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An Exploration of the Study Abroad Experiences of United States Students in Three Halls of Residence at a Catholic University in Western Australia

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An Exploration of the Study Abroad Experiences of United States Students in Three Halls of Residence at a Catholic University in Western Australia.

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STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution. All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/ Safety Committees.

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Signed: _____ Date: _____

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. The significance of the research lies in the belief that host and home universities should be aware of the needs of these study abroad students. The needs of these students were understood through an exploration of the challenges faced, the support received, and the personal and professional development attained.

Four dimensions of the context contributed to an understanding of this study. These four dimensions were the University of Notre Dame Australia Fremantle, the UNDA three halls of residence, Fremantle and Perth cities, and the role of the residential supervisor. These contextual dimensions describe the environment, setting, and background necessary for the research.

A review of the relevant literature was undertaken. In light of this review it seemed appropriate that the conduct of the study should be qualitative, interpretive, and utilise a collective case study. The collective case study utilised two methods of data collection: focus group interviews and reflective journal entries. The method of analysis for the qualitative data followed a format similar to that outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984): data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing/verification. Both the focus group interview transcriptions and the journal entries were coded and analysed according to themes drawn from the three specific research questions for this study.

Findings from the study indicated that the students developed both personally and professionally in light of their study abroad experiences. In the area of personal development the following were identified: independence, confidence, openness to try new things, and self-awareness. Both professional experience and professional possibilities were identified in the area of professional development. Three conclusions that have not previously been detailed in the literature were the development of global-mindedness, difficulties with differences in grading systems and, how these are interpreted by US students, and balancing multiple roles, particularly within new settings.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Study abroad programs allow for unique development opportunities for international students. These programs provide students with a chance to learn about history, literature, business, politics, and world affairs from another culture's perspective. The United States Department of Education (2005) broadly defines study abroad programs for American students as all educational programs that take place outside the geographical boundaries of the United States. These programs can have very different structures. For example, there are programs that run for six weeks, one semester, or a full year. The students may live with host families who are permanent residents of the country in which the program is taking place or on-campus housing may be provided. Although study abroad programs individually can be very different, the overall goals remain the same; immersion into a new culture and a new way of life. Study abroad programs allow students to experience differences in opinions and beliefs, create international partnerships, and become more worldly individuals (Fischer, 2008; Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984). Multi-cultural experiences such as study abroad programs can become a significant part of an individual's education and development.

In 2008, the United States Senate unanimously passed an act titled the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, which is directly related to study abroad programs. This Act aims to increase the number of study abroad participants from around 250,000 at the time of the Act to at least one million within the next ten years (Durbin, 2008). Over the next fifty years, the majority of population growth will occur outside the United States, hence it is crucial for security and economic success that tomorrow's leaders understand the changing world (Durbin, 2008). The understanding that Senator Durbin refers to can be developed through international education opportunities.

There are several different study abroad programs available to students. For example, the duration of the programs can vary; including semester-long and year-long programs. The program could focus on service learning or be a professional internship. It may be a

full immersion program where the students attend host country universities, live with host families, and study a foreign language. Alternatively, it could be a partial immersion program, which means possibly no language barrier, living in student apartments, and courses only with other students from the program. The experience and development resulting from these programs will vary depending on the students and the type of program in which they have chosen to participate (Sandell, 2007). Programs must be supportive of study abroad students and provide cultural immersion opportunities in order to deepen the overall experience. It is through these cultural immersion opportunities contained within study abroad programs that leaders with a broad world understanding may emerge (Mapp, McFarland, & Newell, 2007).

The motivation for this research stems from the researcher's personal interest and involvement with study abroad programs and the significance she feels these programs have had in her own development. The researcher first became interested in international education opportunities when she planned a class fieldtrip to the United Kingdom in Year 12. Subsequently, she has studied abroad in London for three months as part of her undergraduate degree and then came to Australia as the rector for one of the US partners' study abroad programs at the University of Notre Dame Australia. Through conversations with previous residential study abroad students and her own experiences as an international student, the researcher realised that students undergo challenges and development during their study abroad experiences and require varying levels of support. This research was undertaken to further explore these challenges faced, support received, and development achieved.

1.2 PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. Perth Education City (n.d.) reports that Western Australia serves over 36,000 international students annually, of which study abroad students are a component, and this number continues to grow. The need for well-developed programs to best serve these students is a significant concern for Australia, as the host country, and for those countries sending their students abroad. It is necessary to explore the challenges faced, the support received, and the personal and professional development attained by study abroad students. This will

ensure that study abroad programs are, and continue to be, beneficial for the students, the home university, and the host university.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The general research question is: In what ways do United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia?

The specific research questions to be investigated are:

1. What are the perceived challenges for study abroad students studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia?
2. In what ways do study abroad students see themselves supported while studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia?
3. How do students develop personally and professionally in light of their study abroad experiences?

1.4 DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted through the use of a collective case study. Five US study abroad students from each of the three halls of residence at UNDA (Port Lodge, P&O Hotel, & Hotel Cleopatra) participated in the research. The students were drawn from the University of Portland (Portland, Oregon), University of Notre Dame (South Bend, Indiana) and Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict (both from Collegeville, Minnesota and combined into one hall of residence). These 15 US students completed three reflective journal entries and participated in one focus group interview each (of the three focus group interviews undertaken). The reflective journal entries were collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester as described in Appendix 1. The three focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the semester and students were asked to address the questions listed in Appendix 2. Content analysis was then undertaken to analyse the journal entries and the focus group interview transcriptions. The data was examined for common themes, patterns, symbols, topics, and shared mind-sets as described by US study abroad students at UNDA. The US students' perceptions of their study abroad experiences were then applied to the specific research questions.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the study lies in the belief that host and home universities should be aware of the needs of these study abroad students. Study abroad students have a different set of needs than host country students. In addition to the adjustments normally required by the new educational and social environments, study abroad students are often dealing with different cultural norms, language, and a new educational system (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). This means that the host university will need to have support systems in place that are cognisant of these students' needs and be able to assist the study abroad students to navigate their way through the adjustment period. Within a supportive environment, study abroad students will be able to thrive and fully immerse themselves into their new community, creating an extremely rich and valuable experience. It is anticipated that the data collected from the research questions will contribute to the formation of study abroad programs and strengthen future planning for successful hosting of study abroad students at University of Notre Dame in Western Australia. This data will also assist home universities to more comprehensively prepare students for their study abroad experiences.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Three limitations were identified within the study. The first limitation was that of potential personal bias, as the researcher worked closely with the US students of one hall as the residential supervisor and program director. However, this concern was addressed by having a university staff member who did not live with the US students conduct the focus group interview for the researcher's residence hall. Further, all journal entries were deposited anonymously at a central location on campus, which ensured anonymity of all participants. A second limitation was the sample size. The sample size was small, which limits the generalisability of the study to a wider population, but does not hinder the value of research for the universities involved. The sample size was representative of the majority of the study abroad student population living in the halls of residence on UNDA's campus and comprises a significant portion (approximately a quarter) of the participants in UNDA's study abroad program. The third limitation of this study was the length of time over which the research was conducted. The research was conducted over the second semester of a university year and explored student development in light of study abroad experiences. However, it did not allow for follow-up with the participants once they returned to their home country.

Students may not be aware of the development, both personal and professional, they have experienced by the end of the program. They may discover other ways they have or have not developed after re-entering their home country.

1.7 CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The structure of the thesis consists of seven chapters. Table 1.1 provides an overview of this structure.

Table 1.1

Overview of the Thesis Structure

Chapter 1	Introduction
Chapter 2	Context of the Research
Chapter 3	Review of Literature
Chapter 4	Design of the Research
Chapter 5	Results of the Research
Chapter 6	Analysis of the Findings
Chapter 7	Conclusion

1.7.1 Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1, "Introduction", presented the purpose, motivation, and background of the research. The general research question was identified along with three specific research questions. The Chapter then detailed the design, significance, and limitations of the research.

Chapter 2, "Context of the Research", presents four dimensions of the context that contribute to the understanding within this research of the personal and professional development of study abroad students. These are: The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) Fremantle campus, UNDA three halls of residence, Fremantle and Perth, and the role of the residential supervisor.

Chapter 3, "Review of Literature", has five major sections. Firstly, there is literature describing an overview of study abroad students, which provides a framework for

understanding the participants. Secondly, there is literature on the challenges of study abroad programs. Thirdly, there is literature on support for study abroad students. These two sections form a rationale on which to base the idea of personal and professional student development resulting from study abroad experiences. Fourthly, there is literature on development of study abroad students that offers a guideline for further determination of specific types of development. The final section indicates how the review of the literature illuminates this research.

Chapter 4, "Design of the Research", maps out a blueprint for the collection and analysis of the research data. A theoretical framework is initially outlined where interpretivism and theoretical perspectives are discussed. A collective case study is presented as the research design. Data collection methods are explained along with a description of the research participants. Data analysis strategies are then proposed concluding with ethical considerations.

Chapter 5, "Results of the Research", is comprised of four main sections. These sections examine the findings from the case studies of study abroad students in three halls of residence. The findings are presented in three categories: challenges faced, support received, and development achieved. Students' understanding of their study abroad experience is summarised from journals and focus group interview discussions.

Chapter 6, "Analysis of the Findings", presents an analysis of the results of the research and addresses the three specific research questions. This chapter discusses the perceived challenges for study abroad students, perceived support study abroad students received, and the development study abroad students achieved.

Chapter 7, "Conclusion", reviews the results of the research project in light of the stated purpose of the study. Following a restatement of the research design the general research question is addressed. A conclusion to the research is then presented, outlining possible contributions the research makes to scholarly debate. Lastly, implications for stakeholders of study abroad programs are addressed along with suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO
CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. The students were assigned to three halls of residence at a Catholic university in Western Australia. Underpinning the purpose of the research is the belief that study abroad programs provide individuals with multi-cultural experiences that become a significant part of one's education and development.

In this chapter, four dimensions of context contributing to an understanding of this study are reviewed. Context allows the researcher to look at 'the big picture'; to holistically look at the setting of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These four dimensions are:

(a) environment of the University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle (UNDA)

(b) the UNDA three halls of residence

(c) Fremantle and Perth

(d) the role of the residential supervisor

The dimensions describe the environment and setting of the research (UNDA, the three halls of residence and Fremantle and Perth) and an important background characteristic of the researcher (role of the residential supervisor).

2.2 THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA, FREMANTLE

The University of Notre Dame Australia was founded in December 1989 and now serves over 7000 students at three campuses in Fremantle, Sydney, and Broome (UNDA, n.d.). The Fremantle campus houses schools of business, education, medicine, nursing, arts and sciences, and health sciences. Students, including those studying abroad, can take many courses including philosophy, theatre, communications, sciences, education, law, history, literature, theology, and psychology. The university is committed to providing students with a personalised, high quality education in a caring and friendly learning environment (UNDA, n.d.). The university focuses on the

education and training of students for entry into the major professions of medicine, law, teaching, nursing, accounting and finance, physiotherapy, counselling, health sciences, and the priesthood (UNDA, n.d.).

In addition to academic programs, the Fremantle campus provides students with counselling services, academic support opportunities, sports, student clubs, volunteer opportunities, campus ministry, and school events. As described by the Director of Study Abroad, students are provided with all the benefits that attending a fully operating university brings (P. Sanderson, personal communication, October 28, 2009). Furthermore, UNDA is a Catholic university, which means that the education students receive is within the context of Catholic faith and values (UNDA, n.d.). There is an emphasis on community and pastoral care amongst staff and students, recognising and valuing every student and staff member at the university (UNDA, n.d.). Study abroad students attending UNDA are immediately welcomed into this community by staff members and students and are encouraged to become active participants throughout their semester of study. This is achieved through a week long orientation program and ongoing social activities.

2.3 THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA HALLS OF RESIDENCE

The study abroad program at UNDA is a residential one (P. Sanderson, personal communication, October 28, 2009). The University of Notre Dame Australia Fremantle campus has three halls of residence: Port Lodge, the P & O Hotel, and Hotel Cleopatra (Cleo's). Study abroad students attending the university for a semester live in one of these halls, along with other international and domestic students. This study includes US students from all three halls. The Student Life Office manager and Residential Hall Coordinator describe the halls of residence as community living with shared kitchen facilities, bathrooms, rooms, computer labs, and common spaces (D. McLean & M. Gay, personal communication, November 5, 2009).

The Residential Hall Coordinator explained that the emphasis in the halls is on community development: "It's about creating an environment that's structured in its approach with weekly community meetings that are mandatory, community dinners, and dish duty rosters" (M. Gay, personal communication, November 5, 2009). The

Residential Hall Coordinator commented further that "the emphasis is on bringing students together and creating a sense of responsibility and a sense of family" (M. Gay, personal communication, November 5, 2009).The halls of residence are thus a significant part of the students' study abroad experience.

2.4 FREMANTLE AND PERTH

The University of Notre Dame Australia Fremantle campus is located at the west end of Fremantle (Figure 2.1). Its location alone provides the students with a unique experience of life in a historic port town setting (P. Sanderson, personal communication, October 28, 2009). Students have opportunities to fully immerse themselves in the benefits of this location through participation in community events such as weekend festivals, markets, football matches, museums, shops, restaurants, and cafes (Tourism WA, 2010). In a wider context, Notre Dame is located on the Fremantle train line, providing the students with easy access to the state capital city, Perth, and other places of interest in Western Australia. Students are able to experience all the cultural benefits that come with living in a larger metropolitan area such as art museums, musical events, theatre, shops, clubs, parks, and social networks.

Figure 2.1 Map of Fremantle (UNDA indicated) (Fremantle Visitor Centre, 2010)
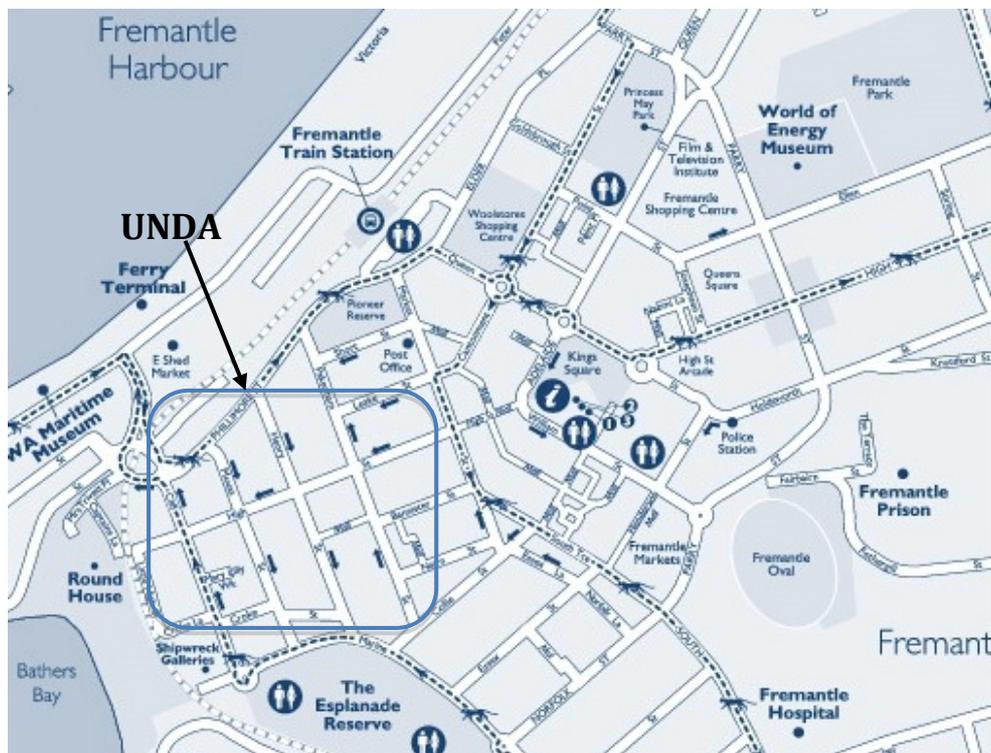
2.5 THE ROLE OF THE RESIDENTIAL SUPERVISOR

As indicated by the Manager of Student Life, the residential supervisor (RS) is the first 'port of call' for study abroad students (D. McLean, personal communication, November 5, 2009). Residential supervisors live in the residence halls and oversee the development of the communities within the individual hall and across the residence halls on campus. They serve as a resource for the students living in the halls and offer support in whatever way possible. "They are responsible for developing and maintaining an atmosphere and community within the hall which nurtures the academic, personal, social and spiritual growth of the residents" (UNDA, 2009, p.3). The researcher is also a residential supervisor who has had three semesters of experience in Hotel Cleopatra, which is home to 18 to 21 second and third year US students per semester.

2.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter reviewed four dimensions of context significant to understanding this study. These dimensions were the environment of the University of Notre Dame Australia Fremantle campus, the three halls of residence, Fremantle and Perth, and the role of the residential supervisor. Discussion of the environment of UNDA, the three halls of residence, and Fremantle, and Perth described the environment and setting of the research. An outline of the role of the residential supervisor provided an important background characteristic of the researcher.

CHAPTER THREE
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to examine the literature in the following areas: overview of study abroad students, challenges for study abroad students, support for study abroad students, and development of study abroad students. Table 3.1 outlines a structure for the review of literature perceived to be pertinent to the study.

Table 3.1

Outline of the Literature Review

3.2 Conceptual Framework

3.3 Overview of Study Abroad Students

3.4 Challenges for Study Abroad Students

3.5 Support for Study Abroad Students

3.6 Development of Study Abroad Students

3.7 Summary

3.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There are four elements to the conceptual framework: an overview of study abroad students, and three themes that are significant to the intended research on student development resulting from study abroad experiences. These themes are challenges faced, support received, and the development of study abroad students. Figure 3.1 depicts the relationship between the four elements.

Figure 3.1: Conceptual Framework of the Literature

3.3 OVERVIEW OF STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

International students are beginning to comprise a significant portion of the student population at higher education institutions (Taras & Rowney, 2007). Research indicates that universities worldwide are consistently experiencing high international student enrolments and that this number is increasing (Tseng & Newton, 2002). Within tertiary education in Australia almost 250,000 international students were enrolled in 2006, accounting for about 23% of the country's total higher education enrolment (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007; Taras & Rowney, 2007). Study abroad students contribute to this international student enrolment and may promote further international enrolments in the future. International students are also a significant source of revenue for several countries, which is one of many reasons competition amongst tertiary institutions for foreign students has increased (Taras & Rowney, 2007; McCormack & Labi, 2007). Study abroad students may not directly contribute revenue to universities in the form of fees and tutition, but the students do contribute to the host country's economy through regular spending on food, transportation, and tourism.

Study abroad students provide benefits for the institutions which they attend, through a more diverse student body (McCormack & Labi, 2007; Taras & Rowney, 2007; Tran, 2008; Johnson, 2008). Study abroad students not only change the demographic

composition of the student body, but also affect the dynamics of the classroom. Taras and Rowney (2007) discovered that in-class discussions and group meetings are positively affected by a more diverse student population. The discussions within the classroom setting are richer (Taras & Rowney, 2007). Johnson (2008) suggests that international students (of which study abroad students are a part) create a multicultural and multilingual classroom, which necessitates lecturers using a variety of teaching styles such as lectures, discussions, and interactive exercises. Interaction between study abroad students and lecturers in the form of emails or conversations is necessary to ensure a mutual understanding of expectations between both groups. Study abroad students should feel that they can ask their lecturers questions about assignments, class discussions, readings, or personal performance. While lecturers, on the other hand, should monitor the study abroad students to see if there are any questions or obvious difficulties with expectations. It follows, then, that the widely held educational goal of preparing students to work in global environments would be supported by study abroad programs since students are receiving first-hand experiences of working in multicultural settings (Taras & Rowney, 2007).

The experience of studying abroad expands the worldview and professional knowledge of students; it creates globally literate citizens (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007; Fischer, 2008). "No number of cross-cultural reading assignments or trips to the museum or lectures by wise and wonderful people has the same effect on young people as a study-abroad experience" (Sanford cited in Fischer, 2008, para. 15). Hopkins (1999) supports this claim by explaining that studying abroad is a form of experiential education. Through study abroad programs, students are provided with daily opportunities for experiential learning, or learning-by-doing, as they immerse themselves into another culture (Hopkins, 1999). This form of education, when paired with reflection, can lead to dramatic self-development, such as an increase in self-esteem, confidence, and communication skills, especially as students are challenged to reconcile their current views about themselves and the world within their new cultural context expanding their worldview, their understanding of different cultures and persepctives (Hopkins, 1999; Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984).

3.4 CHALLENGES FOR STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

Research suggests that students who study abroad may experience an increase in self concept, self-confidence, interpersonal communication skills, and tolerance for persons different from themselves (Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984). These benefits are not achieved without some challenges. These challenges usually involve adapting to the host country, language barriers, housing and expenses, and navigating new educational practices (Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008). The challenges for study abroad students can be categorized into four groups: general living adjustments, academic adjustments, social support, and personal adjustments (Tseng & Newton, 2002).

The first challenges that study abroad students experience upon arrival in a host country are often related to basic survival. Research identifies these as general living adjustments (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Students need to find accommodation, learn how to use public transportation or obtain a driver's license, understand a new healthcare system, locate places to get food, adjust to a new climate, figure out finances, and make sure that they have acquired all the proper documentation such as visas and work permits (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). These challenges are potentially stressful for students because they may be time sensitive (accommodation and visas) or because they are the essentials to survival in the new country (food and money).

Study abroad students may experience academic adjustments that, while similar to issues faced by domestic students, are often magnified due to the newness of the academic culture. Study abroad students have to learn about and adjust to different styles of teaching, curriculum, and expectations (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sovic, 2008; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008; Tran, 2008; Tseng & Newton, 2002). For example, in Australia the format generally is teacher-directed lectures once a week with a separate tutorial and two to three assessments for the entire semester. In the US the format is often small interactive blended lecture and tutorial classes held multiple times per week with weekly assessments, essays, and exams. Study abroad students have to adjust their study techniques, learn how to communicate with other classmates and lecturers, interpret feedback on assignments, decode commonly known writing conventions, and determine what lecturers expect of them in class and when completing assignments (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Sovic, 2008; Tran, 2008; Tseng & Newton,

2002). Some study abroad students also have the added stress of navigating a new educational system while experiencing a language barrier (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007).

Possibly, the most identified challenge for study abroad students is that of social support (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Study abroad students may have friendships and social support within their own cultural group, but struggle to create links with local students, limiting their access to support within and outside of the university community (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007). Study abroad students need to develop a new social network through creating friendships with local and other study abroad students and establishing relationships with advisors and lecturers (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

Personally adjusting to daily life and academic requirements can lead to stress-related illnesses such as depression and anxiety. Study abroad students may experience negative psychological feelings such as a sense of social isolation, loneliness, homesickness, frustration, and a loss of identity (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Sovic, 2008; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). Stress related to psychological adjustments varies depending on the individual. While some students might become very involved with a host country's culture, others might become less involved (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Ramsay, Jones and Barker (2007) state that study abroad students experience a divergence from their own culture and the greater the difference found in the new culture's norms, roles, attitudes, values, and expectations, the greater the difficulty and stress in adjusting.

The literature on challenges for study abroad programs is significant to the development of the study abroad program and to the understanding of the study abroad student. The challenges that study abroad students overcome directly impact on their personal and professional development, which is the central issue explored in this research. Given the major relevancy of the challenges faced in addressing ways study abroad students develop through studying abroad, the following question evolved as a focus of the research:

- What are the perceived challenges for study abroad students studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia?

3.5 SUPPORT FOR STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

The most critical form of support is for everyone involved with study abroad students to understand their situation (Sovic, 2008). Lecturers need to understand that study abroad students may not know what is expected of them or how the system works. The students may require more detailed explanations. Counsellors need to understand that study abroad students are coming from different cultures and that this will impact upon their roles. Study abroad students, moreover, need to understand and learn the cultural ways of the host country (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007; Sovic, 2008; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008). This is required even for those students whose culture is considered 'close' to that of the host country.

There are several suggested methods of support for study abroad students. Methods include orientation programs, development of relationships with faculty and advisors, social support group activities promoting relationships with residents of the host country, counselling services, and improved communication between all parties (Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007). It is beneficial for study abroad students if university counselling services designate specific student advisors for overseas students who would work to best understand the students' needs (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008). Additionally, the development of mentor programs that pair a study abroad student with a host country student can help create social support and ease cross-cultural adjustment (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008). The University of Notre Dame Australia utilises all of the above mentioned methods of support for their study abroad students.

A meaningful study abroad life contributes to the well-being of study abroad students. According to Tseng and Newton (2002) a meaningful study abroad experience is obtained through the completion of academic work, achievement of individual personal and academic goals, and attainment of knowledge about the world. There are eight coping strategies identified that, when used, promote the well-being of study abroad

students. These are to understand similarities and differences between one's own culture and host culture, make friends and build friendships, expand the individual's worldview, ask for help and handle problems, establish cultural and social contacts through participation in community activities, build relationships with advisors and instructors, become proficient in the English language, and use the tactic of "letting go" (recognising that some things may simply never be understood and to let it go rather than stress over it) (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Wang, Singh, Bird, & Ives, 2008).

The literature on support for study abroad students identified knowledge of needs and challenges as a critical form of support. However, several other forms of support were also highlighted as significant, such as social support, orientation programs, and the creation of meaningful study abroad experiences. Due to the significance of support in understanding the research problem, the following question was formed as a focus for the conduct of the research:

- In what ways do study abroad students see themselves supported while studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia?

3.6 DEVELOPMENT OF STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

Research suggests that study abroad students experience substantial levels of development as a result of their experiences (Sandell, 2007). Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009) state that study abroad programs are an effective educational experience for students if the desired goal of this experience is to help students develop holistically and globally. Students are able to articulate significant insight into how the study abroad experience offers them the opportunity to assess their life situation. These programs empower them with self-confidence and an understanding of the meaningful ways they have matured (Doyle, 2009). Students indicated a growth in development of well being over the course of a semester abroad (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009). Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009) suggest that study abroad experiences have a positive psychological impact on students. Students described a greater self-confidence in their ability to meet new situations, to communicate with others different from themselves, and a need to be less continuously supported by others. Study abroad can have a powerful influence on students' attitudes, intercultural skills, and learning within a discipline (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009).

Doyle (2009) describes three domains of development pertaining to study abroad students. These were the cognitive domain, the intrapersonal domain, and the interpersonal domain. The cognitive domain focused on one's knowledge and understanding of what is true and important to know; the intrapersonal domain looks at one becoming more aware of and integrating one's personal values and self-identity into one's personhood; and the interpersonal domain refers to one's willingness to interact with persons with different social norms and cultural backgrounds, acceptance of others, and ability to be comfortable when relating to others. Doyle (2009) argues that students become more aware and respectful of cultural differences within the cognitive domain and gain self-confidence, independence, and maturity through the intrapersonal domain. Additionally, students gain invaluable interpersonal skills such as careful listening, patience, mutual respect, empathy, and cross-cultural relationship development.

Study abroad experiences are described as having an impact on student development holistically, but this development is not separated into personal and professional areas in the literature. Students reported that they developed self-confidence and an expanded world-view as a result of their study abroad experiences (Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton, & Hubbard, 2008). These are examples of personal development. For professional development, studying abroad is an educational opportunity for a student's maturation into their chosen professional field through increased global-mindedness (Sandell, 2007; Relyea, Cocchiara, & Studdard, 2008). It is widely understood that study abroad experiences have a significant positive impact on students' development. While the broad areas of development have been clearly identified, the more detailed components of these areas are less well understood.

Students experience positive development in the broad areas of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development as a result of a study abroad experience (Doyle, 2009; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009). There is a lack of assessment of this development and the importance this would have on students' perceptions of the value of study abroad programs (Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton, & Hubbard, 2008). There is a brief discussion of the impact study abroad has on students professionally (Relyea, Cocchiara, & Studdard, 2008). Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard (2008) describe a growing understanding of the globalization of the professional realm and importance of

international experiences for students' intercultural development. There is a need for further research into student development in terms of personal development and professional development, hence, the specific research question:

- How do students develop personally and professionally in light of their study abroad experiences?

3.7 SUMMARY

The four areas of literature pertinent to the intended research highlighted the unique challenges of study abroad students and the positive outcomes that are possible through overcoming these challenges. The first area provided an overview of study abroad students. Research in this area revealed immense growth in the number of study abroad students and illustrated various benefits that arose from this growth. These benefits included institutional enrichment and the personal and professional development of the individual student. The second area of literature recognised the challenges study abroad students experienced. This literature identified four types of adjustment required: general living, academic, personal, and social. The third area of literature examined possible methods of support and coping strategies for study abroad students. In this area, research suggested concrete ways universities can better serve their increasingly diverse student body populations. The final area of literature briefly looked at the individual development of study abroad students as a result of positively adjusting to their new environment. The review of literature on study abroad students suggested that further research into the personal and professional development of students resulting from study abroad experiences is needed. This study aims to add to the body of knowledge in the area of study abroad students, particularly with reference to an Australian context in a Catholic university.

CHAPTER FOUR
DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The review of the literature in Chapter 3 drew attention to four themes, namely an overview of study abroad students, challenges for study abroad programs, support for study abroad students, and development of study abroad students, which formed the conceptual framework underpinning the research into study abroad. Three questions evolved from the review and provided the focus for the conduct of the study. In the light of these questions, and considering the purpose of the study, it seemed appropriate to undertake qualitative research of an interpretive nature. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the main components of the research design.

Table 4.1

Overview of the Research Design

4.2 Theoretical Framework	• Qualitative Research
	• Interpretivism
	• Symbolic Interactionism
4.3 Methodology	• Collective Case Study
4.4 Research Participants	• US Study Abroad Students from 3 Halls of Residence
4.5 Data Collection	• Focus Group Interviews
	• Reflective Journals
4.6 Trustworthiness	• Methods of Data Collection
	• Sources of Participants
	• Case Study Database
4.7 Data Analysis	• Content Analysis
4.8 Ethical Considerations	

4.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research in the social sciences is either qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of the two. Qualitative research was used in this study to investigate student development from study abroad experiences. Qualitative research is research that "describes phenomena in words instead of numbers or measures" (Wiersma, 1995, p. 12). It is rooted in descriptive analysis and follows an inductive reasoning process, moving from specific situations to general conclusions. Qualitative research is context-specific and the researcher is included in the situation. The underlying purpose of qualitative research is to understand social phenomena through the use of a holistic interpretation, the mixture of facts and values (Wiersma, 1995).

There are various approaches to conducting qualitative research. The approach emphasised in this research into study abroad experiences is that of interpretivism. As explained by Neuman (2006), interpretivism "is rooted in an empathetic understanding, or *Verstehen*, of everyday lived experience of people in specific historical settings" (p. 87). Hence, the objective of interpretive social science is to understand the complexities of lived experience from the perspective of the individuals living it. The researcher thus seeks to understand what is meaningful or relevant to the people being studied or simply how individuals experience daily life (Neuman, 2006). This study attempted to understand the lived experience of the US study abroad students at the University of Notre Dame Australia from the viewpoint of the students themselves.

Within interpretivism, there exist a number of theoretical perspectives or lenses that emphasise different elements of human behaviour. Symbolic interactionism is one of these theoretical perspectives and it was the approach utilised within this study. Symbolic interactionism seeks to answer the question: "What common set of symbols and understandings have emerged to give meaning to people's interactions?" (Patton, 1990, p.75). The focus is on the shared meanings that people create through their interactions. Symbolic interactionism assumes that people utilise symbolic communication when they socially interact. Perceptions of each other and social settings are created and then acted upon. People's interactions affect how they think about themselves and others (Neuman, 2006). It is through communication that one can become aware of perceptions, feelings and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with symbolic interactionism, this

research into US study abroad students was undertaken from the standpoint of those being studied – the US study abroad students in the three halls of residence.

4.3 METHODOLOGY

This research was based on a collective case study. Collective case study involves multiple cases studied together to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition (Stake, 2005). Specifically, this research involves multiple cases studied together to investigate United States study abroad students from three halls of residence at the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA). The study sought to understand the challenges these students faced, the support offered, and the students' resulting personal and professional development during their study abroad experience in Australia. Collective case study was chosen as the method because the research sought to gain an understanding of a specific population, United States study abroad students at UNDA.

Case study was chosen for this research because of its *sensemaking* abilities. Berg defines *sensemaking* as the "manner by which people, groups, and organisations make sense of stimuli with which they are confronted, how they frame what they see and hear, how they perceive and interpret this information, and how they interpret their own actions and go about solving problems and interacting with others" (2007, p. 285). The researcher was interested in how the US study abroad students at UNDA made sense of their semester long study abroad experience.

By involving students from all three halls of residence at UNDA, this research was able to create a diverse sampling and examine shared patterns of interpretation that arose in each case (Patton, 1990). The US study abroad students come from different home universities and are divided into the halls of residence at UNDA based on their home university. Through collective case study and the ability of the researcher to use this to identify patterns, this research sought to understand US study abroad students as one population versus a US study abroad student from a particular home university.

4.4 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this research study were volunteers drawn from second and third year US students participating in a semester long study abroad program at UNDA. The

students were from the University of Portland (Portland, Oregon), University of Notre Dame (South Bend, Indiana) and Saint John's University and the College of Saint Benedict (both from Collegeville, Minnesota and combined into one hall of residence). These students are representative of the study abroad student population living in the halls of residence on UNDA's [Fremantle] campus. They accounted for a significant portion (just over a quarter) of the participants in UNDA's study abroad program. Including students from multiple US universities diversified the sample and added to the generalisability of the research. There were five participants from each of the three halls of residences. The total number of participants for the study was 15 students.

4.5 DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

This research used two methods of data collection for each of the three halls of residence at UNDA:

- A focus group interview
- Journal entries

Participants were asked to take part in both activities.

4.5.1 Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews provide large amounts of data quickly, but more importantly they serve as a window into individual participants' experiences, perspectives, and opinions (Stringer, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This research sought to understand in what manner students develop personally and professionally as a result of their experiences while studying abroad. Focus group interviews allowed participants the opportunity to articulate their experiences, describe the challenges they faced, the support they received or needed, and ways they felt they had changed. There was also an opportunity for immediate follow-up and clarification, ensuring an accurate portrayal of what it was like to be a US student at the University of Notre Dame Australia (Fremantle Campus) (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Books, 1997). The participants were asked to reflect on their experiences as a student at UNDA and focus group interviews provided the students with this opportunity (Stringer, 2008). The focus group interviews concentrated on questions related to challenges faced, coping strategies utilised, support received, support required but not received, perceptions of personal and professional

development, and any other aspect of being a study abroad student (See Appendix 2). The focus group interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length.

One advantage of focus group interviews is that they are socially oriented (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Participants have the opportunity to share opinions and ideas with one another, spurring potential discussions and new insights (Stringer, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Another advantage of focus group interviews is that multiple participants can be interviewed at the one time (Cheng, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). There were three focus group interviews conducted. Each focus group interview consisted of five students. There was one focus group interview for each hall so that the students within each group had common backgrounds and knew each other, creating a comfortable atmosphere for the focus group interviews.

4.5.2 Reflective Journal Entries

The second method of data collection for this research was the use of reflective journals. The participants were asked to write a minimum of three journal entries. The students were asked to write one entry at the beginning of the semester, one in the middle of the semester, and one at the end. Prompts were provided in the form of 'things you may want to think about' (Appendix 1). The journals allowed the students to reflect personally on such issues as challenges faced, coping strategies utilised, support received, support required but not received, perceptions of personal and professional development, and any other aspect of being a study abroad student. The use of journal entries is advantageous because it is less intrusive than focus group interviews, but equally as rich in depicting the values and beliefs of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). By keeping a journal, participants were required to reflect on their experiences as a study abroad student at UNDA, potentially revealing a greater understanding of the students' perceptions of these experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

4.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS

A number of methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. These included: multiple methods of data collection, multiple sources of participants, and the development of a formal case study database as an efficient way of organizing evidence (Yin, 1998). Combining focus group interviews, and journal entries strengthened the

research through multiple approaches to the information and increased diversity within the data (Stringer, 2008). A diverse sample of students from multiple US universities was used. This added not only to the trustworthiness, but also to the generalisability of the research (Yin, 1998). The formal case study database involved typed transcripts of the focus group interviews and coded transcripts and journal entries in order to efficiently organise case study data (Yin, 1998).

4.7 DATA ANALYSIS

The method of analysis for the qualitative data followed a format similar to that outlined by Miles and Huberman (1984): Data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing/verification. The data was collected through reflective journals and focus group interviews. The journal entries and transcribed focus group interviews were colour-coded according to themes drawn from the specific research questions.

Specific research questions were used as an initial form of data reduction providing focus to the collection of data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The forms of data collection used, reflective journals and focus group interviews, served as anticipatory forms of data reduction through the use of focus questions and journal entry prompts. Interim data reduction was utilised through coding (Miles & Huberman, 1984). For data display, the journal entries and typed focus group interview transcriptions were colour-coded according to themes. As part of the conclusion drawing process, themes were drawn directly from research questions and the use of inductive reasoning was undertaken by immersion in the data through content analysis.

Content analysis was applied to both the journals and the focus group interview transcripts. Payne and Payne (2004, p. 51) state that "content analysis seeks to demonstrate the meaning of written or visual sources by systematically allocating their content to pre-determined, detailed categories, and then both quantifying and interpreting the outcomes." The goal of content analysis is to generate knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis allows the researcher to understand the perspectives of research participants through unwrapping the meaning of the text or their words (Berg, 2007). It addresses attitudes, values, and motivations (Payne & Payne, 2004). The journals and focus group

interview transcripts were examined for common themes, patterns, symbols, topics, and shared mind-sets as described by US study abroad students at UNDA.

Content analysis is the process of examining the data for recurrent instances (words, phrases, a unit of 'meaning') or 'themes' (Wilkinson, 2004; Berg, 2007). Content analysis can be both quantitative and qualitative (Berg, 2007). In this research, content analysis was qualitative; it served as "a passport to listening to the words of the text and understanding better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words" (Berg, 2007, p. 308). In this context, the researcher is not counting words in content analysis, but instead is interpreting the words and the structures for deeper symbolism and meaning (Berg, 2007; Payne & Payne, 2004). Figure 4.1 provides an overview of the data analysis.

Figure 4.1 Overview of the Data Analysis

Stage 1 Data Collection: Journals and Focus Groups

Stage 2 Data Reduction: Research Questions

Stage 3 Data Display: Coding of Themes

Stage 4 Conclusion Drawing: Content Analysis- Examination of Themes
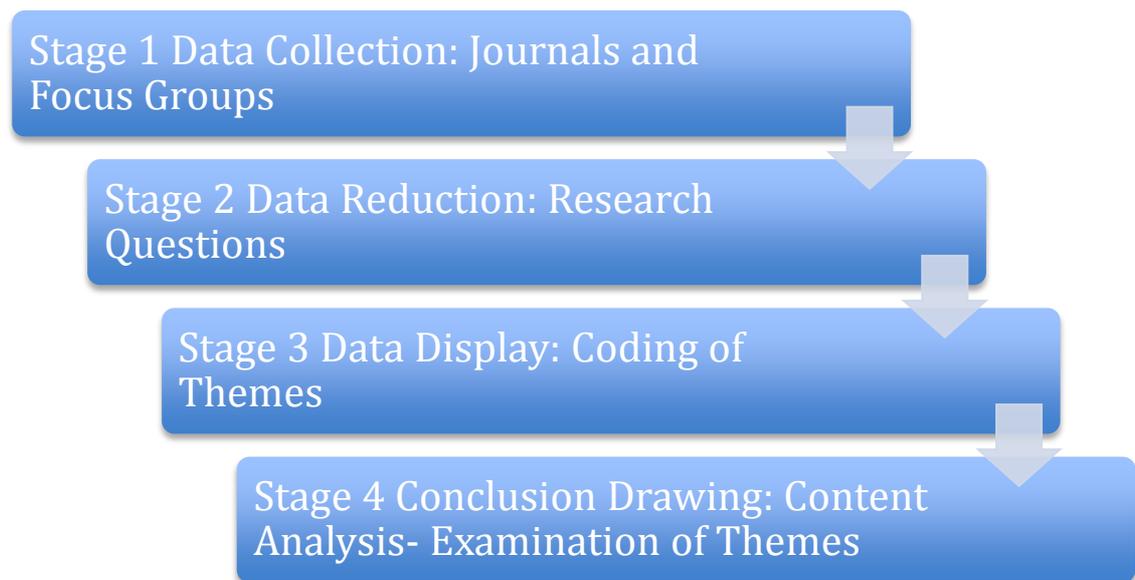
4.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the University of Notre Dame Australia. Approvals were sought and obtained from the Director of Study Abroad at UNDA, the US universities, and the Human Research Ethics Committee at UNDA (Appendix 3). The participants were guaranteed anonymity. Journal entries did not include names and focus group interview transcriptions did not identify individual participants. Participants received information sheets and informed consent was obtained from each individual (Appendix 4). All records of interviews, journals and

other data collected throughout the research are stored in a locked filing cabinet in the research office at the University of Notre Dame Australia for a period of no less than five years.

CHAPTER FIVE
RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. Underpinning this research is the belief that study abroad programs provide individuals with multi-cultural experiences that become a significant part of one's education and development.

The research involved second and third year students from the United States undertaking a study abroad program at a Catholic university in Western Australia. The students were situated in three halls of residence. Five volunteers from each hall of residence were invited to participate in a focus group interview and to write three reflective journal entries that were collected throughout the semester. Content analysis was used to examine themes contained within the data. This chapter presents the results of the research.

5.2 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The findings are organized into three categories: challenges, support, and development. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the presentation of the findings.

Table 5.1

Overview of the Presentation of Findings

Challenges	• Academic Concerns
	• Homesickness
	• Balancing Multiple Roles
	• Finance
Support	• Relationships with UNDA Staff
	• Friendships
	• Community Immersion
Development	• Personal
	• Professional

5.3 CHALLENGES

The data revealed numerous perceived challenges for the students. Four challenges that were evident in the data collected from participants from all three halls of residence at the University of Notre Dame Australia [UNDA] were: academic concerns, homesickness, balancing multiple roles, and finance. The following four sections describe participants' perceptions of these challenges.

5.3.1 Academic Concerns

The theme of academic concerns was the most commented on challenge within the data. As one student stated: "I think the school system in general took a while to adjust to … there are differences that it just took [time] to get the hang of it". Another student described the "vastly different schooling system" as a concern. In addition, when asked about adjusting to being a student in Australia, students responded at the end of the semester with comments like "I feel like I'm still adjusting" and "I'd say it's been pretty drastic". Within the challenge of academic concerns, three sub-themes emerged: grades, class structure, and assignments.

5.3.1.1   Grades

Students identified grades as one of the key sub-themes within academic concerns. A student stated that "after a month of school, the only main concern I have regarding academics is the grading of assignments. I lose sleep over the issue"! Another student remarked, "the major difference that I noticed was the grading method and the amount of work that we had". Students felt that the grading method in Australia was different to what they were used to in the US. They felt that they were assigned normally distributed grades rather than receiving grades they felt they had earned. One student explained the difficulties with the grading method as rooted in the misunderstanding of grade point average (GPA):

> I'd say the discrepancy between GPA. For us as business students
> back in the States GPA is very important as far as internships go,
> that's our process. We need a high GPA so we can get good
> internships so we can get good jobs. That's typically the way I'd say
> most of us look at it. But here, GPA is almost unheard of, some people
> aren't even sure what a GPA is; they're just worried about passing
> their classes and getting their degree.

Echoing this concern with GPA, another student stated:

> There are some things that I'm not used to that make me uncomfortable with the academic situation because I have to keep my GPA high for a lot of scholarships I have. I have no idea where I'm at which is kind of really frightening actually.

Other statements focused on how the grade was determined: "the teachers base the grade on mostly a paper and a test", "the grading method here puts more attention on fewer assignments". The students further expressed how they felt about this grading method: "that just doesn't make sense to me", "I am nervous about the finals, even though I'm a good test taker. There is a good portion of my grade that depends on the test, and I don't think that is fair". As one student explained, "I feel pretty comfortable with the two papers that I wrote, but I am nervous about the grade that will come back because of the difference in the grading method". Another student commented:

> I do have a problem with the system. I think besides the way the whole academic process works with this whole final being up to 50% of your grade, I don't agree with it and I don't know if I'll ever get used to it.

The realisation of the work it takes to earn a good grade at an Australian university was also highlighted. One student pointed out, "having the assignments worth a greater percentage of your grade is intimidating and causes me to work even harder to ensure that I will pass". Other students mentioned, "I have found that it is a lot more difficult for me to get an 'A' here", "the graders were too specific and it could be difficult to get the grade that I thought I earned". One student discussed the perceived expectations of lecturers as having an impact on grades: "They grade so hard as if we're expected to be peers. So I think maybe it all ties in. They respect us at that level; they grade us at that level".

5.3.1.2   *Class Structure*

Students identified attending and participating in classes as a second key sub-theme within academic concerns. As one student summarised, "it's a total mix of things. Some classes I felt totally comfortable in, others not so much". In every focus group interview and several journal entries, students described differences to the structure of the classes as seen in the following statement:

> We're used to having class two or three times a week where here you
> only have it once a week for 3 hours. So that was a big adjustment I
> had to make.

Other students echoed this feeling, "one thing that has been a hard adjustment for me is school. I really dislike the structure of school and classes in general", "I am doing well over all, but I definitely do prefer the US university structure. I like having classes more frequently and having a larger number of small assignments". On the other hand, some students expressed the opposite. One indicated that "the lecture and tutorial setup makes so much more sense than just having class back home" and another stated that "I liked the structure of the class with the lecture and tutorial".

In addition to structure, students also identified "independent work" as a difference: "In one of my classes we had to do a lot of the learning ourselves, we would learn basic things in class but it boiled down to what you researched on your own for your paper". Reflecting on the increased amount of independent work, a student commented that at UNDA, "students and teachers alike seem to be much more serious about school". Students indicated that at their home university this type of work was completed within the classroom setting.

5.3.1.3   *Assignments*

Assignments was the third sub-theme within academics identified by the study abroad students. As one student stated:

> I think the difference in the education system is they have just one big
> assignment and then the final and that's your grade. Whereas we're
> used to having a ton of little things and a lot of homework. That was
> hard to adjust to.

Other students' statements reiterated this feeling, "I think it was most challenging having assignments worth more of your grade. In one week I had like 70% of my grade determined, I'm not used to that", "I also dislike that there are less assessments each worth a large portion of one's grade". Another student explained:

> I think of one of the hardest things for me was the tests. We only had a
> couple and in my science classes at home I would have 5 a semester.
> So it's just more information to cover and they're worth more. I
> thought that was a big adaptation or challenge.

Students felt that there were higher expectations at UNDA because of the differences in the assignments and their worth. As one student wrote, "at home the professors basically walked me through the homework and papers and what was expected, but at UNDA there is not necessarily homework".

5.3.2 Homesickness

Homesickness was the second recurring challenge identified in the data. The majority of students reported that at *some stage* in their study abroad experience they were homesick. As one student commented, "I never really needed to go through an adjustment period, but I have felt more homesick than I was expecting". Another student wrote, "I'm really missing family and people back home and I know that this subconsciously affects a lot of what I do". While one student admitted, "there were times when I was so homesick that I was counting down the days until it was time to go home and wishing that time would pass faster". Homesickness changed as the semester progressed, as one student described:

> In the middle of the semester right before we went to Broome because all the newness had worn off and everything wasn't as exciting any more, it kind of set in that you were still going to be here for a really long time.

A small number of other statements revealed the opposite feelings, "surprisingly, I haven't been very homesick at all", "I can honestly say I have not gotten homesick once the entire time I've been here". One student mentioned, "I thought I'd be more homesick than I was but as it turns out I didn't really get homesick because this became my home". Another student echoed this sentiment, "by this point [halfway point], this place is truly home to me and I am not homesick in the slightest bit".

5.3.3 Balancing Multiple Roles

Balancing multiple roles was a third challenge identified in the research. Students described multiple roles they felt they had to balance: family versus Australia and school versus tourist. A student described, "it's hard to feel like you want to be in two places at once". One student commented, "the hardest challenge that I have had would be missing the people from back home, and trying to stay connected with them as well as being involved in Australia". In addition, another student remarked, "time budgeting was something I had a really big issue with and keeping in touch with my family and

friends and everything". This idea of 'time budgeting' was expanded upon by other students' comments, "to go with balancing time. To balance school with experiencing the culture was hard", "another challenge has been the balancing of schoolwork and taking advantage of the experience of living in a new country". One student wrote:

> I don't regret any of my procrastination; I just find it funny that I almost feel like spending excessive time on studies is a waste of time that I could be spending making connections with people, and exploring Australia.

Another student admitted, "I have been finding school a bit off. There is always something more interesting to do". One student described how she often felt like she was 'living a dual life.'

5.3.4 Finance

Finance was a fourth challenge identified throughout the research. As one student commented, "I think budgeting money in general is a challenge, just because I felt like money went really quickly here". Another student explained how "at several points in time you may spend this much money per week and every week I would exceed that amount of money". Other statements focused on the 'cost of living.' One student commented, "I've spent more money in the last 5 months then I've ever spent in my entire life. Everything is more expensive here". Another student echoed this sentiment, "prices are also a lot more expensive for foods. We really had to budget how we were going to spend our money". Other students agreed, "yah, definitely expensive, always worrying about money", "a lot of the stuff that is really cheap back home is really expensive here". Examples given by students included shampoo, makeup, clothes, and toothpaste.

5.3.5 Summary

The data revealed four challenges faced by study abroad students. These challenges were academic concerns, homesickness, balancing multiple roles, and finance. The students highlighted three sub-themes within academic concerns as particularly difficult: grades, classes, and assignments. Homesickness was experienced at varying levels throughout the semester by the majority of the students. The data also revealed that many of the students found it difficult to balance the multiple roles of staying in touch with friends and family back home, being a student, and experiencing everything

Australia had to offer, or as they described it, 'living a dual life'. The final challenge the students highlighted was finance, in particular budgeting and a higher cost of living.

5.4 SUPPORT

The data revealed several perceived forms of support for the students. Three forms of support that appeared repeatedly in the data were: relationships with University of Notre Dame staff, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion.

5.4.1 Relationships with University of Notre Dame Staff

Relationships formed with university staff members were identified by the study abroad students as a valuable form of support. As one student mentioned, "I really like the personal relationships you form with your professors". Another student commented, "I felt like a lot of my professors were there knowing it was different for us being here so they made sure that I didn't have any questions". One student said, "I had a tutorial teacher who was really helpful and accommodating". Several students specifically identified their Australian history lecturer as a form of support, "he knows what American students expect or are used to and was able to make that academic transition pretty easy", "he was really helpful and able to help us with what we wanted in and out of the classroom", "yeah, he did encourage us to go and do stuff".

Other statements identified the Student Life Office staff as forms of support. The Student Life Office is the office in charge of pastoral care of students. The type of support offered by the Student Life Office includes social activities, academic support, counselling, and residential supervision. In particular, the students named the residential supervisors in the residence halls as significant providers of support: "I think [N] helped us out a lot, too. Oh yeah, for sure". Students also highlighted the international student liaison officer's support: "I'd say [M] was a good influence too".

5.4.2 Friendships formed within Residence Halls

Friendships formed within the residence halls were a second form of support that the students identified. A student commented, "one thing I would say would be living in [the hall] with all these people-that's been amazing". Another student explained, "it was nice to have just a network of people here that we could talk to that were able to relate to the same issues that we were having". This sentiment was echoed by other students

who commented, "I think we all helped each other", "we all definitely bonded together a lot and with everything that we did together it just enriched our relationship so much". One student put it simply: "I think we really made a family here".

Other statements focused on friendships that were formed in the residence halls as one of the highlights for the study abroad students. One student said, "in this house I feel like I bonded with everyone and I'm really glad for that and I wouldn't change that for the world". Another student commented, "I knew I'd make friends here but I didn't realise how good of friends I would make coming here".

5.4.3 Community Immersion

Community immersion was a third form of support that the students identified. One student wrote in an early journal entry, "I'm constantly struck by how nice Australians are in general. I felt very, very welcomed not only into the school, but into this entire country as well". Another student explained, "my job helped; that's been the number one way I've met people and number one way I've gotten used to the culture". As one student wrote, "I have completely absorbed myself into the Australian culture". Other students expressed involvement in the university community as helpful, "I played footy with the ND law team and that was really good just to meet more guys that were all my age", "I went over for dinner to a friend from my lecture's house and I met her family".

5.4.4 Summary

The students described three forms of support they felt they received during their study abroad experience at UNDA: University of Notre Dame staff, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion. The support received from university staff ranged from lecturers and tutorial leaders to Student Life Office staff. The students described the friendships formed within the residence halls as a network of people with the same issues and found that they were able to help each other adjust. Community immersion referred to ways the students participated in Australian culture and the community in which they were living.

5.5 DEVELOPMENT

The data revealed several perceived areas of development for the students. Two forms of development that appeared repeatedly in the data collected from students from all

three halls of residence are personal development and professional development. As one student explained:

> One thing that surprised me was the amount of change that I went through. I knew I was going to change but I didn't think I'd be going back with a whole different look on life. Just like I said earlier trying to live each day to the fullest. I wouldn't have considered myself that type of person before I came here, so the amount of change that I went through has definitely been a surprise to me.

5.5.1 Personal Development

Personal development was the initial theme of development identified by students. There were four sub-themes highlighted within the personal development area: independence, confidence, willingness to try new things, and self-awareness.

5.5.1.1   Independence

A consistently identified sub-theme in this theme was independence. Several students commented, "I feel like I'm going home more independent", "I guess I'm more independent. I can actually take care of myself", "independence is definitely a big one [personal development area]". One student responded to the question about personal development with "I think independence is the number one thing for sure". Another student indicated, "I've learned how to truly be independent. It has made me ready for the real world and living on my own". One student commented further, "I think that Australia will give me a sense of independence that will make me proud of the woman that I am becoming".

5.5.1.2   Confidence

Other statements identified a growth in confidence as a sub-theme of personal development. One student described how "overall [being in] Australia has given me confidence". Another student explained:

> one of the best things about it, is it's up to you. That's probably the confidence and taking on responsibility thing. It's just that it's completely up to you there's no one telling you what to do.

One student wrote, "I have total control over my life, and I'm learning to live responsibly and healthily". While another student admitted, "I learned that I am capable of more than I think. I learned that I can be a more confident person". As a student explained:

this makes me feel that I will be comfortable when I move out on my own because I trust that I can be completely self-reliant and will be able to juggle all my responsibilities.

Other comments highlighted a combination of confidence and independence. As one student stated, "I have changed so much for the better while here. I feel like I have grown up a lot and become a lot more independent and self-reliant".

5.5.1.3 *Willingness to Try New Things*

A third sub-theme of personal development was a willingness to try new things. Several students commented on a new found openness to trying new things: "that's something I'll probably take home; to try new things", "it has opened me up to a lot of new experiences too, so I'm more willing to try new things". As one student explained, "it's just realising that you can go above and beyond anything you've ever done comfort wise". Taking this idea further, another student revealed that "the biggest lesson I've taken from this trip is the realisation that I can do anything I want and go anywhere". Echoing this sentiment a student remarked that, "I knew a lot of things were possible and if I worked hard I could get anywhere that I really wanted to go but coming here just makes it seem so much easier".

5.5.1.4 *Self-Awareness*

Other statements from students identified self-awareness as a sub-theme of personal development. One student explained, "just having a different experience, something not everyone gets to do, I think it helped me kind of develop more of an understanding of who I am". Another student wrote, "I have noticed myself become less naïve about a lot of things and more aware of the world around me". While still another student admitted, "I have come to know myself better here than at any other time or place in my life which is certainly a direct result of the experiences I have had here to this point".

5.5.2 Professional Development

Professional development was the second developmental theme identified by the students. Two sub-themes were highlighted: professional experience and professional possibilities.

5.5.2.1 *Professional Experience*

Several students gained professional experience directly in their chosen fields. One student explained:

> Professionally, as a future primary school teacher just seeing another education system and doing field experience in another education system helped me grow professionally and figure out more of an ideal type of teacher I want to be.

Another future educator wrote:

> I learned a lot about myself and other cultures. I feel these are valuable skills I'll carry with me throughout my life and implement in my future career path as a primary school teacher.

One business student described, "I've learned how to put aside many of my own interests for the betterment of the group, a quality that will be crucial in the business world". While another student explained that these experiences would lead to greater depth in her chosen field:

> my internship here is with Aussie Rules football and I kind of want to go into sports marketing so that'll be something that'll hopefully help me a lot cause it's just experience in the industry.

5.5.2.2 *Professional Possibilities*

Professional possibilities was a second sub-theme highlighted within the area of professional development. Statements from students also focused on the discovery of possibilities. One student commented, "I feel like moving here has definitely opened up possibilities to me". Another student explained, "just realising that you can do whatever you want to; you just have to set your mind to it". In addition to more possibilities, one student mentioned, "worldly view; I would just say a worldview being more open with ideas". This sentiment was echoed in another student's description:

> my trip definitely broadened my horizons and gave me a much better perspective of the world. I feel I am much better prepared to go out into the real world on my own.

Students also described how this experience would help in future interviews. As one student mentioned:

> I feel like just putting myself in this out-of-the-box experience that far out of my comfort zone will definitely help me at least in an interview setting when I have to talk about my personal experiences and myself.

Another student agreed and explained:

> just having an experience in a different culture I think will help
> professionally. It shows that you have a willingness to learn different
> things and you have an open-mind.

Through these comments, students discussed possible ways this study abroad experience could benefit them professionally in the future.

5.5.3 Summary

The students described two forms of development that they felt they experienced, personal and professional. Sub-themes within personal development were independence, confidence, willingness to try new things, and self-awareness. The theme of professional development incorporated sub-themes, which were: professional experiences and professional possibilities. These included aspects of participants' worldview and professional confidence.

5.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the findings of the research were presented under three categories: challenges, support, and development. Challenges included such issues as academic concerns, balancing multiple roles, and finance. Three sources of support were identified: staff from the University of Notre Dame Australia, friendships formed in the Halls of Residence and participation in the local community. Development was viewed from both a personal and professional perspective. These findings revealed that the students' greatest challenge was academic concerns, they felt well supported during their semester in Australia, and experienced positive personal and professional development.

CHAPTER SIX
ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. Underpinning this research is the belief that study abroad programs provide individuals with multi-cultural experiences that become a significant part of one's education and development.

The general research question for this study was: In what ways do United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia? The three specific research questions to be addressed are:

1. What are the perceived challenges for study abroad students studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia?
2. In what ways do study abroad students see themselves supported while studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia?
3. How do study abroad students develop personally and professionally in light of their study abroad experiences?

What follows is an examination of the research findings in relation to these three specific research questions.

6.2 PERCEIVED CHALLENGES FOR STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

The first specific research question explored in the research was: What are the perceived challenges for study abroad students studying at the University of Notre Dame Australia? The data revealed a range of perceived challenges for the United States study abroad students participating in a semester long study abroad program at UNDA. Four challenges appeared repeatedly in the data collected from participants from all three halls of residence at UNDA. These were academic concerns, homesickness, balancing multiple roles, and finance.

6.2.1 Academic Concerns

Every US study abroad student indentified academic concerns as a challenge. Students found that the Australian university system is different from the US university system.

In particular, students highlighted differences in grading method, class structure, and assignment requirements. These differences require students to make academic adjustments that varied in degree of difficulty and length of time from one student to the next. Likewise, Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) discussed how international students have to acclimatize to teaching and curriculum differences such as expectations for class discussions and study techniques. Adjustments to these differences can cause increased levels of stress and anxiety as observed in the students by their constant, almost obsessive focus on academic differences.

For several students, the grading method was the most discussed area within the challenge of academic concerns. In the US university system, a strong emphasis is placed on one's grade point average (GPA). The students described how they understand their educational performance based on their GPA. Future US employers look to the GPA as an indicator of the success the student will have at their company. US students understand GPA to serve as a major determinant of merit for scholarships, internships, and graduate school admission. In Australia, students receive high distinctions, distinctions, credits, and passes on their exams and assessments. These marks initially mean nothing to the US study abroad students. In fact, to a US student a paper returned with a "D" on it would mean that they just barely passed. As study abroad students at an Australian university for a semester, the US students have to adjust their entire frame of reference when it comes to grades and understanding their academic performance level. Students felt uncomfortable with the academic situation because many of them needed to keep their GPAs high for scholarships and internship applications. They felt that they did not know where they stood academically.

Sovic (2008) echoed this frustration stating that study abroad students often struggle with understanding feedback or what needs to be done in order to improve their grades. The students discussed how they would try to convert the marks they were receiving to a comparable grade back home, but even then it often still did not make sense. This uncertainty about grades caused heightened levels of frustration and anxiety amongst the students. The researcher has experienced this increased level of anxiety in her role as a residential supervisor while comforting students after they have received assignments back from lecturers. This has the potential to negatively impact upon their study abroad experience.

In addition to having to understand a different method of assessment, students also had to adjust to a slightly different way of grade determination. The assessments were weighted differently to their home universities in the US. For example, when an exam is worth half the grade for that unit, a student will usually approach preparation earlier, something of which the study abroad students were unaware. There is a certain level of added pressure or stress that comes with an exam being worth more and the US study abroad students felt this. Similarly, Sovic (2008) discussed that the stress which students experience as a result of adjusting to a new grading system is inevitable. Adjusting to the new method of grade determination was a struggle throughout the semester for the US study abroad students and some felt they never fully adjusted. As a result some students minimised their participation in academic activities, while for others the focus on academics became all encompassing causing an imbalance within their study abroad experience.

The study abroad students also recognised a difference in expectations for completed assessments. It is the students' experiences that in the US a lecturer or grader starts at 100% and takes points away from a student as the quality of the student's work is determined. In Australia, on the other hand, the students felt that the opposite happened, the student started at zero and earned points as the quality of their work was determined. They also felt that they were often victims of the normal grade distribution in that it was difficult to achieve grades they felt they had obtained. Due to these feelings of uncertainty, some students felt that they may have failed before they even submitted the assignment. The feelings of uncertainty around expectations can be seen more in the understanding and mindset used in the approach to completing an assessment, rather than in the actual standards required (Tran, 2008). It is the researchers' experience that the final expectations for the quality of work are essentially the same between the two university systems.

Class structure was another commonly discussed area within the literature, as well as this study, within the challenge of academic concerns. The Australian university class structure required adjustment by the US study abroad students. While studying at UNDA for a semester, US students are introduced to the lecture and tutorial structure for classes. The students generally have each teacher-directed lecture once a week with

a separate tutorial, whereas in the US each class will meet two or three times per week with an interactive blended lecture and tutorial format. Tran (2008) highlighted the fact that students have to adjust to a new learning environment, which includes the structure of the classes. The adjustment to the new class structure was more difficult for some students than others. The closer the US class structure for their degree program was to the Australian system, the easier the adjustment between the two. As suggested by this research, the challenge of the new class structure rests in personal preference more than anything else. The students did not describe any misunderstandings or uncertainties of the structural changes as they did with the different grading method. They knew what the differences were and even though some students may not have liked the new class structure, all students were able to adjust to it by the end of the semester. However, this is a significant consideration that should be addressed earlier rather than later in a study abroad experience through preparation programs developed by home universities.

In addition to the new class structure, this study suggested that the US study abroad students felt an increase in the level of independent work expected of them. As highlighted in multiple focus group interviews, the US students are used to their lecturers 'walking them through' assignments and readings. Also in the US system, students are accustomed to having more of an emphasis on group work rather than individual work throughout the semester. Similarly, Sovic (2008) described how an increase an independent work is stressful for the students because they are used to the lecturers ensuring that they complete their work rather than being solely responsible for its completion. Adjusting to this increased level of independent work and the students' perceptions of the higher expectations of quality that independent work brings, were more of a challenge for the US study abroad students than the structure of the classes.

The third academic concern that the US students highlighted as a challenge was assignments. In the US, students often have some combination of daily homework, quizzes, papers, group projects, and multiple exams/tests. They are used to having multiple opportunities to earn a good grade or mark in their classes. The students struggled throughout the semester with having fewer assignments that were worth more of their final grade. Additionally, the students were used to having frequent feedback from their lecturers about their performance and standing in their classes. In the same way, Khawaja and Dempsey (2007) discussed the pressure students place on themselves

to attain academic excellence. This pressure impacted upon the students by causing increased levels of stress. Furthermore, several students suggested that greater awareness of this academic difference prior to the start of the semester would have been helpful to prepare them in advance.

The students highlighted three areas within academic concerns: grades, class structure, and assignments. This study indicated that there are significant differences between the Australian and US university systems. The students will need help from staff members, lecturers, and Australian students to gain an understanding of the Australian system and to make the necessary study skills adjustments to succeed.

6.2.2 Homesickness

The second recurring challenge discussed by the study abroad students was homesickness. The research indicated that this challenge affected some students more than others. For example, it appeared that those who were more focused on what they were missing back home, or staying in touch frequently with friends and family, were more homesick than others. Consistent with this observation, Ramsay, Jones, and Barker (2007) described how lack of engagement with the host culture can have a negative impact on the students' adjustment. Homesickness also was the only challenge that all students felt they were able to overcome completely. Students discussed how their feelings of homesickness changed as the semester progressed. Homesickness did not become an issue for the majority of the students until a few weeks into the semester. The excitement and "newness" of living in a foreign country and going to an Australian university did not last forever. It was after the thrill of the multi-coloured money, cars driving on the other side of the road, and the funny accents were gone, that the students realised they were far away from friends, family, and comfort zone and would be for a while. Sovic (2008) described this phenomenon of culture shock as the transition from the 'honeymoon period' to 'bicultural competence'.

There were, however, a few students who experienced a high level of homesickness yet were still able to overcome it given time and determination to acclimatize. This level of homesickness caused these students to initially isolate themselves from the group and not take advantage of opportunities available to them as study abroad students. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) echoed this idea in their description of how students experienced

homesickness and feelings of isolation. As several students noted, the experience is what an individual makes of it. If the student chooses to become involved and immerse themselves in his or her new environment and culture, they will potentially enjoy the experience more and feel less homesick. Students were assisted in their choices to become involved through provision of opportunities and regular community meetings. As one student explained, the turning point for her was realising that by focusing on what she was missing at home, she was losing out on the opportunities to experience everything Australia had to offer and on creating friendships with local students.

Homesickness is a challenge that affected all students differently due to different personalities, temperaments, and prior experiences. Eventually all students adapted to the new environment in their own way. While Australia is similar to the US in many ways, the distance, time difference, and minor dissimilarities can be disconcerting for study abroad students. This research indicated that students felt they were able to overcome this challenge.

6.2.3 Balancing Multiple Roles

A third challenge described in the research was the idea of 'having to live the dual life' or having multiple roles. The students felt like they were living two or more lives, their Australian daily life and the life they left back home in the US. In addition their Australian life had two parts, student and tourist. Finding the balance between these multiple roles was difficult for the students.

The students talked about feeling like they wanted to be in two or more places at once. They wanted to be in Australia having this wonderful study abroad experience, but at the same time, they wished they were at their home universities starting another school year with their friends. The students stated that, although they did not want to go home, they would feel like they were missing out when they saw pictures posted online of events that were happening at home. On the other hand, they would feel the same way when they had to decline going to the beach or on an adventure in Australia because they had made plans to catch up with family and friends back home.

When students were not determining the balance between living in Australia and keeping up with home, they were trying to find the balance between being a student and

a tourist. The students understood that they were study abroad students, meaning that they were here to study. They were enrolled as full time students at the Australian university, but to them their studying extended beyond the classroom as well. Students found it difficult to focus on their studies because they would rather spend that time making personal connections and exploring Australia.

The challenge of balancing multiple roles manifested itself in different ways for individual students. Students will develop coping strategies for balancing multiple roles. As Tseng and Newton (2002) indicated, maintaining well-being throughout a study abroad experience involves the students having an understanding of themselves and others so they can adjust as needed. For example, they may schedule times to keep in touch with family and friends back in the US so that they do not miss out on opportunities in Australia or they might fully immerse themselves into one role choosing to forego the other completely. The students struggled with balance and a few needed help and encouragement from the residential supervisors, university staff members, and friends to develop equilibrium within these roles.

6.2.4 Finance

A fourth challenge identified throughout the research and supported in the literature was finance. Tseng and Newton (2002) described finances as a general living adjustment, a necessity of basic survival. Many students commented that budgeting money was difficult and felt that money went quickly. The students were responsible for groceries throughout the week and any extracurricular activities they would like to participate in. For some students, this was the first time in their lives that they had to consider how an exchange rate affected the amount of money they had to spend. Many students were used to working throughout the semester so that while they were spending money, they were still earning an income. Only a handful of study abroad students, however, pursued and gained employment during their time in Australia even though they were all eligible to work part time with their student visas. In some situations, the students are not encouraged by their home universities to seek employment, so that they are able to focus more fully on their studies. Other reasons why they do not pursue employment include that finding a job in a new place takes time and effort, or employers may not wish to hire the students, as their availability is very limited.

In addition to learning how to monitor their spending, the students described a higher 'cost of living' that directly impacted their spending and eating habits. The students found that everything was more expensive in Australia. The students were surprised to learn that food prices were higher. For example, a box of cereal can be $5 or more in Australia whereas in the US, the students could purchase a box for $1.99. Students were shocked by the price of meat, which is almost double to what they are used to paying for it in the US. Several students did not purchase meat and changed their eating habits because of its high cost. Other examples of items students found expensive included toothpaste, shampoo, makeup, and clothes. It was common for the students to request these items be sent to them in care packages from home rather than the students having to purchase them in Australia. Items that the students were used to purchasing on a regular basis in the US, cost more in Australia and the students had to learn how to account for this in their spending habits. Several students described money as a constant concern.

Financial aspects can be stressful for the students (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). It is important for the host university to understand that upon arrival the students see Australia as more expensive. The students, therefore, will be looking for ways to save money such as how to make inexpensive meals, purchasing used textbooks, looking for employment, and for ways to budget to be able to afford to experience Australia.

6.3 PERCEIVED SUPPORT FOR STUDY ABROAD STUDENTS

The second research question addressed was: In what ways do study abroad students see themselves supported while studying at University of Notre Dame Australia? Perceived forms of support for US study abroad students were university staff members, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion.

The first type of support the US study abroad students felt they had at UNDA was from the university staff members. The students in this study described the relationships formed with lecturers as helpful. They also found several of their lecturers and tutorial leaders to be very accommodating and understanding of their academic transition to the Australian university system. Without the lecturers and tutorial leaders support, the students felt they would not have succeeded in their courses. Likewise, Poyrazil and

Grahame (2007) stated that interaction with faculty members assists students with adjustment and academic achievement. The students highlighted the encouragement received from lecturers to become involved, and suggestions for ways to do so, as particularly supportive. It was through this encouragement that students planned road trips around Western Australia or learned how to sail or became a fan of Australian Rules football, which are all opportunities that added to the students' cultural immersion and overall study abroad experience. Additionally, students identified residential staff and Student Life Office staff as significant providers of support. Overall, the US study abroad students felt well supported by the university staff at UNDA.

The second type of support highlighted by the US study abroad students was social support in the form of friendships within the residence halls. The students found it comforting to have a built-in network of people who could relate to the issues they were having. The friendships formed within the residence halls were a highlight for the study abroad students. The students explained that they helped each other adjust and overcome challenges. Similarly, Ramsay, Jones, and Barker (2007) described support from peers as beneficial. The students felt that they formed a family through dinners together every week, birthday celebrations, help with assignments, and shared Australian adventures. The students were surprised by the closeness of the relationships they were able to form within the residence halls and looked forward to being able to maintain them upon returning to the US. Social support is identified in the literature as one of the biggest concerns for international students (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

The third type of support indicated by the US study abroad students was community immersion. The students felt very welcomed by the university and by Australians in general. Several of the students found jobs, accepted dinner invitations, went to birthday parties, joined clubs, participated in sports, and made friends with Australians. The students described immersion into Australian culture as a helpful form of support because it helped the students feel at home and accepted in a new place. In the same way, Wang, Singh, Bird, and Ives (2008) and Tran (2008) discussed the importance of students feeling that they are having a meaningful study abroad experience. These experiences may include participation in extracurricular activities, community activities, and friendships within the host culture.

There were three forms of perceived support highlighted by the US study abroad students. These were university staff members, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion, which are consistent with the literature (Poyrazil & Grahame, 2007; Ramsay, Jones, & Baker, 2007; Tseng & Newton, 2002). The friendships formed within the residence halls were described as the greatest form of support; however, the more immersed in the community the study abroad students became, the more at home in Australia they felt.

6.4 STUDENT DEVELOPMENT IN LIGHT OF A STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

The third research question explored was: How do study abroad students develop personally and professionally in light of their study abroad experiences? Prior to participation in the study abroad program, the students appreciated that these programs have the potential to be life changing, but many did not understand the magnitude of these changes. After the program, many were shocked by how much they had changed in areas such as independence, self-awareness, and their worldview and suggested that they would probably notice more changes as they readjusted to life in the US. It is important to note that the students identified experiencing different levels of change because this suggests that the individual experiences may affect the development achieved. For some students, only a few areas of development could be identified at the completion of the research while for others the development was more pronounced. This was particularly evident in the levels of personal development as distinct from professional development. More personal development was articulated than professional development.

6.4.1 Personal Development

Independence, confidence, openness to new things, and self-awareness were the most reported themes within the area of personal development. The study abroad program requires students to prepare their own meals, to sort out details of living in another country such as finance, health care, and transportation, and to adjust to a new university system. For many students, this semester abroad was the first time they were on their own, away from friends, family and their comfort zone. Students highlighted having to find jobs on their own, booking their own flights and accommodation for

trips, and cooking as ways they saw themselves becoming more independent. The students were able to prove to themselves that they could take care of themselves through this study abroad experience. Similarly, Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009) described how study abroad could be a defining experience in a student's life, leading towards self-authorship by developing high levels of self-confidence in new situations, communication skills, independence, and a sense of self-direction.

Further to independence, students identified a growth in confidence as an aspect of personal development. Many students were able to leave all that they knew behind and not just survive in a brand new place, but thrive. This success in taking care of themselves in a completely new situation fostered a greater sense of confidence in individual students as Doyle (2009) described. The study abroad program is structured and the students have a support system, but ultimately the experience is up to them to create and shape in whatever way they want. The students felt that the structure of the program provided them with opportunities to develop confidence through independently exploring Australia or immersing themselves in Australian culture, seeking out participation in sports teams, and the formation of friendships with Australians. The students learned how to trust themselves as a result of their study abroad experience. Many students experienced growth in both confidence and independence.

Students learned that they are often capable of more than they thought. Students talked about developing an openness to trying new things. For example, many students had never cooked complete meals before, but now they were being asked to cook meals for not only themselves, but also for their housemates. Students may have never camped before, but they participated in a mandatory fieldtrip in the West Kimberly where they slept in tents for four days alongside scorpions and deadly snakes. The idea of 'anything being possible' takes on a whole new level of understanding for these students. Echoing this idea, Doyle (2009) indicated that study abroad has a personally liberating nature for the students as they are required to take care of themselves in an entirely new situation.

The final form of personal development the students identified was self-awareness. The students experienced many new things and these new experiences caused them to reflect on themselves and the world around them. Likewise, Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill (2009) described study abroad as an important catalyst for students developing personal

attributes such as a sense of self-direction. The students engage with people from different cultural backgrounds and new perspectives in daily conversations. These interactions lead to self-reflection. It became apparent through conversations with students and their actions that a high level of self-awareness was developed throughout the study abroad experience.

The students experienced several forms of positive personal development. Students identified growth in independence, confidence, openness to new things, and self-awareness as forms of personal development resulting from their study abroad experiences. For the host institution, it is important that they continue to structure the program in such a way that personal development is fostered.

6.4.2 Professional Development

Unlike personal development, students did not as easily identify forms of professional development. Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard (2008) suggested that students need to be informed of the added value study abroad can have on their career outcomes because not all students understand this and if they did more might choose to study abroad. Only a few students actually participated in internships or practicum experiences due to the fact that the availability of these experiences was limited during their semester in Australia. A greater understanding of ways the students have developed professionally in light of a study abroad experience may come about later as they near graduation and the start of their careers. However, the students did describe some professional development, which they felt they experienced in light of their study abroad experience.

Students studying education for a semester in Australia were able to gain hands-on experience in the Australian school system through weekly volunteer placements in local schools. The exposure to the different education system allowed the students to work with teachers who were trained in a different style; one that appeared more structured with a greater focus on independent work. This provided the students with a new perspective on effective teaching methods. In this study and in the literature (Sandell, 2007), education students identified the skills learned from a study abroad experience as tools they would use in their future teaching careers.

Several students recognised the value of gaining experience in their chosen field during their time in Australia as a form of professional development. One business student explained that these experiences would lead to greater depth in her chosen field. According to Relyea, Cocchiara, and Studdard (2008) experience with cultures outside their own increases students' global-mindedness. This then leads to better career success and organisational effectiveness. In addition to these specific experiences in their chosen career fields, students identified growth in general professional characteristics as a form of professional development. The students identified professional characteristics such as group work skills, a broader worldview, interview skills, and confidence, which were also highlighted in the literature (Rexeisen, Anderson, Lawton, & Hubbard, 2008). Students gained invaluable life skills about learning how to work and communicate with all types of individuals. Further to this, students recognised that the professional possibilities are endless and that they are truly capable of doing whatever they set their mind to. Students felt that a study abroad experience on their résumé showed a willingness to learn different things and the possession of an 'open-mind'.

The data supported the existence of professional development in light of study abroad experiences, but also implied that professional development was not as readily apparent to students as was personal development. Many students believed that they had undergone professional development, but unless they had a direct experience within their chosen career field, it did not appear as significant. However, several students were able to gain experience in their chosen career fields, developing professionally in light of these experiences. Additionally, students discussed the positive impact this experience would have on their professional development in the future, citing broader worldviews and unique experiences for interviews as possible outcomes.

6.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the findings of the research were analysed through addressing the three specific research questions. These research questions focused on the perceived challenges faced by study abroad students, the support received, and the development achieved. This analysis forms the basis for the discussion in the next chapter of the implications for the home university, the host university, the study abroad students, and the researcher.

CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSION

7.1 PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to explore the ways United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia. Underpinning this research is the belief that study abroad programs provide individuals with multi-cultural experiences that become a significant part of one's education and development.

7.2 DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

The methodological structure underlying this research was a collective case study. The collective case study of 15 study abroad students in three halls of residence at UNDA was explored in order to better understand student development in light of study abroad experiences. Data collection methods used were:

a) journal entries
b) small focus group interviews

The journal entries focused on students' perceptions of challenges faced, support received, and development identified. The students provided three journal entries: one at the beginning of the semester, one in the middle, and one at the end. The students participated in one 45-minute focus group interview with other research participants from their residence hall. The focus group interviews concentrated on questions related to challenges faced, coping strategies utilised, support received, support required but not received, perceptions of personal and professional development, and any other aspect of being a study abroad student.

Data analysis consisted of identifying themes through content analysis and use of research questions. Content analysis was applied to both the journals and the focus group interview transcripts. The goal of content analysis is to generate knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis allows the researcher to understand the perspectives of research participants through unwrapping the meaning of the text or their words (Berg, 2007). The journals and focus group interview transcripts were examined for common themes, patterns, symbols, topics, and shared mind-sets as described by US study abroad students at

UNDA. In this context, the researcher is interpreting the words and the structures for deeper symbolism and meaning (Berg, 2007; Payne & Payne, 2004).

7.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

The research question was: In what ways do United States students develop through studying abroad at a Catholic university in Western Australia? The research indicated that the students developed both personally and professionally in light of their study abroad experiences. Personal development was identified in the areas of independence, confidence, openness to try new things, and self-awareness. Professional development took two forms: professional experience and professional possibilities. The findings of this study correlated closely with those of previous research in this area. Three new findings that have emerged from this study are:

- Global-mindedness as a discreet form of professional development
- Difficulties with differences in the grading system and how these are interpreted by the US students
- Balancing of multiple roles, particularly within new settings

7.3.1 Personal Development

Independence, confidence, openness to try new things, and self-awareness were the most commonly identified themes of personal development. This personal development as evident in the students' descriptions is interconnected with the challenges the students faced and with the support they received.

The challenges faced by the US study abroad students at UNDA included: academic concerns, homesickness, balancing multiple roles, and finance. Overcoming these challenges enabled the students to experience the aspects of personal development identified (independence, confidence, openness to try new things, and self-awareness). The students developed independence through learning how to succeed in a new educational system, creating a home for themselves in Australia, and being financially responsible. Confidence came from experiencing success within the Australian educational system and creating a new social support system. Determining what were the challenges of the study abroad experience enabled the students to become self-

aware. By being out of their comfort zone, the students were encouraged to try new things.

The students received three forms of support: relationships with university staff, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion. University staff helped the students overcome their academic concerns and experience success in their studies. The friendships formed within the residence halls provided the students with the support needed to overcome their homesickness by creating a social support system for them in Australia. The support received through community immersion provided the students with ample opportunities to try new things and expand their worldview. This enabled the students to overcome the challenges that they faced throughout the semester, which then led to the personal development experienced.

7.3.2 Professional Development

Professional development was not as easily identified; however, the students did describe professional experience and professional possibilities as two themes within professional development. Some students were able to gain first-hand experience in their chosen career field, which they noted as invaluable to their futures, while others explained how their worldview and professional confidence had grown. Overcoming the challenges of academic concerns, homesickness, balancing multiple roles, and finance enabled the students to experience this professional development. By receiving support from university staff members, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion, the students were able to conquer the challenges they faced. For example, a number of the students participated in internships within their chosen career field (support: community immersion) thus providing them with a means to overcome possible homesickness (challenge) and gain professional experience (professional development). Figure 7.1 illustrates how the challenges were overcome by the support received and how together these resulted in students experiencing personal and professional development.

Figure 7.1 The Interaction of Challenges, Support, and Development
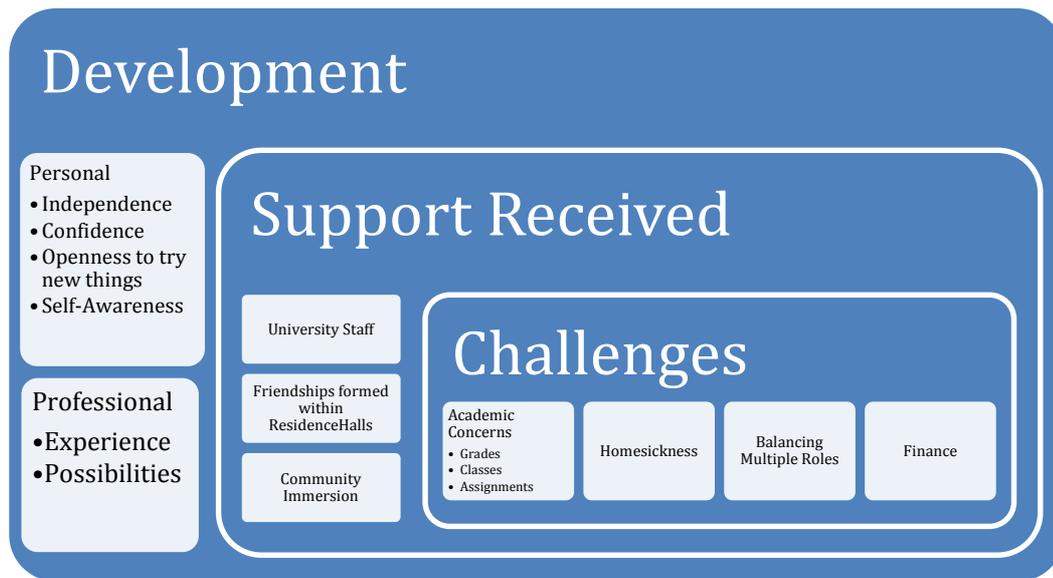
7.4 NEW FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

This study also offers new research on professional development. The literature recognises the importance of study abroad experiences on students' global-mindedness and the significance it has on students' success in the ever-growing global economy (Relyea, Cocchiara, & Studdard, 2008). Global-mindedness refers to the students' ability to think and act within in the perspective that they meet, work, and live with others with different cultural backgrounds, habits, perspectives and customs (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009). While the literature does not specifically label this development as professional, this study has now identified it as a discreet form of professional development. Further research needs to be undertaken on professional development resulting from study abroad experiences. This study offers a useful starting point by indicating that there are a number of forms of professional development that can be researched individually in more depth.

The other two significant new findings were both in the area of personal development. The first finding is the difficulties with differences in the grading system and how these are interpreted by the US students. This finding refers to the differences in the grading system used at The University of Notre Dame Australia versus the US study abroad students' home universities. Specifically, the US students understand their academic performance based on grade point averages and found themselves having to adjust their entire frame of reference to understand the Australian marks of high distinctions,

distinctions, credits, and passes. The literature made reference to academic differences that students would encounter, but did not explicitly cover differences in grading systems (Sovic, 2008; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The second finding is the balancing of multiple roles, particularly within new settings. This finding refers to students needing to balance the differences in the roles of tourist, student, and family member. The literature recognises that students might struggle with identity as they adjust to living within a new country and cultural setting, but does not describe this as balancing multiple roles (Tseng & Newton, 2002). This research explicitly describes the multiple roles US students felt they had and the challenge they had in finding the balance between these.

7.5 SUMMARY

This research has made a contribution to scholarly debate on student development as a result of study abroad experiences. Consistent with the current body of literature in this area, this study indicated that students experience positive development in light of study abroad experiences. The students identified independence, confidence, openness to try new things, and self-awareness as aspects of personal development. In the literature, these aspects correspond to individual development (Kauffmann & Kuh, 1984).

7.6 IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

This research on student development as a result of study abroad programs has implications for the following stakeholders:

      (a) the host university

      (b) the home university

      (c) the study abroad students

      (d) the researcher

Table 7.1 overleaf summarises the implications for each of these stakeholders.

Table 7.1

Overview of the Implications for Stakeholders

Host University	• Awareness • Community and Cultural Immersion Opportunities
Home University	• Awareness • Pre-Departure Preparation
Study Abroad Students	• Awareness • Budgeting • Responsibility
The Researcher	• Communication • Residential Supervisor Role • Training of Residential Staff • Study Abroad Program Development

7.6.1 Host University

Significant implications of this research for the host university are awareness of the challenges faced, support required and potential community and cultural immersion opportunities for study abroad students. The host university needs to be aware of the challenges the study abroad students face during their semester so that they are able to support them as they adjust. In particular, the research identified the challenges of academic concerns, homesickness, balancing multiple roles, and finance. These are important because they all impact upon the students' experiences and behaviour throughout the semester.

The research indicates that the students felt well supported by staff members and lecturers during their semester at the Australian university. In the area of perceived support for study abroad students, relationships with university staff members, friendships formed within the residence halls, and community immersion, were identified as the most significant forms of support. For the host university, these perceived forms of support highlight areas of the program that should be encouraged and further developed. The host university needs to continue to explore additional ways to provide opportunities for the study abroad students to form relationships with other university students, university staff, and community members. The host university should also continue to provide students with cultural immersion opportunities

throughout the semester, whether this is directly by organising specific events, or indirectly by providing information and contact details. These cultural immersion opportunities encourage the students to engage with the host country and are essential to assist them in overcoming homesickness. In terms of friendships within the residence halls, another important form of support for the students, the host university can continue to provide a safe, comfortable environment for the study abroad students to live during their semester. The support received by the host university is significant in the students' adjustment process and essential to their ability to overcome challenges such as academic concerns, homesickness, balancing of multiple roles, and finance.

In overcoming the challenges faced with the support received from the host university, study abroad students are able to experience personal and professional development. It is important for the host university to be aware of this potential for personal and professional development of study abroad students. Awareness of this development can be used as a guide for program improvement and as a marketing tool for study abroad programs. The existing structure of the program allows for significant levels of personal development. The host university, however, should look to increasing professional development opportunities for students through internships, practicum placements, and volunteer experiences. If the students started to feel that they were gaining no more than good memories and beautiful pictures out of their study abroad experience, the structure of the study abroad program itself would need to be examined.

7.6.2 Home University

The most important implications of this research for the home university are awareness of challenges faced, support received, and potential development and also students' pre-departure preparation. The home university needs to be aware of the challenges that their students will face in order to prepare them in advance. The research suggests that academic concerns are the most difficult challenge for the students. It is critical for the home university to prepare students for the differences between the academic systems before arrival in Australia. These preparations could be covered in pre-departure orientation meetings and handouts. Information that would be useful to cover includes differences in class structure, grades, and number of assessments. It could be beneficial

for home universities to consider asking former students who have studied in Australia to discuss their academic experiences with the new cohort of students.

This research suggests that, as a result of their study abroad experiences, students experience both personal and professional development. The research also indicates that the personal and professional development experienced was positive. This implies a successful program for both the home university and the host university. Personal and professional development identified in the research suggests that study abroad programs have the ability to be a powerful experience for study abroad students.

7.6.3 Study Abroad Students

The study has implications for the study abroad students themselves. These include awareness of potential challenges, support available, and possible development along with budgeting and taking responsibility for their experience. Study abroad students need to be aware of the challenges they are facing and be responsible for communicating their needs. The research indicates that the students knew what their challenges were and who to look to for support. It also implies that the students did not let these challenges prevent them from having a meaningful study abroad experience. The study abroad students hold most of the responsibility for taking full advantage of the forms of support and used this appropriately throughout this study. Students also need to be made aware of the academic differences between the Australian and US university systems and be able to develop study techniques that will allow them to be successful. These study techniques can come from conversations with Australian students, utilising information provided in the study abroad students' handbook, and accessing resources available to the students both prior to their arrival and throughout their semester in Australia. Students should be ready and comfortable with asking questions of university staff and other students. Another significant concern for students is finances and students need to be made aware of the increased living expenses in Australia. Students may find it helpful to develop a budget for their expenses throughout the semester so as not to get overwhelmed. Study abroad students would benefit from knowing that participation in a study abroad program could be the best decision of their university career, but that they have to be willing to take the initial step outside of their comfort zone. This then has the potential to lead to significant personal

and professional development through broadening of their worldview and confidence to tackle new situations.

7.6.4 Researcher

Finally, the study has implications for the researcher. The researcher currently holds two roles, one with the home university and one with the host university. These roles allow the researcher to view study abroad students from both perspectives. As a residential supervisor for the home university, this study has affected the way the researcher communicates with the students. For example, the researcher now regularly discusses challenges that students have encountered so that an initial plan to overcome them can be devised. The research impacted upon the activities the researcher suggested and provided for the students as a residential supervisor. The researcher now chooses activities that have a stronger focus on community immersion, as this was an area identified by the students as being of great benefit.

From the perspective of the host university, the researcher recently assumed the role of Executive Officer of Study Abroad. This allows for direct influence upon program development. The researcher is in the position to mentor residential supervisors in light of the information obtained from this research. The research has already been used as a baseline to train a new rector of the residence halls for the host university. The researcher was able to discuss characteristics of study abroad students, challenges they faced, and support they may require to succeed with the incoming rector.

7.7 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study suggests several future research possibilities. These possibilities include:
   a) follow-up probes once students return to their home country
   b) a longitudinal study
   c) involvement of a larger cohort
   d) gender differences
   e) home universities
   f) further investigation into professional development

The research could be extended to include a follow-up with the students after their return to their home country. It could explore how the students understand their

development resulting from study abroad after a semester back at their home university, after a year back at their home university, and upon graduation. As this research revealed, the students may not be aware of the development they have experienced until they return to their home country.

A longitudinal study could be undertaken that looks at a number of cohorts studying at UNDA over a period of two to three years. This study could be undertaken in both first and second semesters, as there may be a difference in experiences between the two semesters due to the availability of experiences, different number of participants, or an uneven distribution within the halls of residence. This longitudinal study would allow for fine-tuning of the present study and for possible greater generalisability to study abroad programs.

The research could also be extended to a larger cohort. This study focused on US students studying for a semester at a Catholic university in Western Australia. It could be expanded to include US students studying at universities in other parts of the world or in countries that also have a language immersion element. The research could also look at a comparison between development that US students experience by studying in Australia for a semester and the development Australian students experience studying in the US for a semester.

Gender differences and the roles these do or do not play in study abroad experiences is another area of possible future research. This study could be undertaken to look at how female study abroad students develop in light of their experiences in comparison to male study abroad students. A study of gender differences would allow for a deeper understanding of study abroad students' perceptions of their experiences and development.

An exploration of the individual home universities and their program structures could potentially contribute to a greater understanding of possible student development. The participants in the current study are from three different US universities and while the current study did not focus on the differences between the three universities' programs, future studies could investigate these and the effect they did or did not have on the students' study abroad experience and development.

Further investigation is needed into professional development that occurs as a result of study abroad programs. This study revealed that students found it more difficult to identify ways they had developed professionally rather than personally. Future research could be organised to focus on professional development alone. Although not the focus of the current study, future studies could look at study abroad students who had internships, jobs, volunteer experiences in their chosen career fields, or direct practicum experience in their profession. These students could be contrasted with the students who did not have work related experiences as part of their study abroad program to see how, or if, the professional development differs.

7.8 PERSONAL IMPACT

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the motivation for this research stemmed from the researcher's personal interest and involvement with study abroad programs. She feels that these programs have had a significant impact on her own development and that this study has only strengthened her belief in the importance of study abroad programs. The researcher's interest in study abroad programs has grown from simply a personal interest to now a chosen career field. Her work with study abroad students on this study was a critical component of that decision. This research confirmed the researcher's belief in the significance of study abroad programs and their 'life-changing experience' potential. It also suggested to her that the key to creating a 'life-changing experience' for the students lies in solid study abroad program development. It is the hope of the researcher that knowledge gained about study abroad programs as a result of this study will be directly applied to program improvement ensuring that students continue to develop positively, both personally and professionally, in light of their study abroad experiences.

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APPENDIX 1

Journal Entry Instructions:
There is no length requirement. Please only write the name of your home university at the top of the page. Journal entries are to be turned in at the front desk of the Student Life Office by 4pm on the date due. Thank you for your help.

	Date Due	Possible Topics
Journal Entry 1	Friday 28.08.09	• Initial impressions of Australia & UNDA • Reasons you choose to study abroad • Things you hope to get out of the experience • Anything about the experience so far you care to share- highs/lows, challenges, etc.
Journal Entry 2	Friday 16.10.09	• How's the experience been now that you're past the halfway point? • Most difficult adjustment you had to make and successful strategies you've used to help with the adjustments • Anything that's surprised you about the experience or yourself since being here? • Anything about the experience so far you care to share- highs/lows, challenges, etc.
Journal Entry 3	Friday 13.11.09	• Final reflection about your experience in Australia & at UNDA • Did you learn anything about yourself during this semester? • What's the biggest lesson or realization you'll take home from this experience? • Would you recommend study abroad to others? Why?

APPENDIX 2

Focus Group Questions:

1. What challenges do you feel you have faced as a study abroad student in Australia at the University of Notre Dame?

2. What kinds of coping strategies (successful and unsuccessful) have you used to overcome these challenges of being a study abroad student in Australia at the University of Notre Dame?

3. Were there any challenges that you feel you have not been able to overcome?

4. What kind of support do you feel you have received as a study abroad student at the University of Notre Dame Australia?

5. What kind of support do you feel would have been helpful that you did not receive as a study abroad student at the University of Notre Dame Australia?

6. In what ways do you feel that you have developed personally as a result of your study abroad experience at the University of Notre Dame Australia?

7. In what ways do you feel that you have developed professionally as a result of your study abroad experience at the University of Notre Dame Australia?

8. Are there any other thoughts or opinions about your experience as a study abroad student at the University of Notre Dame Australia that you would like to share?