positive engagement contributes to student academic and personal development and also emotional well-being. Students agree with the differences in student population; the findings of this study show that there is a gap between sixth-form students

and their counterparts from Matriculation, ASASI, and Diploma backgrounds. They were able to communicate well, able to comprehend each other and importantly be able to learn from each other as a team, but it was found that this is difficult and that not every student was willing to work cooperatively. Usually, dominant students tended to work with their own ethnic group, although some students showed they were more comfortable working and interacting with those from different ethnic and educational backgrounds. Classroom activities such as group presentations, group assignments and group projects are some examples of how the differences can be mitigated. Academic and emotional support provided by their peers or seniors enables the learner to manage appropriately the challenges they face in course of learning.

Furthermore, this research revealed that their relationship with faculty members was a crucial element of the first-generation students' experiences at UKM. These findings suggest that faculty–student relationships should be emphasized as a means of helping these students feel welcome and comfortable. In addition to being experts in their respective disciplines, faculty members were felt by students to demonstrate commitment and a high intellectual level that assisted them with their course. One of the most interesting aspects of the findings was that the students could sense when their skills and knowledge had progressed by virtue of the feedback they received from lecturers. Students especially appreciated that some made an effort to get to know their problems and help to solve them. Students expected the lecturer to act as a mentor, advisor and personal counsellor who could help them on their journey through university.

The design of the study makes it possible to identify and explore variations and changes in first-generation students becoming university students. This is useful in providing information to schools and university on the factors that contribute to the student adjustment process in a new learning setting.

7.4.2 Theoretical contribution

This research aims to fill a gap in knowledge of the experience of first-generation students making the transition from sixth-form. Research into transition process experiences by first-generation students is still in its infancy in Malaysia, and there is little published research on the actual transition process. This dearth of published research means that existing knowledge of transition into university is based on the assumptions and

conclusions made by many studies internationally. The data for this research were gathered at a specific time and place, and the research findings differ from those currently in the literature that tend to assign a negative experience and passive role to first-generation students at university. Since this is an interpretive study, it does not claim that there is a right way to conceptualize the field of study. Rather, theoretical interpretation is proposed and justified by empirical findings.

This research has provided a contribution to the literature on school to university transition, first-year experience and, importantly, given a new perspective on first-generation student experience in the Malaysian education and cultural context. The transition experience identified in this research may be different from that of first-generation students studying at other universities. In terms of the theoretical implications, the findings of the current research continue to advance first-generation transition research.

In order to clarify the complexity of transition experience of first-generation students, this research adopts two main theoretical frameworks. The first is Van Genneep's transition theory to explain the three stages that students experience in the transition to university: separation, transition and incorporation. To understand the transition one must investigate the dynamic interplay between all these stages. In addition to the transition theory, the socio-cultural perspective was also considered to be important. The CoP theory provides insight to the role of social interaction and the development of learning identity during the learning process. Both of these theories have revealed new insights into understanding the background and transition experiences of first-generation students in Malaysia. Nonetheless, it is important to expand and modify the theories to explore new understanding in a different education setting and context in education.

In transition theory, the first stage is labelled as separation, or a stage of disengagement. The theory describes how students leave their previous role, identity and relationships and move into new phase of life. The weakness of this theory is that it fails to recognize the significance of the many years of schooling in students' developmental context. Numerous researchers have written on issues that link schooling experiences and students' future educational attainment (Deci and Ryan, 2009; Rich and Schachter, 2012; Wentzel *et al.*, 2010). Access to academic experiences through the curriculum, teacher and other school activities promotes a range of developmental domains and is not exclusively

concerned with academics but also helps to develop positive identities. One's life encompasses past experiences, and when students enter university they bring along a specific skill set: personal, academic and social. This point is substantiated by students' consistent remarks on their prior schooling experiences, knowledge and attitudes in achieving successful transition. It is through this process of self-continuity that students bring to their learning environment their individual characteristics such as readiness to learn, culture, their values and beliefs, and self-efficacy are brought into their learning environment, which had an impact on their development as a student at university (Yih *et al.*, 2007). Therefore it is problematic to characterize transition as a series of shifts. It is not necessarily linear, but rather a series of interactions where 'the diversity and complexity of transition needs to be valued and understood' (Margetts, 2002, p. 113).

An exploration of how students experience the transition process from sixth form to university reveals that it involves a change of status and the encounter of a new academic culture, places, people, roles, responsibilities and identities. The second phase of transition begins when individuals experience an event or crisis that challenges their prior ways of thinking about learning (Christies *et al.*, 2008; Griffiths *et al.*, 2005; Kariuki, 2006). Similar to this theory, this research found that students react to crises that challenge their prior identities with confusion, stress, sadness, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence. It was clear that students felt ill-prepared for university level work and its responsibilities. Examples of uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy emerging from the students interviewed in the present study included not having the courage to speak out or knowing what to contribute to tutorials; not knowing where to start with an assignment; feeling disoriented; and lacking intellectual and social confidence.

This research found that a significant reason why students encounter transition difficulties is that they rely on past experiences from their schools. Social identity and academic learning developed at school are inextricably linked with student learning experience at university. References by the first-generation students to their past strategies of learning and goal setting were evidence that they were not yet incorporated into the new system, and still identifying themselves with their previous selves, deeply embedded in them. Therefore, there was no real separation period and hence no opportunity for students to detach themselves from the stability of their previous learning context. As stated by

Astin (1984) and Tinto (1994), it is important to separate from past relationships in order to integrate effectively into university life.

Some practical responses arise from the finding: sixth-form teachers need to be aware that students' university experience will vary depending on factors such as prior educational quality. Poor preparation can make the separation process difficult and lead to a poor start for first-generation students at university. As stated by Evans and Kersh (2003), learners bring prior knowledge, understanding and skills with them, which can contribute to their future learning. These findings would suggest that building a sense of continuity between the school and university is of paramount importance in considering and engaging with academic challenge. It should be noted that it takes a while before one can exit the transition stage, so support and preparation is needed.

In the third stage of the transition process, or the incorporation level, the outcomes of the research have shown that Wenger's framework remains helpful in exploring the essentially social nature of university learning. Lave and Wenger's view of learning through legitimate peripheral participation in CoP maps out the changes in roles and practices that individuals experience as they try to become part of UKM's communities. One of the weaknesses found in this theory was it overemphasizes the legitimate peripheral participation concept, in which the progress of a novice to expert status must be legitimized by those already viewed as experts and achieved through collaboration (Wenger, 1998). In a first point, there is lack of clarity in Lave and Wenger's research on novice and experts. There is no clear statement that experts should be qualified, and novices are conceived as a 'passive'. For example, some first-generation students, even though perceived as novices, were more knowledgeable in subjects or tasks relating to prior educational experiences. It is more appropriate to describe the learning process between novice and the senior student as collaboration, sharing what they understand. Furthermore, this research disagrees with the idea that, as novices, students are passive learners. As an adult learner, students take control of their own learning. In other words students engage in self-directed learning. Given this, students identify what needs to be learned, and know the ways and places to access information. In this research, students took the initiative in making use of resources, such as searching the internet, because they understood their own weaknesses. Skills and knowledge to access to new medium of

technologies and communication will displace traditional methods of practice as proposed by Bennett and Kottasz, 2001; Krause and Hamish, 2008; and Taylor, 2000.

Models of higher education pathways and transitions proposed in this theory are appropriate for traditional students, who are more likely to be better prepared than are non-traditional students (first-generation students). First-generation students are different, and were fully incorporated into a new academic culture only when they became involved with university life. Although many felt unprepared for university, once students reached phase three, many demonstrated a strong connection to the university and began to flourish. This research emphasized the importance of activity and first-hand experiences in supporting student's learning and development. Many students reported that they were able to understand their own hidden potential as well as their weaknesses as a result of the first semester. The transition was experienced as a period of rapid and intensive change. It involved reflection and self-critique that enabled them to identify areas of strength and those needing further development. Barnett (2007) asserts these kinds of change related to personal development are 'becoming oneself', which involves a leap by the student. According to Barnett, 'through the leap, the student throws herself into newness. Therefore learning in higher education is not only constructing identities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although first-generation students are held to be 'at risk' (Byrd and MacDonald, 2005; Oldfield, 2007) and more likely to drop out from university, this research views this aspect differently. These students were not dependent on their parents, peers or the institution to drive them toward academic excellence, but were internally driven and motivated.

Furthermore, findings from this research suggest that the concept of communities of practices should go further than simply identifying it within the context of student and academics. As indicated in findings, first-generation students establish their own informal community of practice to meet their own needs. The students pointed out that meeting other students from the same backgrounds and ethnicity formed their social network. The benefits of being a part of this ethnic group include their ability to discuss freely their transition problems and help others with academic and social issues. Working together and learning from each other is an important feature embedded in multicultural students in Malaysia's university. This suggests that a multicultural classroom would have different types of networks. This in turn would suggest new questions for researcher to bring

forward when investigating the social networks of a multicultural classroom, such as how this network functions and helps in the transition process of first-generation students.

Since students were members of a number of wide-ranging communities of practices, they have multiple identities associated with these different communities. For example, active participation in extra-curricular communities of practice is another important factor for first-generation students to embrace. As such these results are intended to raise awareness to the association between student engagement in school extra-curricular activities and university. Active involvement and strong leadership qualities developed at school make them more confident to lead a project, or be appointed as a leader of an organization. Even though they are novices, in some aspects they have the skills, knowledge and qualities like self-reliance, maturity, creativity and team-building skills that enable them to be nominated to posts in student activities. Therefore, not every aspect of the CoP involved students leaving behind prior identities and roles. In this research, a first-generation student does not leave but applies what they have. The student becomes more engaged, increases their self-confidence and develops a range of skills. This research may enrich current thinking in the role of extra-curricular activities in first-generation student development. The students recognize that they possess a competence that their community values. It is about their hidden potential and how others value their potential.

The data from this research reveals the powerful influence of first-generation parents in the integration phase. Aligned with Wintre and Yaffe (2000), this study highlights the importance of the student parent relationship because it was found that students communicate and discuss university-related issues and problems with their parents. This, according to Wintre and Yaffe (2009), contributes to 'emotional well-being' (p. 31). Parents continue to play an important role in the lives of their children (Helsen *et al.*, 2000; Paul and Brier, 2001). Findings of this research indicate that when parents are involved in their child's educational process, they have more positive attitudes and behaviours, stronger motivation and greater participation in university life. As mentioned by Wilcox *et al.*, (2005), emotional support can have a 'buffering effect against the stressful experience of being alone in a new situation' (p. 718). The research indicates that families are critical partners in providing continuity of support as children move to higher education.

Understanding the complexities of the first-generation transition experience therefore demands a subtle analysis that takes into account the inter- and intrapersonal aspects of transitional experiences as well as the structural and cultural context. Having explored the factors shaping first-generation student experience in the first year, the findings of this research oppose previous research by revealing the role of personal characteristics. In summary, this research contributes to previous knowledge by opening up new directions of research that investigate the dynamics of students' personal characteristics. The 'non-cognitive factors' have identified numerous different factors playing a major role in helping students through their early transition life. As various scholars point out, the socio-economic background factor is not a prerequisite for a successful transition process. The literature suggests that academic preparation at school and positive self-attitudes are among the most importance element for change experiences. This is consistent with past studies showing the link between first-generation student adjustment and positive attitudes (Beekhoven *et al.*, 2003; Byrd and MacDonald, 2005; Dickerson-Mayes *et al.*, 2008; Naumann, Debra and Gutkin, 2003; Vuong *et al.*, 2010).

7.4.3 Methodological contribution

This study has contributed methodologically to existing thinking about the advantages of qualitative research in giving in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied. In this research, a longitudinal qualitative case study, the researcher investigated first-generation student transitional experience during the first year. The study explores the students' transition stories through a series in-depth interviews and journal writing. The semi-structured qualitative interviewing method adopted in this study was practical in offering a better understanding of students' transition to university. Through the storytelling approach in the first phase of interviewing, the researcher was enabled to frame their educational journey prior to university entry. Furthermore, a series of interviews enabled the student and research to link to each other to obtain more consistent results. The approach adopted seemed appropriate for the aim of exploring and providing a complex picture of the changing process students experienced from the day they enter university until the end of their first year.

This study also used journal writing as a method to obtain students' thoughts about their first-year experience. This method gives students' a role to reflect on their experience

and provide a more personal and insightful view into their transition in first semester and second semester. This is considered to be one of the main contributions of the study.

7.5 Implications of the Study

Understanding first-generation students' transition experiences in first year is potentially beneficial for informing practices and action. This following section explores the implication of this study to the university, the school and the first-generation students.

7.5.1 Implications for universities

This study provides meaningful insights into understanding first-generation students' experience in a leading university in Malaysia. Universities should consider that students entering university are from a wide range of economic and social backgrounds that give them very different life experiences, different educational opportunities and different expectations, academic potential and goals. They should make an effort to meet individual needs and expectations.

Universities should consider introducing induction programmes in every faculty as a mechanism to help students to integrate into the university (Salesha, 2012). Induction week should address issues of learning and teaching in university, and at the same time acknowledge the existing knowledge and skills of the students. Students should be given a more accurate picture of life at university to overcome their false assumptions about life as a student in university and thus minimise tensions during transition.

For educators in universities, the results will help to draw more attention to the issues of student background for a better understanding of the learning experiences of such students. Course outlines should recognize the specific identity of each discipline in terms of learning. Students must be given clear directions and explanations of course expectations in terms of assessment, exams and grades so students are ready from the start. Failure to meet challenges in their initial transition process will impact on students' ability to engage and perform during their university study. The researcher firmly believes that an interactive, supporting learning environment at classroom level would facilitate students' social and emotional development as much as their academic development.

Furthermore, universities need to collaborate with schools and students prior to entry to ensure students are adequately prepared for the realities of university life. To

support this effort, existing university students should act as a university's ambassadors to deliver accurate knowledge about both courses and life experience as a university student.

7.5.2 Implications for schools

In line with the draft of Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025, Malaysia is undertaking effective action to reform its education system. One of the efforts is to rebrand Form 6 and the STPM in parallel with other pre-university programmes, and change the education system to a modular system. The suggestion is for the new system to give more emphasis to tacit knowledge, for example learning to understand, interpret and analyse information from various resources, such as books and the internet. Students need to be facilitated to achieve multiple skills instead of focusing only on academic achievement.

Curriculum and teaching methods should align with the educational practices and requirements at university. Teaching should be similar or at least more similar to the process they will encounter at university. The sixth form is a stage where students have been prepared academically and socially for university. The result of the study found that, while their grades would not guarantee that a student would enjoy success at university, what most helps them is attitudes and interpersonal skills, to which they need to devote their full attention.

Along with that, students need to have clearer ideas about the reality of university and the academic tasks to ease the transition process. A precondition to accomplish this mission would be that universities establish links to deliver more accurate information, so school teachers or counsellors with the most influence over young people prior to transition are given access to appropriate information. This would ensure that students are provided with accurate information and develop appropriate expectations regarding university education. This may be accomplished by actively assisting students in the anticipation stage, as they receive information about university courses. Special programmes, for example visits to the university and participation in programmes organized by the university, would assist working-class students to gain real experience about university, which has proven effective for many of students in this research.

7.5.2 Implications for the first-generation students

The ways of experiencing the first year identified in this research can be taken as a valuable reference for first-generation students in general. Critical aspects highlighted by this group of students that need to be acknowledged are:

- Knowledge: background knowledge on related fields, knowledge to access information and resources, academic writing, thinking skills
- Communication: language proficiency and communicative competence
- Strategic skills: autonomy, self-confidence, time management and reflection
- Social competence: interpersonal and intrapersonal skills
- Personal and interpersonal attitudes: openness, ‘give and take’, forgiving nature.

7.6 Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this research has several strengths and has revealed a number of interesting results, there are limitations that need to be acknowledged, and these might act as suggestions for future research. It is important to notice that the findings presented and found in this research do not necessarily apply to or fit similar cases in other higher education institutions or in other parts of the world. This may be due to many factors such as differences in sample size, timing, different educational systems and practices and the perception of threat.

Time and resources undoubtedly affected the extent of the data collection. This research would have been more interesting if the researcher could have spent the entire year with the students at UKM to monitor their development process more closely. As a student, the researcher was allowed limited time and resources but, in spite of these limitations, achieved a number of practical approaches to enable follow-up, as it was not possible to stay with the students on campus.

The longitudinal approach of the study has many advantages and disadvantages. As mentioned above, it gave the researcher the opportunity to understand the students more closely. However, due to the circumstances of distance and cost, the journal writing was

performed by email and was not highly effective since few students took part or interacted regularly. The main reason given for this was the students' academic commitments and deadlines. Despite this problem, there was one participant who remained committed and met the researcher's requirements. In conclusion, the key failing was that the study depended on the participants and their awareness of the importance of their participation in this study.

Furthermore, this research is limited by focusing only on first-generation students. It would be beneficial to study the differences in the transition experience between first-generation and non-first-generation students to see if their background had any effect. This is particularly important because in reality non-first-generation students have very different social and cultural capital and there would be a difference in their transition experience, as reflected in the literature. It would also be interesting to investigate the differences in transition experience to university between first-generation students from sixth-form with other pre-university programmes. This is particularly important because these students have very different perspectives and educational experiences, so there would be dissimilar factors shaping their transition experience in university. In fact, sixth-form students have the learning experiences of a normal school-based system.

The present research has been conducted at a specific institution at a particular time. Future research should be conducted at other institutions with a more varied sample of students. It could produce different findings and act as a case for comparison, to investigate the differences between universities. Further study would be needed to explore a range of experiences in the first year of university, and the ways in which different education systems meet needs and support the transition process.

Another substantive issue for future research is obtaining the perspectives of academic staff on the first-generation student transition performance. Understanding how academic staff perceive first-generation student performance in the first year could be beneficial in building a comprehensive model that reflects the perspective of those involved in the teaching and learning process. Understanding student performance in academic tasks such as class discussions, presentations, academic writing and exams might offer further insights into first-generation students' strengths and weaknesses. It also would contribute to enhancement in the teaching and learning process, course structure and

assessment at university level and these could be important contributions to improving teaching and learning at sixth-form level.

Given that student participation in social activities has a great impact on students' sense of belonging and growth, it is important to continue examining how participation in extra-curricular activities helps to form a new identity at university. Educators and administrators need to encourage first-generation students who are less inclined to interact with peers to become socially engaged, in order to make the best of campus life.

7.7 Final Remarks

Generally, research on the transition from school to university has shown that students' previous academic experience differs significantly from what is expected at university. Ultimately, as this research demonstrates, there is no 'one size fits all' explanation to guide our understanding of individual learning experiences and responses must be differentiated by their backgrounds and prior learning. This research would like to quote the idea of a mass system of higher education: 'higher education is not the same experience for all, neither it is likely to offer the same rewards for all' (Reay *et al.*, p. 872). From this perspective, in becoming members of particular learning communities newcomers are expected to master ways of talking, writing, thinking and using literacy that demonstrate membership of a disciplinary community. It has been shown that academic enculturation is an active process that requires a more individual role in planning personal learning schedules, notably different from their previous experience. Positive personal attitudes are some of the most important indicators of individuals' achievement of success. The extent to which the individual becomes academically and socially integrated in the academic and social system of institution refers to individual commitment. Thus, the greater the individual student's level of integration into the social and academic system of the university, the greater their subsequent commitment to the university.

As a final remark, the successful journey to university is not a lonely but an interrelated journey; even if the parents are illiterate, each and every individual in a first-generation student's social network makes a significant contribution to their success.

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APPENDIX A

FLYER

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

Take part in School to University transition research.

I am recruiting a potential First Year student to participate in a research study, to learn about your first year university experience.

To be eligible for the study you must be:

- a. Direct entrants from sixth-form
- b. Age 19–20
- c. First in the family to enter university or parents with no post-secondary qualification.

FOR FURTHER DETAILS CONTACT

Phone Number:

Email:

THANK YOU!

APPENDIX B

Participant Information Sheet

The First-Generation Student Transition to University: An Exploratory Study into the First Year Experience of University Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Researcher: **Faridah Mydin Kutty**

My name is Faridah Mydin Kutty, and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education in University of Southampton. My study is sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia. I am conducting a study on students' transition to university as experienced by those who have the first in their family to study for a Bachelor's degree.

Why am I doing this?

The purpose of this study is to explore the different experiences of first generation students as they process through their first year at university. This research aims to find out factors that influence the first generation students to engage with higher education; their expectations; and their academic and social experiences of their first year in university. The study will also try to find out the impact of race and social class in this transition process. By looking of some individuals from their first arrival in university until at the end of their first year, I hope to understand how students' expectations and experiences change during their first year.

Needed

- Students who are 19 year old, with STPM qualification, entering their first year of university
- Willingness to participate in two separate interviews during the first and second semester and also maintain a regular reflective journal.

What is required?

- Discuss your background and your experience in adjusting to college.
- Interviews will be audio taped and transcribed, but names will be changed and all information will be confidential.
- Participation is 100% voluntary and there are no negative consequences if you decide to withdraw from the study.

Please feel free to contact me at 012 5580912 or via email at idiora1911@yahoo.com or my research supervisor, Professor John Taylor at jtaylor@soton.ac.uk if you have any further questions or concerns.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Faridah Mydin Kutty

APPENDIX C

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

The First-Generation Student Transition to University: An Exploratory Study into the First Year Experience of University Kebangsaan Malaysia.

I have read and understood the information sheet about the study conducted by Faridah Mydin Kutty, a doctoral student at University of Southampton, which will explore the university transition experiences of first-generation, Malaysian students. I have been informed that this study will provide data for Faridah's Ph.D. Dissertation, supervised by Professor John Taylor. He can be reached at (44) 2380597797 or jtaylor@soton.ac.uk of the Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy at Southampton (CHEMPaS)

I understand that my participation will involve 3 interviews, each of approximately 45–60 minutes long conducted by Faridah Mydin Kutty. I realize that the interviews will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed and destroyed following conclusion of the study. I also understand that I have to write a regular reflective journal, and I will send this to her via email.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in the reporting of findings and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study therefore will be protected. I have the right to review tapes and to request that all or any portion of them be destroyed. I also give permission for Faridah Mydin Kutty to access my academic record for the purposes of this study. I have been informed that the use of any data collected will follow standard data use procedures that protect the anonymity of participants. Data will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I may choose to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. Participation in this study and/or withdrawal from this study will not adversely affect me in any way. I understand that this study will not involve any greater risks.

I have discussed my participation with Faridah Mydin Kutty and have had my questions answered to date. I can contact her at any time with additional questions or concerns at 012 5580912 or via email at fmk1v07@soton.ac.uk or idiora1911@yahoo.com

Name of participant (print name) :.....

Signature of participant :.....

Name of Researcher (print name) :.....

Signature of Researcher :.....

Date :.....

APPENDIX D

University of Southampton Ethics Approval

UNIVERSITY OF
Southampton

Miss Faridah Mydin Kutty
School of Education
University of Southampton
University Road
Highfield
Southampton
SO17 1BJ

RCO Ref: 6534

16 June 2009

Dear Miss Kutty

Project Title Transition to Higher Education: Learnig Experiences of First Generation Malaysian Students at University Kebangsaan, Malaysia.

This is to confirm the University of Southampton is prepared to act as Research Sponsor for this study, and the work detailed in the protocol/study outline will be covered by the University of Southampton insurance programme.

As the sponsor's representative for the University this office is tasked with:

1. Ensuring the researcher has obtained the necessary approvals for the study
2. Monitoring the conduct of the study
3. Registering and resolving any complaints arising from the study

As the researcher you are responsible for the conduct of the study and you are expected to:

1. Ensure the study is conducted as described in the protocol/study outline approved by this office
2. Advise this office of any change to the protocol, methodology, study documents, research team, participant numbers or start/end date of the study
3. Report to this office as soon as possible any concern, complaint or adverse event arising from the study

Failure to do any of the above may invalidate the insurance agreement and/or affect sponsorship of your study i.e. suspension or even withdrawal.

On receipt of this letter you may commence your research but please be aware other approvals may be required by the host organisation if your research takes place outside the University. It is your responsibility to check with the host organisation and obtain the appropriate approvals before recruitment is underway in that location.

May I take this opportunity to wish you every success for your research.

Yours sincerely



Dr Lindy Dalen
Research Governance Manager

Tel: 023 8059 5058
email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions

First Semester Interview Questions

Theme	Question
Background and Decisions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. When did you develop an interest to enter university?2. What motivated you to enter university?3. What are the goals that you want to achieve?4. Did your parents' educational background and their occupation influence your motivation to enter university?5. Who influenced your decision making to enter university? And how did they influence you?
Knowledge about University and Application Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Why you choose UKM? Is this your first choice? If YES, why? If NO why and which university you like to enter?2. Where did you find the information about the university?3. How did you select the course you are attending?4. Why did you choose this course?5. How much do you know about the course which you are taking now?6. Did you think you get enough information and resources about the program, faculty before you enter in the university?

APPENDIX F

Interview Question

First Semester Second Interview Questions

Theme	Questions
Acceptance Feeling	1. How was your feeling after being accepted to study at this university?
Initial Expectation and Experiences	1. Is university different from what you expected? If so, how? 2. In general what do you expect being a university student? 3. What are your expectations on university? a) What do you expect about the classes? b) What do you expect about the university academic work? c) What do you expect from faculty members? d) What do you expect from peers? 4. What are the factors contribute to these expectations? 5. Are there any differences between school and university? If YES what and why? If NO what and why? 6. Which aspects are continuity and which aspects are discontinuities? 7. What kind of things are you fearful of about attending to university? 8. Do your pre-expectations before enter to the university match with what you experience now? If YES what? If NO why? 9. In what ways do you expect that university will change you while you are studying at university? 10. What are the barriers for you to integrate to the academic and social environment of the university? 11. What are the most challenging parts at this stage?
Sixth-Form Educational Experiences	1. Do you have any idea what learning at university involved? 2. Do you think your sixth-form school experiences equipped you effectively for greater independent learning at university? a. How did your sixth-form academic experience help you to make the transition to university? b. How did the sixth-form social experience help you to make the transition to university? 3. How did your teacher's support help you to make the transition to university? 4. How did your peers' support help to make the transition to university? a. Are you ready to be a university student?

APPENDIX G

Interview Questions

Second Semester Interview Questions

Theme	Questions
Self-reflection	1. How would you describe your university experience so far?
First Semester	1. What were the most challenging parts of your first semester experience? 2. Do you think you get enough support from the university and faculty? 3. Are your expectations of the university still the same or have you now developed different views? a. If they have changed, what are the differences?
Changes	1. What are the differences that you feel when you first arrived and at the end of second semester? 2. Do you think the first year experience contributes to your personal development?
Support and Motivation	1. Do you feel motivated? 2. Do you think you get enough support from the university? 3. How have your peers' impacts on your first year learning experiences? 4. How do your parents support you in the adjustment process in first year?
Satisfaction	1. How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your university experiences? a) Teaching b) Resources c) Support d) Environment
Challenges	1. What is the most challenging part of your first year? 2. What strategies did you use to solve the problems? 3. Do you agree with me, that your status as first-generation student affects your adjustment with the academic and social needs? 4. Is there anything else you like to tell me about being a first-generation university student?
Improvement and Suggestion	1. What aspects of your first year university experience would you like to improve? 2. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to offer first year students to enable them to be successful and enjoy their university life?

APPENDIX H

Journal Questions

First Semester Journal 1

Theme	Question
Academic Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What do you think about teaching and learning activities in university?<ol style="list-style-type: none">a) Your views on lecturerb) Your views on lecture and tutorialc) Your views on assignmentsd) Your views on independent learning2. How do you develop your study skills?3. How do you find your relations with the academics?4. How you become familiar with the academic process?
Social Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do you find your friendship in first semester?2. How did these friendships develop?3. How have they helped you in the academic process, in what way?

Second Semester Journal 2

Theme	Question
Feeling	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do you feel to be in second semester?2. Are you ready for second semester?
Achievement	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How was your achievement in exams?2. Do you feel satisfied?
Expectation	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What are the aspects that you going to improve in the second semester?

Second Semester Journal 3

Theme	Questions
Academic Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. How do you experience the teaching and learning at university at this stage?2. Do you feel more confident?
Social Experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What do you thing about your relationship with your peers?2. Do you still support each other?3. Do you involved with campus activities?

