Each year numbers of university students discontinue their courses. The number involved varies from one university to another, and from faculty to faculty. The proportion of students discontinuing can be over ten per cent in some departments while it is usually found that the rate of discontinuation is highest amongst first year students, than among later year students, and among higher numbers of students in university courses as Arts, Science and Economics than among those in professional courses.

Little information has been gathered on the nature of discontinuers and the reasons for their discontinuations. From time to time statements are made that a disbelieving public, ranging in prominence from prominent university staff to leading public figures, about 'wastage' which occurs as a result of so many students 'dropping out'. Since the gaining of a place in a university course of one's choice has become more competitive and many applicants are unsuccessful with their applications, there has been increasing pressure on those who are admitted not to 'waste' the opportunity. This pressure has made a decision to discontinue more difficult to make for the student and less acceptable to the community.

The term 'drop out' is often used to describe students who do not proceed with their courses. This term is somewhat loosely used and unfortunately often is used in a derogatory sense. There are really three or four groups of persons who 'drop out'. First those who either decide not to continue or are prevented from continuing their courses because of academic failure, second, those successful students who decide not to re-enrol in their courses, and third, those students who voluntarily withdraw from their courses during the academic year. Most of the studies relating to 'drop outs' include all three groups since interest has largely been focused on graduation rates, and those who do not proceed with their studies are therefore all lumped together. Susan Hayes' study of university discontinuation in Australia has taken this approach as has Miller' in his review of higher education in Australia, England and the U.S.A.

The interest in this study, however, is solely in the third group — those who withdraw during the academic year. The reason for discontinuing for this specific group is scarce indeed but recently three studies in Australia have focused on this group. Lawrence' conducted a study in 1979 on Sydney University who discontinued between 14-7-72 and 1-7-72. Fifty-five student responses were analysed and Lawrence clearly distinguished the students who did and did not constitute a homogenous group. He did not, however, compare them with continuing students.

At Adelaide University, Rump and Green conducted a survey of all students who voluntarily withdrew before 31st July. Their aim was to have these students complete a questionnaire and also to complete a number of psychological and educational tests. However, their response rate was only about one-third and interpretation of their results is accordingly open to question. The chief findings from this study were that part-time students had particular academic difficulties, those who continued at a rate higher than full-time students, and that first year and later year students differed in the reasons for their discontinuations. Both these findings are recorded in this present study.

Susan Hayes conducted a study of 170 students who voluntarily withdrew from their courses at the University of New South Wales. Hayes identified five groups of discontinuers (she used the term 'drop out' which we have chosen not to use).

In addition to examining the nature of the 'drop outs'. Hayes compared them with a matched sample of continuing students she labelled 'persisters' and established numbers of differences between the groups.

There is no reason to believe that factors leading to discontinuations in one institution is significantly different to other. Moreover, each institution is itself a unique institution with its own students and its own students too are unique and different from each other. There may be factors peculiar to an institution itself which significantly affect students' decisions and these factors need to be discovered. Apart from any generalities which may be established from research relating to discontinuation the topic should be a subject of internal institutional research since it is each institution's responsibility to seek information relating to its own students. This article reports the major findings of a study which set out to do this for the University of Sydney.

Procedure
It was decided to conduct a questionnaire survey of all students who discontinued their courses at the University of Sydney in 1973. A questionnaire was constructed for the purpose. The questionnaire included items relating to respondents' domicile, family members' university attendance, travelling time, reasons for discontinuing and the conditions leading up to the decision to discontinue. In addition a series of rating questions about their university experience was included. These ratings as well as some of the questions had been used in an earlier study involving students in Geography'. The responses of the Geography students were available as a reference group with which the responses of the discontinuers could be compared.

Questionnaires were sent to all persons who discontinued for reasons inherent in the persons themselves. Ten per cent of the questionnaires were undertaken by the staff of the Information and Enrolments Office as soon as notices of withdrawal were received. Names and addresses of students withdrawing from their courses were forwarded to the Student Counselling Service so that non-respondents could be followed up. Two follow-up letters were prepared and these were despatched by the Student Counselling Service four weeks and seven weeks after the initial request if no reply had been received. Another copy of the questionnaire was included in the second follow-up letter. This procedure was also adopted in 1974. The response rate was 71.3% in 1973 and 67.1% in 1974.

The first few weeks of the academic year are often quite confusing to students. Many students change their minds about their choice of subjects and amend their enrolments to suit their intentions. Others decide that they do not wish to stay at university at all, and such decisions are reached for a variety of reasons. Persons in this category cancel their enrolments altogether. For example, in 1975 in the Faculty of Engineering, fifty-five students discontinued during first year, but twenty-nine of these did so before 31st July. Such persons are unlikely to be committed to a course and their experience of university is minimal. For the purpose of this study the students who dropped out before 31st July were excluded. This procedure was adopted in 1974. It is clear that all respondents would have sufficient contact with the university to form some judgements about it and to experience some of its policies. Students who volunteered to participate in this study would have demonstrated a modicum of commitment to his/her chosen course.

Initially the intention was to carry out the survey for 1973 only. However, at the end of 1973 the Australian Government abolished university fees and it was decided to continue the survey through 1974 in order to see if the reasons for discontinuation had changed. Thus for the purpose of the study all students who voluntarily withdrew from their courses in 1973 were included. It was felt that all respondents would have sufficient contact with the university to form some judgements about it and to experience some of its policies. Students who volunteered to participate in this study would have demonstrated a modicum of commitment to his/her chosen course.

Initially the study was designed to include students who continued in 1974, but it subsequently became clear that the first 1973 respondents were not as typical as was originally thought. It is clear that all respondents would have sufficient contact with the university to form some judgements about it and to experience some of its policies. Students who volunteered to participate in this study would have demonstrated a modicum of commitment to his/her chosen course.

Results
A summary only of the major findings is presented here. A complete report of the results has been prepared for the University and distributed internally within the University of Sydney. Copies of this report, which includes the questionnaire used in the study, are available on request from the authors.

Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings. Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings. Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings. Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings. Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings. Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings. Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the responses to the discontinue ratings.

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In considering the results of this survey emphasis has been placed on the four identifiable groups, financial, illness, not coping and changed life goals. Analysis of data took two forms. First, these four groups of discontinuers were compared on numbers of variables to determine if there were differences between them and, secondly, they were compared with the reference group of Geography students who represented a group of successful and continuing students. In the latter case, since the Geography students were all first year students and since they were drawn only from degree courses in Arts, Science, Economics and Education, the discontinuing students used for comparison were restricted to first year students from these four courses. Thus far the first part of the study all 858 respondents were included; for the second part only 187 were involved.

What are the Characteristics of Discontinuers?
The results of the survey clearly demonstrate that discontinuers are not a homogenous group. Their experiences and the reasons for discontinuation are quite confusing to students. Many students change their minds about their choice of subjects and amend their enrolments to suit their intentions. Others decide that they do not wish to stay at university at all, and such decisions are reached for a variety of reasons. Persons in this category cancel their enrolments altogether. For example, in 1975 in the Faculty of Engineering, fifty-five students discontinued during first year, but twenty-nine of these did so before 31st July. Such persons are unlikely to be committed to a course and their experience of university is minimal. For the purpose of this study the students who dropped out before 31st July were excluded. This procedure was adopted in 1974. It is clear that all respondents would have sufficient contact with the university to form some judgements about it and to experience some of its policies. Students who volunteered to participate in this study would have demonstrated a modicum of commitment to his/her chosen course.

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discontinue in their case seems to be a degree of personal discomfort, unhappiness and they probably lay in different courses within the University.

Although these two groups were distinctly different and above, and the evidence produced from this survey suggests that students who were not coping, were shown by our group of students could have been helped if there

Two such groups of students are discussed beneath. Since discontinuation and any suggestions they might have been of mature age (a mean age of 30%)

Many universities have financial aid offices and administrative staffs of financial assistance schemes available. Many universities have financial aid offices and
each university should make sure such offices are well known. Furthermore, persons who advise or counsel older students at the time of their entry to university could be of considerable help if they both emphasised the need to ensure financial security before beginning a course and pointed out the existence of financial aid schemes to assist them in emergencies.

The group usually identified as ‘no-hopers’, those students who were not coping, were shown by our study to feel remote from their lecturers, to dislike attending lectures and to feel uncomfortable within

there appear to be a number of steps which could be taken in the University of Sydney. Some of these have already been mentioned (e.g. publicity to financial aids).

In view of the fact that 12% of respondents did not discuss with anybody their decisions to discontinue it would be useful to examine the way in which separation occurs and endeavour to devise a procedure which would ensure that all discontinuers discussed their plans with a suitable member of staff (e.g. sub-dean, counsellor, course adviser) before taking action.

By and large there are formal and informal steps which can be followed. Informal steps are at a more personal level and involve one concerned person interacting with another. At a more formal level, however, we should not shirk the attempt to identify as early as possible students at risk. Information derived from surveys such as we have reported can be of use to this end. Students seen to be at risk can be so identified it would then be possible to institute suitable intervention strategies.

REFERENCES:
