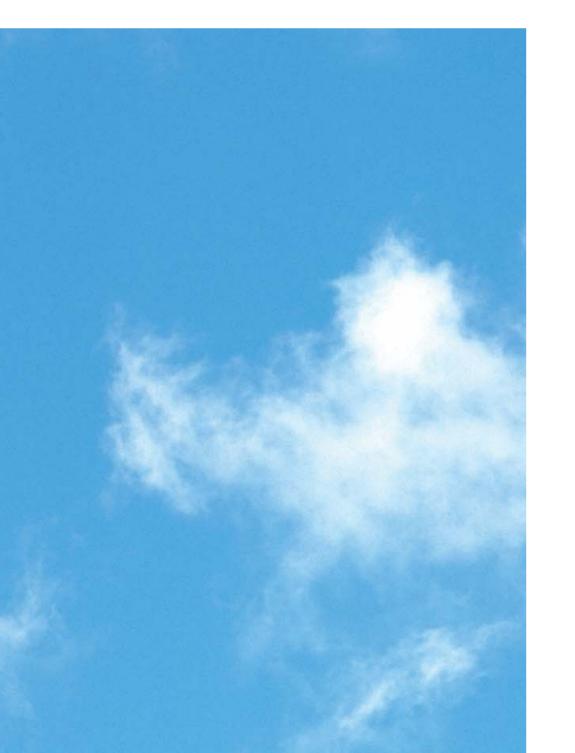# Stumbling blocks or stepping stones? Students' experience of transition from low-mid decile schools to university

Starpath Project

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All views expressed in this report, and any errors or omissions, remain the responsibility of the authors.

Other Starpath Project reports may be available from the Starpath website at www.starpath.ac.nz

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report forms part of The Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success, established in 2005 as a Partnership for Excellence between the University of Auckland and the New Zealand Government and administered by the Tertiary Education Commission. Starpath is a collaborative project based on a partnership with one mid-decile and four low-decile secondary schools in Auckland and Northland, and two tertiary education institutions. Its brief is to undertake research and develop and evaluate evidence-based initiatives to improve the participation and achievement of students from groups currently under-represented in university education. In particular, The Starpath Project is designed to identify and minimise or remove barriers that contribute to lower rates of participation and success in degree-level education by Māori, Pacific, and other students from low-decile schools.

The Challenge

Previous research has shown that Māori and Pacific school leavers, who tend to be clustered in low-decile schools, are less likely than other ethnic groups in New Zealand to begin degree-level studies, succeed in their first year, and continue with their studies. Prior school achievement has been identified as one of the main contributors to existing disparities in tertiary education outcomes (Ussher, 2007; Loader & Dalgety, 2008; Earle, 2008; Scott, 2008). How successfully students manage their transition to university and how well they do academically is also important as the highest level of attrition occurs among students who make limited progress in their first year. Currently there is limited local research into the transition process, especially as experienced by students from under-represented groups, including rural youth (Māori and Pākehā/European), Pacific youth from economically disadvantaged communities and other school leavers who might be the first in their family to attend university, and what needs to be done to ensure that these students are successful in their transition from school to university.

The Project

The overall goal of the present study was to develop a deeper understanding of the processes experienced by students making the transition from secondary school to university study, with a particular focus on students from currently under-represented groups – Māori, Pacific and other students from predominantly low-decile urban and rural schools.

The project was designed as a longitudinal, prospective, qualitative study. This design allowed us to examine participants' experiences as they evolved, including early planning

and decision-making prior to enrolment and problem-solving in relation to enrolment and other administrative matters, as well as adjustment to university study and the new environment, changes in social networks, and how these students handled study loads, exams, feedback and other issues as they arose.

A total of 44 participants (26 female and 18 male) were recruited from two urban and six rural predominantly low-decile schools. Thirty seven of these students commenced tertiary education and 29 remained in the study until its completion. A combination of semi-structured interviews, and student journaling and photography, was used to collect data over a period of about 10 months, starting in October 2007 while the students were still at school and concluding in early August 2008, after the end of their first semester at university.

The Key Findings

Transition from secondary school to university was found to be a complex process, lived through by individual students, which began well before they set foot on a university campus. Their experience of transition was influenced by the attributes, knowledge and skills they brought with them, as well as the conditions they encountered in the new learning environment. The following factors were found to act either as 'stepping stones' or 'stumbling blocks' for students at different stages of the transition process:

Before university

- Developing clear academic goals and realistic expectations of university study was made easier for students who felt secure in their family environment and had role models and mentors with university experience who could inspire, advise, and support them in their decisions. Students who lacked such support tended to be less clear in their plans and less well prepared for the demands of a new learning environment.

- High family expectations were helpful if they were combined with informed advice and encouragement, and allowed the young people the freedom to decide what they wanted to study and where. Students who did not share their parents' or others' aspirations for university education were more likely to change their plans and not enroll, or to have a more difficult and less successful transition experience.

- Students' personal determination to get to and succeed at university was an important factor that helped them make a successful transition despite sometimes challenging life experiences, limited financial resources, and/or a lack of easily accessible academic role models and mentors.

- Early planning, including careful selection of NCEA subjects at secondary school with clear links to their planned field of university study, contributed significantly to students' readiness for transition to university.
- Strong academic preparation, including the study of academically intensive NCEA subjects and the development of independent study skills, diligence, persistence, and the capacity to do well in external examinations, was a significant stepping stone in the transition process. Students who met only the minimum UE standard and had limited experience and success in external examinations at school experienced more difficulties.
- Students with broader interests and experience, such as leadership positions within or outside their school, work experience, and a general inquisitiveness and desire to learn, tended to approach transition to university with greater confidence and more realistic expectations.

The summer months

- The hiatus between school and university acted as a welcome break for students with clear goals who felt academically and socially ready for the next phase of their lives.
- For students who had less clear goals and were less confident about their readiness for university study, the summer months were more likely to be a time of self-doubt, loss of focus and weakening of resolve. Pacific students in particular were at risk of reacting to peer pressure or other external influences and either delaying attending to enrolment and other procedures or deciding to not enroll. Lack of appropriate guidance and support from academic mentors during this period acted as a stumbling block in their transition experience.

The first semester at university

- Many students experienced practical difficulties in their initial engagement with university, often because they were not given or did not know how to access relevant information. Academic orientation activities varied in their effectiveness and appeal, with smaller group and more targeted activities seen as more effective by the students.
- Students who arrived at university with strong academic preparation and a high degree of self-efficacy were generally successful in becoming academically and socially engaged in their new environment. They saw their university's expectations of first year students as challenging but achievable.
- Students with less adequate academic preparation and/or less confidence needed more information, guidance and encouragement to make social connections and to engage with their academic work.

- Students who struggled with academic involvement found large arts, science, and commerce classes particularly challenging and were at greater risk of irregular class attendance and poorer performance than their counterparts in smaller classes with greater face-to-face engagement with academic staff.

- Students who struggled with academic involvement responded to personalised student support services that initiated contact with the students, were easy to access and responsive to a range of needs, and used informal, friendly approaches in their interactions. Such students were much more reluctant to use learning support services that used more formal work practices and expected students to initiate contact with them.

- Students enrolled in courses in which learning support was built into the core curriculum achieved greater academic and social engagement and better academic results than students in large courses with separate support services.

- Mastering aspects of the "hidden curriculum" helped students become more confident, self-reliant and settled in their academic work.

- Our attention to individual stories highlighted the risks of categorising students from under-represented groups in terms of ethnicity, place of family residence, or school decile, and the importance of recognising their individual strengths, potential and specific needs during the transition experience.

The Key Implications

The findings of this study have implications for students and their families, for secondary schools, and especially for universities and other degree-level education providers.

Implications for students and families

- Parents and families can help their young people make a successful transition to university by encouraging them to explore different educational and career options early, to set goals that match their abilities, interests and aspirations, and to make informed NCEA course choices at school.

- Parents and families can also assist by encouraging their young people to develop regular study habits, to appreciate the links between their effort and the academic outcomes they achieve, and to develop wider interests and skills that will increase their competence and confidence for education and life beyond secondary school.

- Students should be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for the decisions they make, including lifestyle choices, and for how they manage their time and balance their various interests and activities.

Implications for schools

- Schools play a critical role in the academic and social preparation of students for tertiary study, particularly in the case of students whose families lack experience of university education, and should provide a challenging and supportive learning environment for students with the academic potential to succeed in higher education.

- Schools need to be fully informed of the universities' academic entry requirements, particularly for limited-entry programmes, and be in a position to provide accurate information and advice to their students.

- There are significant benefits to students when they are able to access NCEA subjects and specific standards needed to prepare them adequately for their intended course of study. Students should be advised and encouraged to complete significantly more than the minimum number of credits required for the UE qualification and to aim for the highest possible level of achievement. Helping students to appreciate the importance of external examinations and to develop the skills and confidence needed to perform well under examination conditions will contribute to their competence and confidence as first year university students.

- Schools can contribute to successful transition by ensuring that appropriate pedagogical approaches are used with senior students to challenge and stimulate them to engage in independent learning, and to develop critical thinking and strong written and verbal communication skills as well as a strong work ethic.

- Having high expectations of students who show academic potential and encouraging such students to have high expectations of themselves can contribute to students' readiness for transition to university.

- Schools need to foster close collaboration with students and their families and provide regular academic counselling, information and advice to ensure that students have clear academic goals, that families are helped to support their children's efforts and aspirations, and that students remain on the most appropriate academic path.

- Schools can assist by challenging academically-able students with opportunities to widen their interests and develop additional skills and confidence, while also supporting them to set priorities to ensure that leadership and other roles and commitments do not jeopardise their chances of academic success.

- On a more practical level, schools can assist students to identify and apply for scholarships for university study, both as a means of affirming their abilities and potential, and for their financial value.

Implications for universities

- In opening their doors to students from currently under-represented groups, universities need to ensure that prospective students are helped to navigate the enrolment process successfully even if they come with limited knowledge of how the university system works or of the university's expectations of first year students.

- Intending students seeking academic advice about specific courses or needing to work through timetable clashes, and those who must review their options when not accepted into the programme of their choice, need to be provided with appropriate help easily, quickly, and in a friendly and supportive way.

- A more proactive approach might be needed with the most at-risk students, with universities taking the initiative to remind them of enrolment and other deadlines, and to offer help and support during this period.

- Consideration should be given to the place of summer courses that could familiarise targeted students with the university's conventions and expectations, strengthen their academic skills, boost their confidence, and assist them to become socially and academically engaged in their new learning environment.

- Pedagogical approaches used with first year students should be chosen for their effectiveness in facilitating learning and helping students to become engaged in their academic work.

- A significant way in which universities can assist first year students to adjust to the demands of university study is by ensuring that students receive early, constructive, detailed, and frequent feedback on their work so that they are able to adjust their study practices and effort to match the expectations universities have of them.

- As far as possible, learning support services should be integrated within the normal academic curriculum, or more closely aligned with specific courses and programmes. The "learning communities" model deserves careful consideration and trials in selected local settings.

- Successful models of student learning support services, that are proactive, flexible, and responsive to students' overall needs should be supported and extended. Overly formal learning support services that depend on student initiated contacts need to reconsider whether they are reaching the students most in need of their assistance and whether the approaches they are using are as effective as they could be.

2. INTRODUCTION

This report forms part of The Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success, established in 2005 as a Partnership for Excellence between the University of Auckland and the New Zealand Government. Starpath is a collaborative project based on a partnership between the University of Auckland, Manukau Institute of Technology, and one mid-decile and four low-decile secondary schools in Auckland and Northland. Its brief is to improve the participation and achievement of students from groups currently underrepresented in university education. In particular, the Starpath project is designed to identify and to minimise or remove barriers that contribute to lower rates of participation and success in degree-level education by Māori, Pacific and other students from low-decile schools.

This study seeks to deepen our current understanding of the experience of the transition from high school to university for students from these groups. Previous research studies have shown that Māori and Pacific school leavers, who tend to be clustered in low-decile schools, are less likely to begin a degree, to pass all their first-year courses, or to continue into a second year of degree study than other ethnic groups, and have also suggested some of the factors, particularly prior school achievement, that are likely to contribute to these disparities (Earle, 2008; Loader & Dalgety, 2008; Scott, 2008; Ussher, 2007). However, it is clear from the research literature that a complex range of personal, institutional and external influences impact on student transitions. This qualitative, longitudinal study illuminates some of these influences by following Māori, Pacific, and other students from predominantly low-decile schools as they make the transition from secondary school to university.

A research report on NCEA course choices recently released by Starpath highlighted a pattern of some academically able Māori and Pacific students, and other students from low-decile schools, choosing, or ending up in, school courses that do not offer them the best preparation for university study (Madjar, McKinley, Jensen, & Van Der Merwe, 2009). This report extends the story by asking what happens to students in the summer after they finish school and over their first semester at university. Starpath's previous research predicted that some of these students would be academically under-prepared and would find it difficult to gain entry to university, particularly into limited-entry programmes, and to succeed in their studies. But what else influences students' decisions about further study and their level of achievement at university?

International and New Zealand research makes it clear that increasing students' readiness for university before they arrive is fundamental to improving students' experiences of transition, and their success in university study. However, it is clear that academic issues are only part of the challenge for students, as social aspects of the transition experience also have an important influence. Vincent Tinto (2008), a leading author in the field of transitions research, has found that the extent to which students are academically and socially involved at university is closely related to their persistence and achievement, and that academic and social engagement is particularly crucial in students' first year of university, laying the foundation for success in later years of study. To better understand students' transitions into New Zealand universities, this study looks at both academic and social integration and considers how the two may interact.

Research into which interventions are most effective at enhancing students' transitions has suggested that such initiatives are likely to be more effective if they are integrated with teaching and learning in university courses and are directly relevant to students' studies. This suggests that institutions need to move beyond an 'add-on' approach to improving transition and retention by including all first year students, instead of leaving it up to individuals to find assistance, particularly as students are often reluctant to seek help, even as they struggle to adapt to a new academic and social environment (Anae, Anderson, Benseman, & Coxon, 2002; Hemmings et al., 1995). The study reported here built on this research by looking at what support proved to be most helpful to beginning students.

Project overview

The guiding question for this study has been: *What is the nature of the transition process experienced by academically able students from under-represented groups as they move from high school to university education, and how is the experience of transition incorporated into their life narratives?* In particular, the project has asked what this experience is like for Māori, Pacific, and other students from low-decile urban and rural schools. Transition is understood as a set of inter-connected personal, social and academic processes that often occur alongside a geographical relocation. Students must adjust to these concurrent changes if they are to meet the expectations of the tertiary institutions in which they are enrolling, and engage and succeed in their chosen fields of study.

Students' transitions to university occur over many months. The process begins while students are still at high school, continues over the following summer and during their initial months at university, and often stretches out beyond the first year. Despite this,

most previous research on the topic has used cross-sectional and retrospective approaches, interviewing or surveying students after their arrival at university, sometimes quite late in their first year. We therefore know little about what the process of transition (as opposed to being a first year student) is like, especially for students from under-represented groups, including rural youth (Māori and European/Pākehā), Pacific youth, and those who are the first in their family to attend university. For these reasons, the present project was designed as a longitudinal, prospective study. This allowed us to examine participants' experiences as they evolved. We have been able to explore how students plan and make decisions about tertiary study and how they deal with problems that arise before the start of the academic year, as well as how they adjust to the university environment after their arrival.

More specific aims of the project were to:
- describe the transition process as experienced by students from the end of secondary schooling, through the summer "waiting" period, arrival at university, and the first semester of university study;
- examine ways students with different life experiences talk about and construct the experience of transition and incorporate it into their life narratives (who they are, and who they are becoming);
- identify what students with different life histories experience as "stepping stones" and "stumbling blocks" within the transition process, and what sustains them during this period;
- identify factors that might contribute to, or detract from, their motivation, confidence, academic and social integration within the university, and decisions they make (to stay, leave, or change courses) during the first semester of university study; and
- determine how we can better prepare and support first year university students through existing and/or new support or mentoring programmes.

Research participants for this study were recruited from two schools in Auckland and six schools in Northland. Data collection took place between October 2007, when participants were in their final year of school, and early August 2008, after their first semester at university, during which time participants were interviewed up to six times. In addition to semi-structured interviews with a Starpath researcher, participants were asked to submit journal entries and photographs related to their transition experience.

This project report is comprised of seven sections. It opens with an executive summary, followed by this introduction. Section three reviews relevant international and New Zealand literature and provides a more detailed background and rationale for the

project. The fourth section explains the project's design and methods. Section five outlines how the research participants were selected and describes the backgrounds of the students who chose to be involved. The project's findings are presented in the sixth section through an analysis of the transition process and a presentation and discussion of narrative exemplars. The report closes with a discussion of the significance of these findings and the project's key recommendations for students and their families, schools, and universities.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a vast body of international literature on transition from school to university. Much of this research comes from the United States, with Australia and the United Kingdom also being large contributors. In contrast, there is a paucity of published New Zealand research in this area, although the amount of New Zealand transitions literature is increasing. Statistical analyses using national data, produced by the Ministry of Education, give an indication of some of the predictors of enrolment, persistence and academic success at university (Earle, 2007, 2008; Loader & Dalgety, 2008; Scott, 2008; Scott & Smart, 2005; Ussher, 2007, 2008). There have also been some small qualitative studies in New Zealand, for example Purnell (2002) and Ditcher and Hunter (2002), who interviewed twelve and eleven first year students respectively, at particular universities. The most significant New Zealand research project on transitions to date was carried out by Zepke et al. (2005), using surveys, interviews, and focus groups of first year students, their teachers, and administrators, at seven universities and polytechnics. This study, like nearly all transitions research, was conducted with students who were already at university, rather than tracking students longitudinally, beginning when they were still at school. For this reason, it did not include students that never made it to university or who dropped out before the research was carried out. Both the international and New Zealand literature will be drawn on in this review.

While there is much diversity in the published research findings, some clear themes emerge upon which there seems to be a widespread agreement. This review aims to sketch some of these, as pointers towards factors which have an important influence on students' experiences of transition to university. It is these areas that need to be addressed to enable more students – particularly those from under-represented groups – to persist, and succeed, in university study.

Very clearly, academic preparation is vital in making a successful transition to university. Academic achievement at school has been shown to play a key role in each phase of students' decision making about whether to attend university (Leach & Zepke, 2005). It is also an essential prerequisite for gaining admission to university, and students' first choices of programmes. However, if students fulfill only the minimum admission requirements, this is likely to make transition to university study challenging. For example, students who have achieved the NCEA Level 3 qualification in addition to University Entrance are more likely to pass all their first year courses, and are less likely to drop out after their first year, than those who have only University Entrance (Scott,

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2008). Numerous examples in the international literature also demonstrate that prior academic achievement is a predictor of persistence, university achievement, and degree completion (Evans, 1999; Gabb, Milne, & Cao, 2006; Perna, 2005).

3.1 Academic preparation

Academic preparation encompasses not only students' grades, number of credits, or school qualifications, but also the school subjects and standards that they study. Certain subjects or groups of subjects are prerequisite for particular university programmes. If students are given entry without studying these prerequisites, they may find that they are at a disadvantage compared with the rest of the cohort. In addition, if students lack particular standards (i.e. subject content) because their school did not include them in the courses they offered, this may also cause the students to falter, especially if it is assumed that all of the students in that university programme have attained these standards and have the basics on which to build more advanced knowledge (Meyer, Weir, McClure, Walkey, & McKenzie, 2007). The frequent lack of continuity between school curricula and those in tertiary institutions is commonly identified in the U.S. literature as a major problem for students (Shulock, Moore, Offenstein, & Kirlin, 2008). In New Zealand, this challenge may require particular attention, given the vast choice in the design of courses within the NCEA system.

The overall rigour and challenge of students' school programmes is also important. A large U.S. study found that the "academic intensity and quality of one's high school curriculum (not test scores, class marks or GPA) counts most in preparation for bachelor's degree completion", and that this was particularly the case for minority students (Adelman, 1999). Related to this, New Zealand research undertaken by the Starpath Project showed that students who achieved higher grades in NCEA assessments (demonstrating a greater depth of understanding in a subject) were more successful in first year university studies than students who attained a greater number of credits but at a minimum pass level (Shulruf, Hattie, & Tumen, 2008).

When students arrive at university only to discover that they are unprepared for the courses in which they have enrolled, this can be a disconcerting, negative experience (Simons, Parlett, & Jaspan, 1988). Increasing students' readiness for university before they arrive is a necessary element of any comprehensive transition strategy. There is a large body of research on raising school achievement which will not be discussed here, although this is a fundamental issue for those groups of students who have, on average, lower school achievement (such as Māori, Pacific, and other students from low-decile

schools). It is relevant to note, however, that recent work by Starpath researchers (Smith & Timperley, 2008) showed that high school students in New Zealand who attempt more NCEA Level 3 subjects from the approved list are more likely to achieve the UE qualification than students who attempt fewer approved subjects. Analysis of the 2005 NCEA data showed that students who attempted four approved subjects were more than twice as likely to achieve UE than students who attempted only three subjects from the approved list, yet Māori and Pacific students, on average, attempted only 2.7 and 2.5 approved subjects respectively. Striving to achieve only the minimum UE requirement can result in failure if a student does not achieve in even a small number of credits in a single subject. In addition, the study showed that Māori and Pacific students are also more likely to miss other criteria for the award of UE, e.g. failing to achieve the number and mix of standards needed to satisfy the literacy requirement[1].

The research indicates that if we are to increase the proportion of students from these groups who successfully transition to university, students and their teachers need to receive clear messages about the demands of tertiary study and how best to prepare for it (Earle, 2007; Perna, 2005). Informing students about the nature and specific expectations of different courses would also help prevent the very common problem of students finding they have made the "wrong choice" of university programme or field (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000; Tym, McMillion, & Wenster, 2004). Students need to receive clear and detailed guidance to ensure that the school courses they take will match their long-term goals, and students with the potential to attend university need to be identified early, and made aware of the pathways open to them. This is particularly important for students whose family members have not participated in tertiary education, as they are likely to have less knowledge about how to prepare for university, and might not consider themselves as suited to university level study (Tym et al., 2004). Advising students on these matters should begin early – by the first or second year of high school – particularly as early subject choices can constrain their later options (Bonous-Hammarth & Allen, 2005; Leach & Zepke, 2005).

The literature also suggests that many students from under-represented groups will require ongoing support to achieve academic success at university. Inevitably, at least some students will arrive with less than ideal preparation, and need assistance so that

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[1] University Entrance (UE) requires the completion of a minimum of 42 credits at NCEA Level 3 or higher, including a minimum of 14 credits at Level 3 or higher in each of two subjects from the approved list of subjects, and a further 14 credits at Level 3 or higher from no more than two domains on the National Qualifications Framework or other approved subjects. It also requires completion of at least 14 credits at level 1 or higher in mathematics (or pāngarau) and at least eight credits at level 2 or higher in English (or Te Reo Māori). Four of the "literacy" credits must be in "reading" and four in "writing".

they can overcome this (Tinto, 2008). Furthermore, even with solid academic preparation, there are many academic challenges for new university students. The university learning environment is usually very different from that of schools. Students are expected to take much more responsibility for their own learning, and must adapt to teaching styles which are quite different from those they might have experienced in the past, as well as to a faster pace of learning (Hemmings, Boylan, Hill, & Kay, 1995; Yorke, 2000). The implicit requirements for success in this new environment, or what is often referred to as the "hidden curriculum", may be far from clear to students (Lawrence, 2005). Essentially students must enter into the academic culture of the institution, which for many students is very unfamiliar.

3.2 Social transition

Academic issues are only part of the challenge for students. Research has demonstrated that the transition to university is also a social one, involving a change in social context. Many students struggle to make solid friendships at university; large and impersonal first year classes can make this difficult (Kantanis, 2000). For students who are the first in their family to attend university, or who have few friends who also went into tertiary study, going to university can mark a significant separation from the other social contexts in which they operate (Tym et al., 2004). Social factors can have a major impact on transition; it has been found that "students who do not have a positive experience in making the social transition at university face increased difficulty in negotiating their way through the challenges of first-year" (Kantanis, 2000, p. 1). Consistent with this, New Zealand researchers have found that "relationship building is a key factor in determining success or failure; retention or early withdrawal. Positive, professional relationships between students, their peers, institutional support staff, and teachers do have major effects" (Zepke et al., 2005, p. 20). Several studies have found that contact with faculty outside of class has a positive impact on persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This is likely to contribute to both social and academic integration. Indeed, it is clear that academic and social integration are related and can positively reinforce each other. For example, students who form good relationships with peers and staff are likely to be able to use these social networks to access help and support with academic issues.

The proposition that "quite simply, the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely are they to persist and graduate" (Tinto, 2008, p. 5) forms the backbone of Vincent Tinto's model of student withdrawal, which is widely recognised and underpins much of the research on transitions (Gabb et al., 2006). Tinto (2008)

stresses that academic and social engagement is crucial in the first year of university "when student membership is so tenuous yet so critical to subsequent learning and persistence. Involvement during that year serves as the foundation upon which subsequent affiliations and engagements are built" (p. 5).

Acknowledging this, universities often try to facilitate academic and social integration of new students in a range of ways, such as through orientation activities, first year seminars, campus tours, online communities, student learning centres, instruction in study skills, mentoring, peer tutoring, academic advising and extracurricular and social activities. Positive effects have been shown for many of these types of activities in particular institutions (although very often such activities are not rigorously evaluated in terms of their impact on student outcomes) and a range of these sorts of programmes no doubt have a place in any comprehensive transitions strategy (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

3.3 Integration of academic and social support

Research evidence indicates that initiatives to improve transition are likely to be more effective if they are integrated with teaching and learning in university courses. As Tinto (2008) and others have stressed, "Nowhere is involvement more important than in the classrooms" (p. 5). This is often the only place where students meet and interact with their teachers, and each other – particularly as it is now the case that many students juggle study with other commitments, such as paid work, and that most students live off campus (Gabb et al., 2006). Furthermore, "learning is central to the college experience and the root source of student success. Involvement in classroom learning, especially with other students, leads to greater quality of effort, enhanced learning, and in turn heightened student success" (Tinto, 2008, p. 5). Integrating academic and social support into university courses means that it is directly relevant and immediately applicable to students' studies. This also overcomes the deficiencies of an 'add-on' approach to improving transitions by including all students, rather than leaving it up to students to seek out help if they need it (the frequent reluctance of students to do so, as well as their confusion about how and where to get help, is well documented) (Anae, Anderson, Benseman, & Coxon, 2002; Hemmings et al., 1995).

The creation of learning communities is one example of an attempt to restructure university learning environments, and enhance academic and social involvement, in an effort to address student attrition. Learning communities are prominent in the transitions literature from the U.S., where many institutions have established first year learning

communities. In these, a group of students are enrolled in a set of courses (which are linked together around an organising theme), and are engaged in collaborative learning – that is, students work together in groups to achieve shared learning goals and take shared responsibility for their own and their peers' learning (Gabb et al., 2006; Tinto, 2000). Characteristics of learning communities have been listed as:

- organising students and academic staff into smaller units or communities;
- creating curricular integration;
- facilitating formation of academic and social structures that provide students with support;
- socialising students into academic culture;
- providing academic staff with a means for collaborating across departmental lines;
- emphasising learning outcomes;
- constituting a venue for institutional support programs such as tutoring and academic advisement; and
- focusing attention on the first year experience (Williams, 2000).

Learning communities have been found to have many positive outcomes, including increased retention, academic performance, motivation, student engagement, cognitive development, and social integration (Jaffee, Carle, Phillips, & Paltoo, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

3.4 External demands and their impact on transition

While improving students' experiences of university is vital in managing transitions, research evidence indicates that students' individual circumstances and the demands of their external commitments also affect the transition process. A New Zealand survey of students at a range of tertiary institutions found that 42 percent of students who withdrew gave "there was too much going on in my life" as an important or very important reason for doing so (Zepke et al., 2005). While this does not give us any understanding of what particular issues caused students' problems, it does indicate that non-institutional factors are important. Nevertheless, institutions can provide services that help students balance these demands or cope with personal issues. In addition, student attrition and persistence are complex processes in which many variables interact, so attending to institutional factors can make persisting at university seem more possible – despite challenging individual circumstances.

Ultimately, there is strong evidence in the research literature that managing student transitions in a way that significantly improves student retention and achievement,

particularly for 'non-traditional' students, requires institutional commitment. As Tinto (2008) comments, institutions need to "stop tinkering at the margins of institutional academic life and make enhancing student success the linchpin about which they organize their activities" (p. 3). Those universities that are committed to enhancing the outcomes of all of their students (and are willing to invest resources to do so) generally find a way to achieve this.

3.5 Issues for Māori and Pacific students

The fact that Māori and Pacific students are significantly under-represented in degree-level study in New Zealand (Education Counts, 2009), and have lower degree completion rates than European/Pākehā and Asian students suggests that the transition experience of these groups requires particular attention. Some of the issues outlined above might be particularly salient for some Māori or Pacific students, or play out in particular ways for members of these groups.

3.5.1 Māori students

The literature indicates that prior achievement is a major barrier to entering university for many Māori school leavers, who are less likely to transition into degree-level study than other ethnic groups. Of all 2004 school leavers, 50 percent of Asian students and 33 percent of European/Pākehā students began a bachelors degree, compared with just 13 percent of Pacific students and 11 percent of Māori students (Ussher, 2007). However, when students' highest school qualification is controlled for, the disparity in transition rates between ethnic groups is greatly reduced, although Māori are still less likely to enroll in a bachelors degree (Ussher, 2007; Loader & Dalgety, 2008). Of students who left school with the UE qualification in 2004, 82 percent of European/Pākehā students moved on to degree-level study, compared with 81 percent of Asian students, 77 percent of Pacific students and 70 percent of Māori students (Ussher, 2007). Earle (2007) comments that, "In order to make a significant change in the number of Māori attaining degrees, the most important change would be to increase the number of Māori secondary school students achieving university entrance or better. This remains the major constraint on success. It limits the number of younger Māori who can enter degree studies" (p. 3).

Prior academic achievement is also an important influence on the success of Māori students who do enter university (Earle, 2008). First year Māori students participating in degree-level study are less likely to pass all their courses than non-Māori students, and are also less likely than non-Māori to continue into the second year of an undergraduate

degree (Scott, 2008). Part of the reason for this is likely to be that Māori students begin degree-level study with lower school achievement, on average, than non-Māori, and are less likely to have attained University Entrance, and NCEA Level 3 Certificate (Earle, 2008).

The lower average achievement of first year Māori students, however, cannot be attributed solely to less adequate academic preparation. In previous research, when Māori and non-Māori first year students with the same level of NCEA performance were compared, Māori did somewhat less well, on average, in their first year degree courses (Earle, 2008). Furthermore, "The relationship between Level 3 expected percentile [which estimates the performance of a student relative to his/her peers] and passing all first year degree courses was stronger for non-Māori than for Māori, suggesting that factors other than school achievement have more influence on tertiary achievement for Māori than for non-Māori" (Scott, 2008, p. 4).

These factors are unlikely to be able to be fully illuminated using survey approaches, as it is clear that important influences on success are not captured in available data. In a model constructed by the Ministry of Education, variables contained in NCEA data and enrolment data (including demographics and course enrolments) explained only around 23 percent of the variation in first year pass rates among students who left school in 2004 or 2005 and began a degree in 2005 or 2006 (Earle, 2008). This "reinforces a general theme throughout the international literature that there is a complex set of factors, institutional, personal and external, which influence student success" (Earle, 2007, p. 20). To date though, there has been little qualitative, longitudinal research that focuses on Māori students as they transition to university.

3.5.2 Pacific students

As we have seen, Pacific school leavers, like their Māori counterparts, are much less likely to begin a degree than Asian or European/Pākehā students, and this appears to be at least partly a result of the lower average school achievement of Pacific students. Pacific students are also less likely to pass all of their first year degree courses than non-Pacific students (Scott, 2008). It may be the case that Pacific students, like Māori students, enter university with lower-than-average achievement in NCEA, although the Ministry of Education has not yet reported on this. We also do not know whether the relationship between school performance and first year degree success is the same for Pacific students as it is for non-Pacific students.

While recent Ministry of Education reports have provided more survey findings on Māori than Pacific students' transitions to degree study, a significant piece of qualitative

research has explored reasons for the lower participation and achievement of Pacific peoples in tertiary education (Anae et al., 2002; Benseman, Coxon, Anderson, & Anae, 2006). Interviews and focus groups were conducted with Pacific community members, Pacific students who had successfully completed a tertiary qualification, those that had taken part in a tertiary programme but did not complete it, and those who had not participated in tertiary education, as well as with key informants in particular tertiary institutions. The study identified factors that were perceived to lead to Pacific students performing poorly or withdrawing from tertiary study. Motivation and attitudes to study were seen as important, especially given the amount of freedom and personal responsibility that students are given in tertiary education. Many students reported that they had considerable family and employment commitments that had to be juggled with study. Lack of availability (or awareness) of appropriate support services was also cited. Factors that were seen to support Pacific success in tertiary education were also identified. These included accurate and timely information about tertiary study; role models who provided support and encouragement; the presence of Pacific staff, student associations and dedicated Pacific space in tertiary institutions; and particular pedagogical components (including "teaching that ensures academic and social engagement between learners and lecturers" (Benseman et al., 2006, p. 160)). These findings echo many of the themes found in the international literature.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, the present study was undertaken as part of a wider programme of research conducted by the Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success. Previous Starpath research, including literature reviews and scoping studies, relying largely on statistical data, has established that Māori and Pacific students, and those attending low-decile schools, are less likely than other New Zealand students to achieve the UE qualification and to begin university study, regardless of their individual ability and potential. Recent research conducted by a Starpath Project team (Madjar, McKinley, Jensen, & Van Der Merwe, 2009) has also provided evidence that students who complete little more than the minimum number of credits required for the UE qualification and/or NCEA Level 3 Certificate; who complete only a minimum number of standards from subjects on the approved list; and who do not establish academic goals and strategies early in their NCEA career are very likely to be under-prepared for university study. Furthermore, the research found that this group of students includes many academically able students who wish to go on to university. Such students can find it more difficult to gain entry to university, particularly into highly competitive, limited-entry programmes, and to succeed in their studies.

The **overall goal** of the present study was to develop a deeper understanding of the processes experienced by students making the transition from secondary school to university study, with a particular focus on students from currently under-represented groups – Māori, Pacific and other students from predominantly low-decile urban and rural schools.

For the purposes of this study, transition was defined as a series of interlinking processes – personal, social and academic – that often involve an element of geographical relocation, and need to be accomplished to a level that allows individual students to meet the expectations of the tertiary institutions in which they are enrolling. Some degree of successful transition was considered a prerequisite for students being able to engage and succeed in their chosen fields of study.

Transition to university is a lengthy process that begins while students are still at high school, continues during the ensuing summer, and during the initial months at university, or even longer. Yet despite its temporal nature, most previous research on this topic has used cross-sectional and retrospective approaches, recruiting research participants after their arrival at university, sometimes quite late in their first year. What we

currently do not know is what the process of transition (as opposed to being a first year undergraduate student) is like, especially for students from under-represented groups, including rural youth (Māori and European/Pākehā), Pacific youth from economically disadvantaged communities such as South Auckland, and other school leavers who might be the first in their family to attend university.

For these reasons the present project was designed as a longitudinal, prospective study. This design allowed us to examine participants' experiences as they evolved, including planning and decision-making prior to any contact with a university and problem-solving in relation to enrolment and other administrative matters, as well as their adjustment to university study and the new environment, changes in their social networks, and how they dealt with study loads, exams, feedback and other issues as they arose.

The following **research question** provided the focus for data collection and analysis:
What is the nature of the transition process experienced by academically able students from under-represented groups as they move from high school to university education, and how is the experience of transition incorporated into their life narratives?

More **specific aims** of the project were to:
- describe the transition process as experienced by students from the end of secondary schooling, through the summer "waiting" period, arrival at university, and the first semester of university study;
- examine the ways in which students with different life experiences talk about and construct the experience of transition and incorporate it into their life narratives (who they are, and who they are becoming);
- identify what students with different life histories experience as "stepping stones" and "stumbling blocks" within the transition process, and what sustains them during this period;
- identify factors that might contribute to, or detract from, their motivation, confidence, academic and social integration within the university, and decisions they make (to stay, leave, or change courses) during the first semester of university study, and
- determine how we can better prepare and support first year university students through existing and/or new support or mentoring programmes.[2]

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[2] An additional aim of the project was to facilitate research with a cohort of Pacific students – a sub-sample within the larger project – to form the basis of MA (Development Studies) thesis by Marianna Deynzer. The thesis was submitted for examination in March 2009 and the degree awarded in October 2009.

4.1 Data collection and analysis

Data collection was organised into five phases, beginning while students were still at school and concluding at the end of their first semester at university. The types of data gathered and modes of data collection are summarised in Table 4.1 below:

Table 4.1 Summary of data collection

Phase	Interview	Journaling	Photography	Focus
Phase 1. Oct-Nov 2007	Face-to-face	✓	✓	Home, family and community. Experience of school. Aspirations and plans. Readiness for university.
Phase 2. Dec 2007 – Feb 2008	Telephone (one or more)	✓	✓	Summer period. Work, travel, holidays. NCEA results. Changes in plans. Enrolment experiences.
Phase 3. March 2008	Face-to-face	✓	✓	Arrival at university. Orientation. First impressions and early experiences.
Phase 4. April-June 2008	Face-to-face or telephone	✓	✓	Academic work, learning experiences, performance, feedback, challenges and successes. Social integration.
Phase 5. July-Aug 2008	Face-to-face	✓		Reflections on previous nine months. Evaluation of semester one. Future plans.

Semi-structured interviews were supplemented by participants contributing periodic journal entries, either in hard copy or online (on a password-protected website), and photographs of people and places involved in their transition experience. Selected photographs were used as stimuli for discussion during the final interview, encouraging reflection on past experiences. Most of the interviews conducted during the summer and in the April-May period were held over the phone. In addition, two students who had enrolled at universities outside Auckland had all but their initial interviews conducted over the phone.

Research participants were recruited from two schools in metropolitan Auckland and six schools in Northland. All data were collected between October 2007 and early August 2008. (A less intensive follow-up study is continuing with participants who agreed to on-going involvement and the outcomes of this follow-up study will be reported at the end of 2009.)

Following an initial briefing of the research team, interviews were conducted by five researchers, each following a group of participants over the course of the study. Researchers used interview schedules with a list of key questions. Two of the researchers identify as Māori, two as Tongan-Palangi, and one as European/Pākehā, and all are female.

All interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders and these, along with hand-written journals, were transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were checked for accuracy, and the QSR N'Vivo™ (version 7) software programme was used for storage, retrieval and initial open coding of the data. Further narrative analysis was undertaken in relation to different phases of the transition process, different subgroups within the study, and individual participants. Data relating to Pacific students were used in two ways. Initially, these data were analysed independently of other data and used as the basis for the Master of Arts thesis by Marianna Deynzer (see footnote on the previous page). Later, these data were re-coded and analysed with all other data within the larger study.

None of the students who were excluded or withdrew from the study[3], asked to withdraw their data. Therefore, the analysis included all data collected during the project. This provided important information on factors that contributed to participants' decisions, both when participants followed through on their initial plans to embark on tertiary study and when some chose to change such plans and seek paid employment or defer further education.

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[3] See Section 5 of the report for details.

5. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purposive sampling was used to recruit a total of 44 participants who were in their final year of high school in 2007 and planned to begin university studies in semester one, 2008. The aim was to include Māori, Pacific and European/Pākehā students from low to mid-decile, rural and urban schools. A total of 26 female and 18 male students were recruited, including 17 Māori, 11 Pacific, and 13 European/Pākehā students.[4] Three students with "other" ethnic affiliations (African, Asian, and Fijian-Indian) were also included in the study as they expressed strong interest in taking part and had friends who had volunteered. All three remained in the study until its conclusion. Six rural and two urban schools provided the study sample (see Table 5.1 below). One school was decile 5 and the other schools ranged from decile 1 to decile 3.

Due to expected attrition over the ten months of data collection, and the need to exclude students who did not proceed with their initial plans to enroll in tertiary studies, 44 participants were recruited to ensure that at least 24 would continue with the project until its conclusion. In the end, 29 students remained in the study until the final

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[4] It is relevant to note that ethnic classification was problematic in relation to a number of participants. Both Māori and European/Pākehā groups included young people who were ambivalent about their ethnic identities, speaking of their "mixed" heritage or dual affiliations, or identifying with one ethnic group at one time and a different group at another time. This fluidity was influenced by situational demands, with individuals choosing to "pass" as members of a particular group in some situations but asserting a different ethnic affiliation in other situations. Some felt quite comfortable with a dual sense of identity, while others were still working through issues of ethnic affiliation and its implications for them as individuals. There were also participants for whom ethnic identity did not appear to be salient; they saw themselves as New Zealanders, or regarded aspects such as family ties or sporting achievements as more relevant to their sense of self.

Regardless of whether they were overseas or New Zealand born, participants from Pacific backgrounds had strong connections to their ethnic communities through families, churches, school cultural groups, and friendship networks. They had a strong sense of "PI" (Pacific Island) identity, both in how they referred to themselves and in how they perceived they were seen by others. In most cases, at least within the research project, their "PI" identity was expressed more strongly than their more specific affiliations with Tongan, Samoan, or other Pacific groups. In some cases this might have been due to mixed Pacific heritage, but was also evident with participants who were Island-born and from single ethnic heritage. As a group, Pacific participants had a well established sense of ethnic identity, which proved both a source of strength and, at times, a source of challenge and difficulty in the transition process.

At the beginning of the project participants were asked to nominate the ethnic group with which they identified (or identified most closely), and were categorised accordingly in all subsequent counts.

interview, 18 female and 11 male – nine Māori, seven Pacific, ten European/Pākehā, and three "Other". (See Table 5.1, figures in parentheses).

Table 5.1 Participants by school location, gender & ethnic affiliation at the <u>start</u> (and, in parentheses, the <u>end</u>) of the study

	Māori	Pacific	European/Pākehā	Other	Total
Northland					
Male	6 (3)	-	1 (0)	-	7 (3)
Female	9 (5)	-	6 (4)	-	15 (9)
South Auckland					
Male	-	5 (2)	-	-	5 (2)
Female	-	5 (4)	-	-	5 (4)
West Auckland					
Male	-	-	3 (3)	3 (3)	6 (6)
Female	2 (1)	1 (1)	3 (3)	-	6 (5)
Total	17 (9)	11 (7)	13 (10)	3 (3)	44 (29)

Of the 44 participants, 36 (82%) gained the University Entrance (UE) qualification[5], six failed, and the outcome is unknown for two participants who withdrew from the study before their NCEA results were known (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2 Participants' UE achievement – number who <u>achieved</u> UE (and, in parentheses, total number of participants for whom NCEA results were available) by school location, gender and ethnic affiliation

	Māori	Pacific	European/Pākehā	Other	Total
Northland					
Male	4 (5)	-	1 (1)	-	5 (6)
Female	7 (8)	-	6 (6)	-	13 (14)
South Auckland					
Male	-	4 (5)	-	-	4 (5)
Female	-	3 (5)	-	-	3 (5)
West Auckland					
Male	-	-	3 (3)	2 (3)	5 (6)
Female	2 (2)	1 (1)	3 (3)	-	6 (6)
Total	13 (15)	8 (11)	13 (13)	2 (3)	36 (42)

Of the 36 students who gained UE, 33 went on to enroll in degree or certificate/diploma studies, as did four of the six who did not gain UE (the latter enrolling in bridging or preparatory certificate programmes). Of the 42 initial participants whose secondary school achievement outcomes are known, 37 went on to enroll in some form of tertiary

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[5] One student did not meet the normal UE qualification requirements but was permitted to include credits from a non-NCEA course deemed equivalent to UE level subjects, and was allowed to enroll in degree-level studies at university.

education. Three students who gained UE and had planned to attend university changed their plans during the summer period, opting to take up paid employment instead. Students who did not go on to tertiary study were excluded or withdrew from the project once their decisions were confirmed.

Of the 37 students who began tertiary studies in semester one 2008, 20 enrolled with the University of Auckland, eight with the Auckland University of Technology, six with other universities (Massey, Otago, Victoria, and Waikato), and three with other tertiary education providers in Auckland (Unitec, Manukau Institute of Technology, and a private tertiary education provider) (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3 Participants by institution of enrolment, gender and ethnic affiliation

	Māori	Pacific	European/Pākehā	Other	Total
UoA					
Male	2	1	3	2	8
Female	4	4	4	-	12
AUT					
Male	1	2	-	-	3
Female	2	1	2	-	5
Other universities					
Male	1	-	1	1	3
Female	1	-	2	-	3
Other providers					
Male	-	1	-	-	1
Female	2	-	-	-	2
Total	13	9	12	3	37

Of the 37 students who began tertiary studies, four either withdrew or were unable to be contacted once they moved away from home. Therefore, the project continued with 33 participants at the beginning of semester one (see Table 5.4). Although the initial plan was to include only students enrolled in degree-level studies, this was changed to allow students who had made a commitment to the research project to remain involved. As well as having their commitment to the project recognised, these students made a significant contribution by sharing their experiences of having to change their initial plans, adjusting to different institutions or areas of study, and taking a longer term view of their goals and how these might be achieved. During their first semester of tertiary study, one Māori, one European/Pākehā, and two Pacific students withdrew from the project. For one of the Pacific students this was because of the decision to withdraw from university.

Table 5.4 Participants by study programme and ethnic affiliation (start of semester one)

	Māori	Pacific	European/Pākehā	Other	Total
Bachelors degree	9	6	11	2	28
Certificate or Diploma	1	3	-	1	5
Total	10	9	11	3	33

Overall, less than a quarter (3 out of 13) of the European/Pākehā students were lost to the study (through exclusion or withdrawal), while the figure for Pacific students was slightly over a third (4 out of 11), and for Māori participants it was close to a half (8 out of 17). As already shown in Table 5.1, a total of 29 students completed the study by taking part in the last interview following the completion of their first semester of study.

Participating students came from families with a wide range of educational attainment, although only one in four had a parent who had a degree-level qualification. More than half of the students reported that, if successful, they would be the first in their immediate family to attend university. Although 14 of the 44 participants mentioned older siblings who had been or were currently studying at university, many mentioned that they were the first in their family to complete Year 13 of high school and to achieve UE. More of the European/Pākehā than other students had parents with professional qualifications (e.g. in law, engineering, or education), although this applied to only one third of the European/Pākehā participants. More Māori students had parents employed in primary industries (e.g. forestry or farming), small businesses or service work, while the majority of Pacific students had parents who were employed in service or manufacturing work although one parent was self-employed and another was engaged in full time church ministry. Regardless of their parents' educational qualifications or occupations, participants were both anxious and excited about the prospect of attending university, although, as will be shown later, some also demonstrated uncertainty and a lack of confidence that they could succeed in this new and challenging environment.

6. FINDINGS

The findings from the study are presented in two sections. Section 6.1 deals with the process of transition, from individual and family aspirations and plans through to the outcomes of the first semester of study. Section 6.2 provides a small selection of narrative exemplars that illustrate and compare the experience of transition for individual students. The significance of the findings and their implications for students, schools, and universities is discussed in Section 7 of the report.

6.1 The process of transition

> *High school is like the last sort of thing you do as a child. Well, that's what I think of it. And then university is the first sort of adult thing that you do in life, yeah. It's like the stepping stone to all other adult things.* (European/Pākehā female)

Transition from school to university involves a series of unknowns as students step outside their taken-for-granted family and school life into a world that promises not only higher education but, also, greater independence and progress toward adulthood. It signals a move away from childhood and the regimented nature of school days. It holds a promise of greater freedom and novel experiences. Transition is not only a question of geography and time. At its heart it is about growth, learning, and self-transformation. For school leavers, transition to university occurs in late adolescence, and is therefore often intertwined with a search for a sense of identity (at a personal, cultural and spiritual level), and a search for purpose and direction in life (including a choice of future career); all made more acute by leaving home, mixing with more heterogeneous groups of people, and being exposed to new ideas and different role models. The process, and how successfully it is managed, begins long before a conscious decision is made and enacted to apply for enrolment at a particular university.

Some students in the study came from backgrounds that had enabled them to envisage transition to university as a natural next step in their life story. Their secondary schooling, choice of subjects, accumulation of credits, and even extracurricular activities were seldom described as ends in themselves. Rather, they were part of essential preparation and training for university education and, ultimately, a career that they considered would suit them and enable them to achieve a life they desired. For such students, the transition to university was a welcome *rite of passage;* as much a social transition toward adulthood as an educational transition from school to university. As

with any life transition, there were changes and challenges, but none that could not be solved and many that would be enjoyed. These students looked to themselves and their own hard work to adjust to the new environment and the demands of academic study, but they also had access to older mentors with experience of university education (within their family or wider social network) to help and encourage them along the way.

For other students, the transition process was more acute, more challenging, and less clearly scripted. Rather than university appearing as the natural next step in their life stories, it was often seen as daunting and a break from the past. To varying degrees, their plans seemed less focused and their energies not as well harnessed toward the goal they were supposed to be pursuing. For a few, the desire to leave their home environment was stronger than the desire to become a university student. In some cases "going on to university" was as much an outcome of indecision, the need to make a decision – any decision, or the outcome of someone else's decision, as a culmination of personal plans and aspirations. These students often saw themselves as different; out of place; "the other" who did not fit the model of a typical university student. Being a university student was more often a role they had to play than something they had become. Many felt lonely and uncertain in their new environment and looked to others for continuity and help through the experience. Lacking access to older and more experienced mentors familiar with university study, some of these students relied on peers who shared their ambivalence. Rather than helping them to engage with their new environment, such relationships often reinforced their sense of difference and "otherness".

These contrasting narrative archetypes are the anchor points for a range of personal stories that demonstrate the complex and demanding nature of the transition process for students who come more or less equipped for the experience.

6.1.1 Family and personal plans and aspirations

Without exception, the students in our study reported that their families were supportive of their plans to attend university, with many mentioning their parents' wishes for them to succeed academically, making most of the opportunities that had not been available to them. In some cases, particularly for Pacific students, these parental aspirations amounted to considerable pressure, although they seemed to view this as normal and appropriate, with none expressing resentment at parental aspirations and wider expectations, as in the following example:

> It was one night, we had family night, and my Dad was telling us what his wish before he leaves this world is for all of us to get a good education and end up in a

good job… And so that kind of hit us… and that's how my brother ended up in uni and I was just trying to do the same. Because if I didn't pass to uni I'd have the feeling that I'd just let my Dad down. (Pacific female)

Other parents were described as supportive but also more open to their children's own plans and wishes, although often steering them to university and away from decisions to take a gap year to go overseas, or defer their enrolment in order to work and accumulate some savings before embarking on university studies. Family's concern, shared by the students, was that students who take a gap year are much less likely to go on to university.

Students varied in terms of their own motivation and reasons for going to university. There were those who had "always" planned to go to university (although they were not necessarily sure of what they wanted to study), and others who hoped to work as "a teacher" or "a doctor" and needed educational qualifications to realise their career ambitions. There were also those who made the sometimes tentative decision to participate in tertiary study in the course of their last year at school. Finally, there were students whose personal goals did not focus on tertiary study but who applied because others – family, teachers or school friends – expected them to do it. This was particularly evident in relation to Pacific students (and is reported on in more detail by Deynzer, 2009). Deynzer found three patterns:

- students who were "pulled to university" by their own goals and aspirations for a specific career;
- students who were "pushed to university" or a particular field of study by parental aspirations and expectations, and
- students who "went with the flow", feeling unable to assert their preferences. By the end of the summer, however, most of these students had taken a different path and did not enroll at university.

All participants were recruited for the study because they planned to go on to university on completion of their secondary schooling. Yet, there was considerable variation in the clarity and firmness of their intentions. During the summer months a quarter of the participants contemplated not going to university, some as late as a few weeks before the start of the first semester. Eventually, eight of the eleven vacillating students did enroll.

Students who felt "pulled" to university by personal goals and aspirations tended to approach their transition differently from students who were "pushed" to university by others' aspirations, or who "went with the flow" – following their peers or expectations

of parents or teachers, while wanting to defer the decision to do so, or hoping to pursue work or other options.

Rural students, both Māori and European/Pākehā, had to be more organised in order to leave home and their home communities as they had to decide where they would study and live. The financial costs of living and studying away from home made it necessary for most of them to apply for scholarships and investigate other sources of financial support while still at school. These requirements helped rural students to begin planning earlier, seek more information, and make more definite decisions. Even so, a number of these students were unclear about what they wanted to study or how they would manage financially.

About half the students mentioned wanting to "help people" as the key motive for their choice of career, in the fields of health, law, business or teaching. These altruistic ambitions were based either on direct experience, such as having family members with major health problems or involvement in legal issues such as iwi land disputes, or on a more general sense of social responsibility, most notably in relation to their own ethnic group or community, whether in New Zealand or overseas:

> *I've got this desire in my heart to help people… We have an orphanage back home and I've always wanted to do something for it like, make it bigger, put a school in it, or a good medical system or something… I want to… work in commercial building,… or own a business or just something, something that can help me help people back home kind of thing.* ("Other" male)

Some mentioned the ambition to earn high salaries, while others spoke about not wanting to be restricted to low-paying jobs – especially those with experience of working (or having parents working) in minimum-wage jobs:

> *I want to have money. I want to be able to shout my Mum places. That's what I want to be able to do. I want to be able to come back and say "Come on Mum! We're going shopping. Don't worry about the price tags Mum, just grab it!"* (Māori female)

A few spoke of their intention to study in fields that would develop their talents, mostly in communication or visual or performing arts. These students were passionate about their choices, even when others tried to change their minds, and were more concerned about what they would learn and how fulfilling they would find it than what jobs might be available to them at the end of their studies.

In this context, peer influences were an additional and, in some instances, the main motivator for the decision to pursue university studies. Students whose plans were uncertain or who lacked confidence drew comfort from the fact that they would not be the only ones from their school undergoing the transition to university. For rural students, the

attractions of city life and the pull of friends going to university combined with the push to leave their small communities where work and social opportunities were limited:

> *All my friends were going to uni and I didn't want to be stuck in* [home town], *especially when I'm sick of it already.* (Māori male)

Whatever their reasons for going to university, few students anticipated not achieving the University Entrance qualification, or not being accepted into the course of their choice.

6.1.2 Academic preparation

At the end of Year 13, the study participants tended to be seen as among the best and most talented students in their respective schools. Of the 44 participants (from eight different schools) initially recruited for the study, two achieved *Dux*, two achieved *Proxime Accessit*, one won the school award as the "Top Māori Scholar", and one was named the "Top All Round Year 13 Student". Other students reported coming first in one or more subjects (e.g. one topped both calculus and physical education classes), one won the award of the school Sportsman of the Year, and others were recognised for various leadership contributions. In their last year at school almost all study participants were Prefects while a number were also the Head Boy or Head Girl, or a student representative on their school's Board of Trustees. Many were involved with sports and cultural groups in their schools, often as leaders or coordinators.

The demands of multiple leadership roles and extra-curricular interests raises the concern that the students' academic study was compromised, a situation made worse for students who also worked part-time, were involved in church and youth group activities, and/or had responsibilities at home, such as helping care for younger siblings or older relatives.

Although some students commented on not having the time or feeling too tired to study "after school", they did not always see the situation as one of their choosing, or as a situation that they could manage differently. A much smaller number of students showed a deeper understanding of the competing demands on their time and of what they could do to manage these effectively. Several students, for example, chose to focus on their academic goals in Year 12, completing both UE and the NCEA Level 3 Certificate and achieving Merit and Excellence grades that would allow them to compete for a place in limited entry programmes at university. Although well qualified to enroll at university, they returned to school the following year, using it to complete additional subjects and broaden their educational preparation, but also to take on leadership roles, enhancing their overall "CVs" without compromising their academic

records. Another student deliberately chose to take on a number of leadership roles, knowing that these would have an impact on his academic performance (he gained fewer Merit and Excellence grades than he knew he was capable of achieving). Nevertheless, he was careful to ensure that he did well enough academically to achieve a solid academic record and to qualify for the scholarships he was seeking.

Overall, academic preparation for university study, at least in terms of NCEA qualifications, ranged widely, and included students who:

- failed to achieve UE (and who therefore had to enroll in bridging/preparatory certificate programmes);
- needed to have credits from non-NCEA courses accepted in lieu of Level 3 NCEA credits (to be allowed to enroll in a degree programme);
- achieved UE with a bare minimum of required credits (and, in some cases, having been turned down for limited entry programmes, enrolled in BA or BSc degrees);
- completed both the UE and NCEA Level 3 qualifications with 80 or more credits in Level 3 subjects from the approved list, and achieved a number of standards with Merit or Excellence;
- completed both UE and NCEA Level 3 with Merit and Excellence grades in Year 12 and used their final year of high school to complete additional standards in their core subjects, to broaden their study by completing additional approved subjects and, in three cases, to also complete some university papers through extramural study.

Of the students who failed to achieve UE, three were Pacific, two Māori and one of "Other" ethnicity. (The results for three other Māori students are not known as they withdrew from the study before the NCEA results were notified.) Of the students who achieved at least 80 Level 3 credits in approved subjects and who achieved credits with Merit and Excellence, most were European/Pākehā, some were Māori, and fewest were Pacific.

Of particular concern for successful transition to university is the evidence of a disconnection between some students' NCEA subjects and standards they completed at school, their career aspirations, and the programmes they wanted to take or enrolled in at university. Students who:

- had clear study and career goals,
- were able to make appropriate NCEA course choices at school,

- completed significantly more than the minimum number of credits required for UE and the Level 3 Certificate, and
- achieved Merit and Excellence in at least some of their assessments,

started from a much stronger base than other students with a weaker or less focused academic preparation. Even if they were not entirely confident in their choice of degree or study major, they tended to have sufficient academic preparation and flexibility to make alternative choices. On the other hand, students whose academic preparation lacked focus and depth had their aspirations thwarted, some by not being accepted into the programme or university of their choice, and some by finding that they were inadequately prepared for the level of study expected of them and therefore struggling or failing in their assessments (and in one case, withdrawing from university).

6.1.3 Expectations of university

Unsurprisingly, when they were asked towards the end of their Year 13 school year about their expectations of university, all but a few of the students replied in very general terms. Most reported feeling simultaneously excited and scared, expecting to find university big, confusing, and different from all their previous experiences. Several students anticipated finding it difficult to manage financially, while others seemed anxious about the prospect of having to fend for themselves in terms of cooking, cleaning, and having to manage without all the comforts of home.

Students also spoke of expecting to have more freedom, although this was not seen as entirely positive. While there would be fewer boundaries, and no-one would care if they "wagged", they would also need to be far more self-motivated and self-reliant. Most thought the academic work would be hard and fast-paced compared to school, whilst the predominant social expectation was of being amongst not just many more people, but among people of different ethnicities with whom they had had only limited contact up to that point, either because of growing up in rural areas or within their own ethnic communities.

Most students expected their first year at university to be the hardest. They expressed concern about: the amount of reading expected of university students, note-taking, essay-writing, assignments, doing labs, and even being able to concentrate through "boring" lectures. Many were also concerned about the extent their life would change, with some describing the prospect as "daunting" or "intimidating". Most seemed to see the schools they were leaving as having been safe, sheltered places, where life was predictable and teachers were supportive. They expected the university to be very different, although the specifics eluded them. "A crystal ball would be useful", is how one participant expressed

her uncertainty. Nevertheless, almost all the participants held great hopes and high expectations, either academic or more general, concerning the "new life" beyond school which they were about to begin.

6.1.4 The importance of summer

> *I was going to take a gap year and see how it went with just working next year, but I kind of thought I might lose my motivation and get used to earning, money coming in. But I didn't really want to lose motivation 'cause for me it's quite hard sometimes for motivation but I usually get around to it, and for such a big thing I didn't really want to lose it at this point.* (Māori female)

The three-month period between finishing school and commencing university, which many students expected would give them time to spend with family and friends, go to the beach, "drink and party", and perhaps earn some money for the following year, proved to be quite challenging for some. Students confident about their NCEA results and their university plans tended to take an organised but relaxed attitude to this period, although some later needed help to manage the enrolment process. They applied for university courses (and where appropriate, university-based accommodation), scholarships, student loans and allowances, and planned which subjects they would take in their first year. Some worked – in a few cases doing long hours at one or more jobs and in one case going to Australia for full-time work. Some enjoyed family holidays, days at the beach or trips away with friends. Although few enjoyed working in the kumara fields, market gardens, factories, fast food outlets, or supermarkets, they appreciated the income such work provided and tried to save toward the costs of university studies. In some cases having a summer job was a condition for receiving financial support from their parents; a required demonstration of the student's commitment to his or her study plans. In other cases, savings from summer jobs were crucial, particularly for rural students who faced significant accommodation costs but could not rely on family support or scholarships.

Other students talked of working but either did not try or were unable to find work during the summer. Students without previous work experience or personal or family contacts with potential employers found it particularly hard to get paid employment. Although all but one of the Pacific students intended to work during the summer only two had summer jobs, both continuing in casual and part time work they had secured earlier in the year. Cultural values and understandings played a significant role in how Pacific students approached the question of money and financial support. Although they often had the responsibility of looking after younger family members or older relatives, and put a lot of time and effort into church activities such as choir practices, their parents did not usually expect (or, in some cases, allow) them to be in paid employment during the school year, once they began university studies, or even during the summer holidays. It is relevant to note

that within Tongan and Samoan cultures childhood is less a matter of chronological age and more of social roles. As long as young people are single and living with their parents they are generally regarded as children rather than "adults" (in the Western sense of the term). Thus even though their families had limited income, there was seldom any pressure on these students to move towards greater financial independence from their families, and hence to find paid work during the summer holidays. Family responsibilities, whether in New Zealand or in the Islands[6], and the view that earning money might distract them from focusing on their education, also made it less likely that Pacific students would (or would be allowed to) seek employment during the summer months.

> *I'm meant to apply for a job… It's a call centre job that I got through my cousin, she works there… But, well, my family said not to, because* [it would be better] *for me to prepare for next year*. (Pacific female)

Lack of summer employment meant that the majority of Pacific students started the academic year heavily dependent on their parents or families for financial support. This also meant that they missed out on learning opportunities that working outside a familiar environment would have given them – communicating with people from different backgrounds, developing a greater degree of independence and personal responsibility, and using the work experience as a bridge between the familiar environment of home and school, and the as-yet-unknown world of university.

This is in contrast to the experience of a number of Māori and European/Pākehā students who worked during the summer months and expected to be financially self-supporting once they started university, albeit with the aid of student loans and allowances. In a few cases students living at home were expected to pay full board or make a contribution toward household costs. Even so, the majority of students needed at least some parental support to cover the costs of accommodation, food and transport. Only a few were able to start university studies knowing that they were financially secure, at least for the first year.

Some, particularly Pacific students, delayed submitting their enrolment and financial support applications, and did not always provide additional information (e.g. ID photos, proof of residency, or proof of parental income) as soon as it was requested. (In at least one case this was because the parents did not wish the student to receive financial assistance and refused to provide information about their income). Although they were aware in a general sense of the need to "get organised", "prepare for university" and lodge

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[6] "The Islands" is a commonly used colloquialism in New Zealand referring to any of the Pacific Islands and is used in the same way in this report.

various applications, some students took time to do it, sometimes not applying until close to the deadline:

> *It took a while for me to get myself organised 'cause I was too much in the holiday mode. And then I was just "nah, I'll do it next week"… and next week would come and I wouldn't do it… and it just dragged like that until this year… I knew it started in March so I thought that I had heaps of time to get ready… the week before, that is when I did my student loan* [application] *and then… the following week was the start of the semester.* (Pacific male)

Lack of adequate understanding of the available financial support proved a serious impediment to a number of students. Those who lacked a clear understanding of current StudyLink provisions were often concerned that receipt of any assistance would result in debt they would not be able to repay, while others assumed that they did not qualify for financial assistance other than loans. Points on which students were not clear included:

- who is entitled to apply;
- the amount and types of financial assistance available (e.g. course related costs or accommodation supplements);
- how parental income affects what students can access;
- how financial assistance students receive might impact on parental income if parents are receiving a child allowance payment for the same child;
- what constitutes a loan that has to be repaid and what qualifies as an allowance and is not subject to repayment.

Similarly, lack of adequate understanding of the enrolment processes had negative effects on some participants. The fact that some universities and some programmes allow for applications to be lodged up to the start of the academic year lulled some students into not seeking important information about specific programmes early enough. Some did not appreciate that once their NCEA results were released and acceptance into a programme of study confirmed, they needed to apply for enrolment in specific papers immediately. Delays in this area resulted in some students being unable to enroll in the subjects of their choice (because the classes were oversubscribed) and having to find alternatives, as well as ending up with inconvenient lecture streams and tutorial timeslots that made for long days on campus or made commuting more difficult (especially if car pooling with other students from their area).

In addition, a number of students expressed uncertainty and self-doubt in relation to university study generally, some delaying their applications while they tried to decide, and three ultimately deciding not to enroll. Lack of information, misunderstandings about university regulations, lack of confidence and fear of failure, all acted to shake their resolve.

During the holidays, I was kind of thinking, doubting myself, "do I really want to do this?" And then I came home and I was like… yeah, still want to carry on with it… I hadn't really got that far [considering other options], *just didn't know if I wanted to study.* (Māori female – did not enroll at university)

External factors often served to further undermine the confidence and sense of direction of students whose decisions to go to university were tentative or a response to others' wishes. Peer influences such as friends' decisions not to go to university made them question their own plans. External events also diverted them from attending to enrolment and seeking information about the subjects they would be studying, subject options, tutorial or laboratory requirements, and what preparation they could do before the start of the academic year. Students who were the least informed about the nature of university life and what awaited them in their first year were also those who tended to do little to prepare for the start of their first semester. They not only did not read the prospectuses or course information materials put out by their intended faculties or departments, in many cases they did not know how to obtain them, or were not even aware that such documents existed. This lack of information and awareness was a major factor in poor or inadequate planning and preparation over the summer period.

For some, multiple factors were present and proved too hard to overcome, and their tentative plans could not be put into action. For example, a Pacific student whose early NCEA subject choices did not follow the academic pathway and who therefore had to take three unfamiliar subjects in Year 13 to be able to achieve the UE qualification:

- felt tired and stressed by the academic pressures of her last year at school and overwhelmed at the prospect of an even more demanding first year at university;
- was undecided about what she wanted to study and where;
- doubted her ability to cope with the interpersonal and social aspects of university, particularly being among large groups of people she did not know;
- was sent to the Islands over the summer by her parents, on a one-way ticket, with no indication of when she would be able to return to New Zealand.

Although she returned to New Zealand in February, she had failed to achieve UE and did not enroll at university or any other tertiary institution.

Another Pacific student whose plans floundered over the summer had decided to apply for university enrolment because of others' expectations and the desire to be with his friends. This included a girlfriend who had encouraged him to study and aim for university even though his heart was set on a job that involved work-based training. He discovered rather late in the piece that the university course he was considering was not offered on the central city campus and he was uncertain about how he would manage to commute daily to a more distant campus, or meet additional transport costs. Over the

summer the relationship with his girlfriend ended and, although he achieved UE and the Level 3 Certificate and met the entry requirements for his chosen course, he decided against university study and did not apply for enrolment.

Several students had to deal with major family disruptions and challenges over the summer. These included the death of a grandparent, the sale of a family home, and major family disagreements and health problems that placed extra demands on the young people as they prepared for university. In perhaps the most challenging case, a student whose parents were overseas for much of the summer had the responsibility of not only looking after younger siblings and all the household chores during his parents' absence, but was also working up to 72 hours, six days a week, in two jobs, in order to pay the rent and other household expenses. Having missed achieving UE by a small number of credits he also had to deal with the rejection from the university and the course of his choice, and to work through available options, without parental or other adult support. (He enrolled in a Foundations Certificate programme at a different university.)

While challenging experiences during the summer reinforced the determination of some students to go on to and succeed at university, for others the summer period was filled with questioning and uncertainty about their original plans, reducing what little confidence they had, and turning them toward the more immediate rewards (or promise) of paid work.

> *I need to know what I want to do before I go… committing myself to anything for years… And I was really unsure about my exam results… I thought I'd just go and get a job and work in the meantime and I'm really enjoying it… I'm going to stick at it for a year and save some money and then I might go, I might look at going again, but I don't know yet.* (European/Pākehā female)

6.1.5 Enrolment experiences and challenges

Close to two-thirds of students across all groups experienced significant difficulties with enrolment procedures and were disappointed and frustrated by their first formal contact with university. Automated telephone and on-line services were experienced as confusing and unresponsive (e.g. when students tried to enroll in conjoint degrees, or were not told what constituted a full-time enrolment for StudyLink purposes). Difficulties contacting university student services, or academic staff who could assist them with subject choices or timetable clashes, proved frustrating for many and a major barrier for some (to the point where the researchers felt ethically obliged to intervene with information, advice and, in a few cases, with active support to ensure the students knew

what decisions had or had not been made in response to their applications and what options were still available to them).

> *It took a couple of weeks. I kept ringing up and getting passed on to another person. So that was my first experience of university being kind of impersonal. They just kind of shove you off to the next person to deal with your problems… It wasn't a very good first impression to be honest, and they just seemed so disorganised… They just kept saying "email the help desk" which I'd done, but I wasn't getting an error report so they weren't interested… But eventually I got hold of a girl who was really helpful and she sorted it out for me. But it was a bit frustrating and slightly disconcerting when I couldn't even enroll in my courses.* (European/Pākehā female)

For some students this was the first experience of having to solve what should have been minor but sometimes became major problems, or make important decisions on their own, without the help of their school teachers (who were no longer available) or parents (who in most cases had no experience of dealing with university systems).

Students applying for limited entry programmes were particularly anxious when they did not hear if their applications were successful and when, despite numerous telephone calls, they were unable to get a response. In some cases the student's enrolment status was not confirmed until one to two weeks before the commencement of lectures. (In two cases, students from Northland, who had paid deposits on accommodation in Auckland and were all set for the move, were informed a little more than a week before the start of the semester that their applications were not successful. They chose to accept places in their preferred degree programmes at different universities further afield, but felt very anxious about going much further away from home than they had planned, and about trying to find accommodation at such short notice, in places they did not know, and at a time when there were already long waiting lists for places in university halls of residence.)

More than a third of the participants experienced difficulties with StudyLink and at least 10 of the 37 students who commenced semester one did so without financial assistance in place. Some students lacked adequate information and did not appreciate that failure to pay their tuition fees (contingent on receiving a student loan) would, in some cases, limit their access to university resources such as on-line and library services. Rural students, whose move away from home involved significant accommodation and living costs, were generally more proactive and organised in relation to their financial support, although those without significant family or scholarship assistance knew they would be struggling to meet the costs of university hostel accommodation. For some urban students, StudyLink finances were a welcome addition but not essential to their ability to pay university fees. For others student loans and allowances were critical. More Pacific

than other students failed to have their student loans and allowances in place by the start of the academic year. Lack of financial resources to cover tuition fees was a contributing factor in one of these students withdrawing from university within a few weeks of commencement.

Of the 37 students who commenced tertiary studies, 10 were declined enrolment in their course of choice (in health, commerce, business, law or visual arts). Among them were three students who did not achieve UE and whose only option was to enroll in a bridging/preparatory certificate programme, as well as a student who achieved UE and 97 NCEA Level 3 Credits in approved subjects but was not accepted into the limited-entry degree programme and was directed into a preparatory certificate programme. As well as having to deal with the disappointment of not getting into their programme of choice, many of these students had to make alternative plans with limited time before the start of the academic year and, often, had difficulty accessing academic advice and help. Eventually, of the 10 students not accepted into their course of choice:

- four enrolled in preparatory certificate programmes at the same or a different university;
- three enrolled in their course of choice at a different university;
- two enrolled in a different degree programme at the same university;
- one, rejected from a conjoint degree, managed to enroll in the two degree programmes separately.

Five of the affected students were Pacific and three came from Northland. This initial setback did little for the confidence of most of these students, although three commented on being even more determined to succeed and to learn from the experience by studying hard and achieving grades that would give them entry into the degree programme of their choice at a later point.

For other students, rejection from their programme of choice was a "wake up call"; their first encounter with the reality of a competitive world they were struggling to enter. Having achieved UE and the NCEA Level 3 Certificate they expected the university doors to be wide open. Instead, with the doors before them closed, they had to embark on a hastily chosen alternative, in some cases unsure of where it would lead them.

6.1.6 Initial experience of university

The most striking finding about the participants' introduction to university was how few of them attended academic orientation activities provided by the universities in which they had enrolled. Some stayed at home, without bothering to consult the orientation programme and decide what activities might be of use to them. Others felt "too scared" to come on their own. Some students came on campus but spent their time "hanging out" with friends from school, checked the locations of their lecture and tutorial rooms, and settled any outstanding enrolment problems, but did not stay for any organised activities.

> *I got to tell you the truth. I didn't really go to orientation. I just came and hanged out. I was just meeting up with my mates… First I got the programme and I ticked all these things that I wanted to go to. And then when my mates came along, that's when I just "oh, stuff that! I'll go hang out with them and try to get used to the campus", so yeah.* (Pacific female)

Some attended a single session, found it "boring" and did not attend any others. A student enrolled in a science degree attended the orientation for arts students, because that was what a friend from school was doing.

> *We decided to follow the arts people, so I did as well 'cause I didn't want to be a loner (laughter). I found out where most of her lectures would be* [but] *I didn't really know where I would be most of the time.* (Māori female)

The activities that students who did attend organised sessions found helpful included small group orientation with a guide – an older student familiar with needs of new students – who not only provided helpful orientation to the campus layout and the locations of various student services, but could also offer useful hints on a range of practical issues (e.g. that lectures finish five minutes before the hour and start five minutes after the hour to allow students to move between lectures, or which textbooks to buy and which to borrow from the library). Smaller faculty or school-specific sessions were seen as more relevant and useful than large, general sessions that tried to provide large amounts of information in the shortest possible time. Such sessions left most students feeling overloaded with information and unable to recall most of it.

In retrospect, library orientation sessions (including electronic database searching) were also found to be worthwhile, particularly by students with limited computer literacy:

> *In the first week of uni I did the recommended library courses for people new to uni. So glad I did. I have found the hardest part about uni all the use of computers!* (European/Pākehā female)

Participants who attended one particular university made very positive comments about their orientation experiences. The programme was well organised, targeted at specific student groups, and included elements of academic and social orientation:

> *Māori transition, that was cool man. I loved that. That's where I met my friends, that's where I met half the people I know now… They took us through key courses. They pretty much prepared us for uni. It was choice man. And the Pacific Islanders have their same transition that same week too, so we pretty much combined… I loved it.* (Māori female)

Moving from a school with several hundred students to a university campus where individual classes were sometimes larger than that proved daunting for many students. Rather than being located within their suburb or town (in some cases, within walking distance of home), university campuses were places to which they either had to relocate or to which they had to commute long distances. Those living in university halls of residence or student apartments adjacent to university had to adapt to living amid the bustle and noise of the inner city but found their way around campus quickly. Students from West Auckland, most of whom lived at home, and from South Auckland, all of whom lived at home, had to adjust to up to two hours of commuting time each day, whether using public transport or driving into the city. Initially at least, some underestimated the travel time, or the time needed to walk from the train or bus station to their lectures, and arrived late or missed classes altogether.

The sheer size of university campuses surprised many students, especially when they needed to walk a city block or more between lectures and other activities. Pacific students also mentioned the presence of large numbers of people as a somewhat intimidating experience, especially as most were "Palagi[7] or Asian" and seemed self assured, striding energetically toward their destinations. Pacific students described feeling unsure and hesitant. Some felt alone in the crowd and would have preferred to have had friends from school attending the same classes:

> *I thought some friends of mine would be coming with me, so it would make the experience more enjoyable, or more pleasant. But… it's not all I thought it would be.* (Pacific male)

Those who had older siblings or other familiar people already studying at university relied on them for initial orientation and support. One student described how his sister accompanied him to all his lectures during the first week, and even took notes for him to show him how to focus on the important points. Left on his own in the second week, he still showed extreme discomfort about his place in the university environment, coming into lectures last, sitting in the back row close to the exit door, and leaving first.

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[7] A Samoan (and Tongan) term for a Westerner or European.

He did not want other students to look over his shoulder and read what he was writing, and tried to avoid being jostled by other students as they left a large lecture room.

Some of the students made simple mistakes, such as an arts student who assumed that "ENG" in her lecture room name indicated "English" Department and, running late already, looked for it in the Arts Faculty building, only to discover that it actually referred to the "Engineering" building. It took a friend guiding her via cell phone to get her to the right place and then coax her into entering the lecture room after the student thought that she would "just sit out here and just be lost for a little bit", which she did for almost 20 minutes. Eventually she got up, walked across the corridor and opened the door:

> *I looked in and I was like, "oh I don't wanna go in" (laughter). 'Cause there were too many people and I was like "I'm too shy to go in" and* [the friend on the phone said] *"What? You can't be shy at uni. Nothing bad's gonna happen to you… You could go in late. You can't be too shy and miss your lecture". And then… I walked in and I just sat there, and there was only like ten more minutes left.* (Pacific female)

Lack of basic information and failure to sort out the venues for all classes at the start of the semester had serious consequences for at least one student who reported half-way through the semester that it had taken her that long to work out where one of her tutorials was held (even though she had been attending the lectures for that subject):

> *I just found my tutorial class last week… Because it didn't say on my timetable, it* [said] *"see your department", and I was wondering "oh my gosh, I don't know where to go". And then I finally asked one of the ladies* [fellow student] *in our class, and I was like, "Oh yay! Now that I know where this place is, I can start coming to the tutorial".* (Pacific female)

A few students found their introduction to university life "liberating": no school uniforms, no strict timetables, no surveillance or sanctions related to smoking or alcohol consumption. Those who felt confident enough enjoyed experimenting with their new-found freedom by turning up a little late for lectures, or by going bare feet. By the end of the second week, however, most students had sorted out where they needed to be and how to get there and could turn their minds to what was actually happening in the sessions they were attending.

What is evident from the data is that most (although not all) students from West Auckland (predominantly European/Pākehā) and Northland (both Māori and European/Pākehā), but only some from South Auckland (Pacific) had a sense of readiness for university study and even unexpected experiences did not throw them off their stride. Their first encounters with university lectures and tutorials were generally positive. They were excited by their new environment and able to cast a critical gaze

on their lecturers, tutors and other students. They made comments about individual lecturers' enthusiasm for the subjects they were teaching and their capacity to engage (or bore) the audience and make the material comprehensible and relevant. They also reflected on the need to balance social and academic activities, do the preparatory readings, and plan well ahead for written assignments and other assessment activities (even if they did not always act on these intentions).

This contrasted quite sharply with the experience of most (although not all) Pacific students, who often felt overwhelmed by their early experience of university and their initial encounters with university-style teaching and learning. Although excited to be at university, they lacked confidence and ease in the new environment and among people from different socio-cultural backgrounds. They were acutely aware of being different: in appearance, mannerisms, their use of English language, and even humour. Many were concerned about being alone and being seen to be alone (appearing to be an "outcast", as one student put it), and missed the comfortable familiarity of school where all activities involved groups of students who knew each other. They talked about needing to get organised and begin working on their assignments, but tended to put off getting started. They often found the large lecture theatres intimidating and uncomfortable. Although some preferred the anonymity of sitting in lectures attended by hundreds of students, most preferred tutorials, which they often likened to school (as there were smaller groups of students, a less formal atmosphere, and tutors who behaved more like school teachers – encouraging discussion, welcoming questions and seeming more approachable than lecturers).

What most students enjoyed about their early exposure to the university environment was the freedom to use their time as they wanted and the social aspects of student life – meeting friends, "hanging around" in social spaces, and having free access to the internet and social networking sites such as Bebo. For many the academic work proved a great deal more challenging.

6.1.7 Academic engagement

In the absence of compulsion to attend lectures and tutorials and without direct surveillance of their daily activities, individual students exhibited different patterns of behaviour and approaches to their academic work. On a continuum – from students who plunged into their studies determined to excel, to those who struggled to engage with the reality of tertiary education – three main patterns became evident, reflecting a combination of individual students' academic preparedness, motivation, and clarity of purpose. The three patterns included (1) the academically engaged students who

came to university to work; (2) the students who were still working on becoming academically engaged and needed time to learn how to do this effectively, and (3) the academically unengaged students who needed help if they were to develop and internalise the connections and strategies needed to continue and succeed in their studies.

The "academically engaged" students – here to work

These students came to university with a solid (although not necessarily outstanding) academic record and a strong desire to learn. They expressed determination and a sense of purpose, and looked to themselves for motivation and the most effective approaches to their academic work. They ranged across disciplines, from arts to commerce, law, and sciences. Although in some cases not yet set on a specific study major or a particular career, they were at university to learn, refine their goals, and succeed. Very early in the semester these students developed a definite pattern to their day that (usually) included getting up on time, attending classes, reading and preparing for tutorials and lectures, and doing additional study during the day, in the evenings, or during weekends. Students who were aware of distractions at home made sure they completed their work by staying longer at university.

> [I study] *before I go home, yeah, because at home distractions are everywhere… TV, food, my parents… they want me to… do things for them… So my typical day: go to uni, my lectures, then go to the labs or library, do my homework or whatever I have to do and then go home and that's about it (laughter)… Sometimes I go home from uni around 8pm… when I am doing my assignments.* (Pacific female)

They were careful about the amount of time they committed to social and sporting activities, reviewing their decisions as the semester progressed. However attractive other demands on their time and energies, they seldom allowed such demands to distract them from their primary commitment:

> *You have to decide whether it's good if you go out or not… If I know I have an assignment due, I'll stay home. Or if I have anything the next week, I'd stay home.* (Pacific female)

This student saw her achievements in terms of class attendance, attaining high grades and staying focused on her studies:

> *Getting some high marks… Attending all classes; I haven't missed one yet, or a tutorial… Staying focused, because you know how some people drift off, yeah. That's about it… It comes naturally (laughter). I've always been a focused person.*

Students in this group seldom missed classes. They mapped out their time commitments and were very clear about assignments and tests coming up. Occasional slip-ups, when they overlooked a test, or misread an assignment deadline, were

treated with frustration and a determination not to repeat the mistake. They were engaged and interested in study topics, even if they did not always find them riveting. As one of the students said, "not too many people get really passionate about accounting". If a topic was particularly difficult they would re-listen to the lecture online (if available), seek help from tutors or other students, or undertake additional reading to try and grasp the information. Study was the reason they were at university. They saw themselves as responsible for their learning, and most seemed to learn quickly that, unless they were similarly motivated and focused, friends could be more of a distraction than help. They wanted to not only pass their courses, but to excel.

> *I'm generally more diligent* [than other students]*, but I think I was at high school as well. You have to do all the reading before* [lectures] *and I do it. Like I was up till eleven 'cause I hadn't read the one for this morning and so I did it last night…* [Because] *I want to get into second year law I've been really diligent with it and that's what I have been studying primarily… I've decided that I'd rather not have bad marks. Not that I've been getting any bad marks at all… However, indubitably a time will come where I cannot ride on my "I've done uni last year", or "this isn't too hard", or my "I'm generally ok", and my As will start slipping to B+s and then everything will go downhill. So I study. I have been studying a lot.* (European/Pākehā male)

These students tended to initiate contact with lecturers and tutors when necessary, seeking clarification of assignment topics or examiners' expectations, and additional feedback on their work when what was provided was insufficient. They also started to develop networks of contacts with other students, in some cases more senior to themselves, who could answer questions they might not wish to take to a tutor or a lecturer; such contacts made them feel more confident within the university system.

Although strongly evident in individual students, this pattern was not typical of most of the research participants. Rather, it was present among a small group of students who made it clear that they had come to university with high aspirations, a strong work ethic and a determination to succeed, and that university was the place where they needed to be.

The "working-on-becoming academically engaged" students – needing time

These students might have been just as academically able but were less concerned about succeeding from their first day at university. They tended to be more relaxed about their studies and academic achievement and more easily swayed by others to skip a class or put off "hitting the books". Sometimes they missed classes because the topic was boring, they preferred to sleep in, or because they thought they could access sufficient information from online resources. What marked the students in this group was a degree of casualness in their approach; waiting to see how they would go, and

using experience and feedback to decide how their study habits or approaches might need to be adjusted.

> *I'm going to get the hang of it. It's just getting into that routine… that's going to happen. Once it does happen then it will be all good… I think it should be pretty cruisey, pretty enjoyable, and I think that once I adapt to the university life properly I should be able to really get into it and really enjoy it and really do well at it… I don't have, really, any study habits (laughter). I don't do any study… Yeah, well, I do some study before tests, a little bit. Getting Bs, which is not too bad. So that means I'll just need to do a little bit more work to be getting As.* (Māori male)

Some of these students did expect to be able to get by, at least initially, on their natural abilities or the strength of their academic performance at high school. They discovered rather quickly that that only worked in relation to subjects with which they were already familiar (and then only for a short time), or where assessments focused largely on recall of information presented in class. Their learning strategies were not always appropriate or efficient (e.g. relying on rote memorisation, or writing lecture notes in pencil and rewriting them later in pen). At some point during the first semester, usually after receiving feedback on their performance in their initial tests or assignments, these students responded to the "wake-up call", realising they needed to study more if they were to make the grade or achieve at a level they had set for themselves. For some this included maintaining a specific grade point average in order to retain a scholarship, or improving grades in specific subjects in order to be selected into limited entry courses in the second year. Often they knew exactly what they needed to do but took time to translate their intentions into regular practice. Some, who had not done as well as they expected in their last year of high school, needed the reassurance of passing marks to feel they would be able to cope with tertiary studies. Overall, they responded well to feedback from academic staff and to being able to gauge their performance against that of their peers, often choosing to set their own standards of performance.

> *I've done pretty well so far. I'm averaging, like, B+, so yeah. I could do better, (laughter), but it's just putting a lot of effort into it… If I studied hard out all the time, I know I could do a lot better than a B+ but I'm fine with a B+.* (Māori female)

This pattern was characteristic of most participants in the study, who needed time to settle into their new role. They were generally confident in their ability to succeed, but were prepared for some "ups" and "downs" in their performance, especially during the first semester. Doing well academically was important to them but this did not have to include achieving the highest possible grades, or doing better than everyone else.

The "academically unengaged" students – needing help to connect

Students who exhibited this pattern attended university physically but struggled to achieve any sense of personal connection with the learning expected of them, with the subjects in which they had enrolled, or with their role as young adults expected to take responsibility for decisions and actions related to their studies. Although numerically small, this group is important because they needed early and ongoing help to engage with their academic studies, and because they were the most reluctant and the least well equipped to seek learning support and assistance.

In terms of their academic readiness, these students seemed ill prepared for the level of performance expected of them. In most cases they had either achieved UE with a minimum number of credits, or failed to achieve either UE or the NCEA Level 3 Certificate. They had a history of academic "disconnections", including a pattern of NCEA course choices that lacked systematic planning, progression, or clear links to their university courses. Several of these students were not accepted into the course of their choice, had not prepared for this contingency, and struggled to adapt to their new environment.

In the final months of high school most had visited the campus of the university in which they planned to enroll, and were part of a year-long mentoring scheme designed to prepare them for transition to university. Yet their initial weeks at university were marked by a serious lack of confidence and a sense of disorganisation and bewilderment – surprised to be told that the "readings" they were given needed to be read rather than just consulted when preparing an assignment, or immobilised by what they perceived to be a huge amount of work expected of them. It was as though simply being at university was all that they expected to achieve, at least in the first semester. Students in this group tended to attend classes sporadically, did little preparation for tests, and were usually late with their assignments or failed to submit them. Their inability to connect with the academic work was particularly evident in their unrealistic perceptions of what such work entailed, and in the failure to change approaches and behaviour patterns that were clearly unproductive.

> *In the beginning of it I was like, "yeah, yeah, so far this is going good. I'm keeping up." Then the first assignment came in… it was easy but I left it, like I started on the day it was* [due to be] *handed in. But even when I did I was like, "oh, I know this stuff… oh this is easy". And then second one I started on the day as well. I said I was gonna start early… I printed out the assignment* [instructions]. *And I just ended starting late again, on the day and then, there weren't many questions I'd done* [and could answer]. (Pacific male)

Positive role models (e.g. an older sibling enrolled at the same university, checking that a new student was spending enough time studying) did not seem to have much impact

on them. They seemed to lack an inner sense of direction in relation to their studies and were vulnerable to negative external influences, tending to associate with other students with similar habits and being easily distracted – "hanging around" university for most of the day but putting off any serious work.

> *"My friends will* [say] *"Oh nah, we'll do it next week". And then we're all… "Oh yeah, let's go to lunch". And then next week will come and we'll be like "Oh nah, we've still got one more week". And then it keeps on going like that… And then what do you know? The night before it's, "Oh we haven't done it!", and then we have to* [stay] *up the whole night and do it and then, next morning, we'll be crashed out… Then I always say "Oh my next assessment, I'm not gonna leave it till last minute", but I keep on repeating the same thing. It's no good.* (Pacific female)

Students in this group talked about inner tensions and strong feelings of guilt, something not mentioned by other participants. Unable to draw on more effective strategies, they reminded themselves of their parents' expectations, one student by carrying his mother's photograph on his cell phone and imagining her standing at his shoulder, urging him to study – it helped him to attend more classes but, by his own admission, made little difference to other aspects of his academic work. These students enjoyed the freedom and status associated with being a university student, but not the guilt that went with the awareness that they were failing to live up to their parents' expectations.

> [Social life is] *awesome (laughter), awesome! I love it!* [But] *you feel guilty at the same time that you're socialising. Your parents are thinking that you're at school, studying. I will always do that, every time we're on our way back home, it's "oh my gosh, we didn't even study today, we're so bad."* (Pacific female)

In some cases these students tried to apply themselves to the task of study, seeking out a quiet spot in the library, reading on the bus home, planning assignments and doing preparatory readings (even if the outcome was a late submission or work that did not always meet the passing standard). In other cases it seemed that these young people could not work out how to bridge the gap between their previous and their current experiences of learning. For whatever reason, they lacked the skills and focus needed to engage with their studies and, even when they appeared to be involved in academic work, their involvement seemed half-hearted.

> *A lot of spare time,* [we] *sit down there… We just hang around… just sit on the table, and go through our books, and then just talk, talk, talk, talk, take pictures, (laughter) and talk, talk, talk, go on Bebo (laughter) like that.* [What do you do when you look through your books?] *I look. I read. I do my readings, but it just doesn't stay in there, it's just like, just to make it look like I'm reading, but* [not] *really.* (Pacific female)

What set students in this group apart was their tendency to give primacy to relationships with likeminded students who reinforced each others' preferences for

doing what they found easy and comfortable – engaging socially rather than academically. They did not form study groups, help each other with difficult texts, or challenge each other to spend time preparing for tests or writing assignments. Yet, even though they talked of feeling guilty about failing to put time and effort into their studies, they did not feel that their time at university was completely wasted. They seemed to need time to get used to being university students, while delaying the work involved in the role. Whatever their stated intensions, students in this group tended to approach their first semester (and possibly the first year) hoping not to, but expecting to fail academically. They cited examples of older siblings or people they knew who had failed in their first year, but gone on to succeed later. It was almost as though the only way to learn how to succeed was to fail initially, learn from one's mistakes, and then finally make the grade. Their actions did much to ensure this self-fulfilling prophecy of initial failure would come true.

The importance of teaching staff

Transition to university tends to be seen as a learning process, experienced by students. But teachers and teaching practices play an important role in the process. At school, students have to deal with a small number of teachers, some already familiar from previous years, and most teaching a subject across the whole year. Just as importantly, students not only know their teachers, they are known by them. At university, students are exposed to a larger number of subject coordinators, regular and guest lecturers, tutors, demonstrators and markers.

Study participants in large first year courses tended to see their lecturers as distant (especially when they walked into a large lecture theatre, delivered a lecture, and left immediately after), and not always approachable. Tutors, on the other hand, were more likely to be seen as down-to-earth, friendly and helpful. Overall, students liked and were more easily engaged by teaching staff who were passionate about their subject, articulate, physically expressive, used interesting illustrations, and had a sense of humour. Being entertaining was seen as a positive attribute, but what students looked for particularly was teachers who were excited about the subject they were teaching.

Some lecturers made a deep impression on their students, inspiring them to take on the passion for learning and scientific discovery:

> *We had a really good lecture… a really good lecturer on immunology. He had a special topic lecture on HIV… And so yeah, pretty much since that lecture I've been trying to work out ways to win a Nobel Prize for a vaccine for HIV.* (European/Pākehā male)

Lecturers who spoke quietly (so they could not be heard clearly), seemed disorganised, did little more than read from their notes, or appeared uninterested in the topic they were teaching, were more likely to elicit negative comments and students admitting to not turning up to their lectures.

Highly motivated and academically engaged students could be critical of academic staff who failed to live up to their expectations, but could also see past a lecturer's apparent weaknesses and would still attend classes and strive to do well in the course. Students struggling to engage with their studies were more likely to use negative perceptions of their teachers as reasons for non-attendance or for failure to put time and effort into a particular subject. Lecturers who embarrassed or shamed individual students by asking them questions they were unable to understand, let alone answer, were most likely to be avoided completely.

What the affected students found surprising was the "rationing" or complete absence of tutorials in some subjects. This was either because of the large number of first year students (with fortnightly tutorials replacing the traditional weekly ones), or apparent lack of postgraduate students in a discipline and hence lack of a suitable pool from which to appoint course tutors (leaving formal lectures as the only form of face-to-face teaching). Limited contact with teaching staff was of lesser concern to the highly motivated students, who felt comfortable with self-directed study. Other students reported that they missed the benefits of regular interactions with tutors and fellow students, and opportunities to seek guidance and clarification, and found the subject content more difficult to master and the process of study less satisfying as a result.

Some students also commented on slow and limited feedback they received after their first tests and written assignments. Most felt that they needed the feedback to know how to improve next time, and felt anxious when they had to submit second assignments without any feedback on the earlier ones. In some cases, these comments were still being made in the interviews conducted in early-mid May (i.e. eight to ten weeks into the first semester). Other students commented on receiving a mark but little, if any, comments on their work.

The importance of learning support services

As with the academic orientation activities at the beginning of the semester, another striking finding from this study was how few students, particularly those most in need, made full (or even limited) use of the learning support services. Most of the institutions in which study participants were enrolled provide general academic support services.

Most also provide targeted services for Māori and Pacific students. In some cases, special services and assistance are an integral part of a study programme (such as within the University of Auckland Certificate in Health Sciences for Māori and Pacific students), combining teaching of academic subject content with training in critical thinking, academic writing, and study skills, as well as aiming to build confidence and encourage independent learning. In other cases, both general and targeted services are organised and staffed separately from the core curriculum, sometimes located in one central space and sometimes split into smaller units dispersed in different locations. Regardless of their focus and structure, the aim of such services is to help students experiencing difficulties or needing assistance to make a successful transition to university studies. Yet, students in most need of support were often the ones least likely to seek it from these sources.

Unless learning support services were an integral part of the curriculum, or the staff took the initiative to not only make the first approach, but to do so in person, students were generally reluctant to access such services. Some felt that they did not need any learning support; some did not know what specific assistance might be available; a number attended a single session and did not go back for more.

> *I went to one* [session], *but I don't generally like the way* [the particular service] *is run. So, nah, I haven't bothered to go to any others. And I don't think I need, like… I don't really know what I need help with, because I think I'm alright with it all, pretty much. So I don't really care about going to them.* (Māori male)

Students were particularly reluctant to follow formal rules set by some learning support services. They registered, but did not attend any of the activities organised for them. They received targeted invitations to specific events, did not bother to RSVP (as expected), but turned up anyway. They disliked having to make an appointment in advance, instead of just dropping in when they had a particular question or issue to resolve. They were particularly reluctant to commit additional time to attend regular workshops or sessions. A student, asked if she had made use of any learning support services, responded:

> *No. Probably a stupid idea not to. I heard they're really good… I think it's just because I didn't want to… make my timetable more hectic and… I'd just rather study on my own.* (Māori female)

Some students did not appreciate the nature of the services available to them (assuming, for example, that these were cultural clubs), did not know where or when specific activities were planned, felt embarrassed to ask for help, felt too tired to attend late afternoon sessions, or did not think they needed extra help until they ran out of time to ask for it before assignments were due. There was also evidence that some students were reluctant to seek help, particularly when struggling to cope with their

academic workload, for fear of being advised to "drop" one or more of the papers they found particularly challenging and therefore not be able to continue in their chosen field of study.

When students did attend learning support workshops or tutorials, sometimes late in the semester, they often found them relevant and helpful. Students saw tutors' practices such as their use of plain English, avoidance of jargon, and clear explanations of unfamiliar technical terms as particularly helpful. They also appreciated clarifications, tips and suggestions about tests and assignments. Yet, rather than students in most need of help, it was often the more able students who attended these sessions, usually choosing those that were subject-specific and had immediate relevance:

> *I went to one for economics… that was before the test, so that was mid semester... They went over a whole paper and how you should answer the paper. And then we sort of got a feeling for the time constraints, and how quickly and how much we had to write for each answer… That was pretty good. That was quite helpful. And then I went to the stats workshops around assignment time and those were really helpful for the assignments, they helped quite a lot with the assignments.* ("Other" ethnicity male)

Students who benefited from specific sessions, such as the ones mentioned above, were often students who were academically engaged already and who had no difficulties accessing additional help, be it from friends, tutors, or online resources. Students whose confidence was a lot shakier, and who were still struggling to engage with their academic work, were much less likely to initiate contact with learning support services, even to attend a structured workshop or tutorial. A collection of specialist services, expert at providing specific interventions but separate from the core curriculum, was difficult for students to appreciate in terms of possible personal benefits. These students responded more readily to a person (or a small group of people) who usually initiated the first contact, made them feel at ease, and to whom they could turn for help without feeling inadequate, embarrassed, or labeled as different.

At one university, students were sent an invitation and appointment time to meet with a support person, before any problems arose. When they needed help they were able to approach a person already known to them. Students from another university commented positively about the "one-stop-shop" service located in a high-student-traffic area – the library. The informal organisation of the service allowed them to access help without prearranged appointments, with much of the support being provided by older students employed as "peer tutors" empathetic to the struggles of first year students.

The importance of relationships and rapport was stressed by a number of students, particularly in relation to a Pacific student support service at one university that used a strongly student-focused approach, providing whatever help individual students needed. These students were especially appreciative of the attitudes of staff who encouraged them to see their contacts with the support service as normal and constructive within a challenging new environment, rather than as symptomatic of individual students' inadequacies.

> *They don't only help you… They make you feel they're just friends or something. They're normal, yeah… They don't want you to feel like they're counsellors or stuff… I was amazed at how happy they were to see an Islander there, 'cause they say "it's always not the Islanders that come", 'cause… "some of them are embarrassed to ask for help"… They motivate us, and they don't make us feel like we're below the Palangi people… They make us even with them, like, "you can do it if you believe in yourself"… And they help you write your essays, yeah… They make sure it's all your work but they just encourage you and show you where you can find the information. But they still want you to do it. You do the big part, their part is just to encourage you, motivate you, make sure you don't give up, like I nearly did on one of my assessments.* (Pacific female)

Overall, the existence of learning support services did not guarantee that students most in need of them would be the ones accessing them. Students struggling to engage with their academic studies had similar problems engaging with learning support services, at least during the first semester when such help might have been critical to their academic success.

6.1.8 Social transition

> *I had never been to* [university city] *before, ever in my life… So I was quite nervous about coming down, but I think it wasn't too bad leaving home. I was ready to do it. It was just saying goodbye to the family. I guess it didn't really hit me until my parents were actually leaving me here and I was all by myself. I didn't know anyone or anything but it was just kind of the first couple of days was a bit hard, but after that I was pretty much fine.* (Māori female)

Becoming a university student requires students to adapt to a new and very different environment; change their daily routines; organise how they use their study and leisure time; decide whether to continue, take on, or give up any paid employment; make new friends and maintain family contacts. These are just some of the adjustments that need to be made within a relatively short time. In some cases the changes are made quickly and successfully, in other cases trial and error predominate, while some students struggle to make the necessary adjustments.

Connections with home and family

Students from rural areas of Northland faced the biggest dislocation, having to leave home and move to larger urban centres where few had family or friends. They reported feeling homesick and lonely, especially early in the semester, although many felt that both organised and informal activities in the students' halls of residence did much to both occupy their free time and help them meet new people. Most of them maintained regular contact with their families by phone, texting, or email. Māori students reported feeling more homesick for longer. When they had the resources, their families tried to help by visiting or keeping in close contact. In one case a mother stayed in Auckland for a week to ensure her son was settled before she returned home; in another a mother came down for several weekends until her daughter was more confident on her own. In at least one case it was the parent rather than the student who was distressed at the prospect of the student leaving home. A small group of students from one school in Northland were able to share accommodation in Auckland and developed their own whanau support group that helped them through the initial adjustment of living in a large city and away from home. For some students a sense of loneliness and homesickness persisted and they tried to go home every weekend – a costly and time consuming exercise. Others were drawn home by family events, both happy ones such as a sibling's wedding, and distressing ones such as a parent's major illness and surgery or death within the wider family. Mid-semester and end of semester breaks were invariably spent back home, some students sharing a family holiday and others being happy to just relax and enjoy home cooking and other comforts of home.

Having relocated from their home communities, rural students were not able to continue in part-time jobs they had during the previous year or summer. Only one of the 14 rural students found part time work during the first semester at university, all others preferring to see how they would manage the academic load in their first year before considering paid employment. Even the two students who came from single-parent families and had been urged to find work to help pay their way through university decided to focus on their studies in the first year. Some of the rural students experienced financial problems and were not always able to rely on their families to come to the rescue, either because they knew that their parents were not in a position to help them, or because they had got into significant debt and were concerned about their parents' reaction if they admitted the true figure. Budgeting was a challenge for most students, although a few whose accommodation costs were covered either by scholarships or their parents were able to save money from their student loan or allowance and increased their bank balances.

Students who remained living at home had different but sometimes equally difficult challenges. Many had to rise early (in one case at 5.00 am) to avoid rush hour traffic, share a ride with another family member or car pool with other students, or catch a bus or train in time for 8.00 or 9.00 am lectures. Others found the long days, when they did not finish their last lecture or tutorial until 6.00 pm, tiring and stressful. Students who had part time jobs (six of the 17 students who continued living at home, three of them holding down two jobs) had to fit these in, before or after classes and on weekends. Transport was often difficult to arrange and travel between home, university and work was often time consuming. At least one student gave up paid work during the semester when the working hours started to impinge on her lecture and study time.

Some, mostly European/Pākehā students, felt that once they started university they were given more freedom by their parents and were able to manage their time and commitments as they wished. Pacific students, all of whom remained at home, found it harder to separate themselves from family expectations and activities. They were financially more dependent on their parents, and under closer scrutiny in terms of when they came home or how they used their free time. Weekends especially tended to involve the routines they had followed when at school – helping around the house, watching sport, and attending church meetings on Saturdays, and church and family activities on Sundays. Some also continued with church choir practices on two or three evenings a week. Participation in church activities was important for some of these students, not only because of their faith and sense of community, but also because their participation in music and other public roles contributed to their confidence and self esteem. (This contrasted sharply with their early experiences of university where they felt less sure of themselves and their ability to perform to others' expectations, and where their talents and abilities were not necessarily evident to others.) In addition, several Pacific students were also required to contribute to the care of sick relatives or to assist with hospitality and catering for large gatherings such as funerals over several days. In one case, a student chose to take time away from university because of the personal importance of caring for someone to whom she was close. In another case, a student experienced a great deal of stress and frustration when she was given no choice and missed important classes, tests, and assignment deadlines because of family commitments.

It is relevant to note that some students had to deal with ongoing family difficulties that required their involvement and could not but have some effect on their studies. Whether they lived at home or away, they were still part of their families – families that had to cope with whatever was happening and could not always appreciate, or make

allowances for the impact this was having on the person starting university studies. This included both acute and ongoing serious health problems of family members, death within the family, financial difficulties, alcohol abuse, drug rehabilitation, and extended parental absences and associated financial hardship. In one case, a student who had been brought up by her extended maternal family was caught in a tug-of-war situation as her father insisted she live with him and his family, while the family that had brought her up wanted her to remain with them. She tried to please both sides, moving between the two households every three or four days, but became increasingly unsettled and despondent about her predicament. She used her time at university as an escape from the tensions at home but found it difficult to focus on her studies. In another case a student who had lived in New Zealand from the age of eight years found that his family's uncertain residency status created serious problems. He was able to stay in the country on a student visa, but having finished high school (and achieved well academically) he now faced the insurmountable problem of international student fees for any tertiary education – fees he and his family could not afford. While such problems affected a minority of the research participants the impact on individual students was considerable, with some students showing remarkable maturity and resilience in the midst of family difficulties and crises, whilst others clearly struggled to cope. Significantly, in terms of transitional support, none of these students sought help or support from student counselling services, in one case, not even to obtain "compassionate consideration" in relation to missed tests and late assignments.

Health and emotional issues

The demands of social and academic transition to tertiary study and the associated changes in lifestyle had an impact on the participants' emotional and physical wellbeing. Students who moved away from home were more likely to report a range of health-related problems than those who remained at home, although, as noted above, staying at home was not necessarily without its challenges.

Alcohol consumption: Students who moved into hostels or halls of residence reported changes in sleep and exercise patterns, and diet and alcohol intake, particularly in the initial weeks of the semester. Students used to the quiet of a farm or small town life took time to get used to traffic noise and bright city lights outside their bedroom windows, and the constant presence of other students. Social orientation activities invariably included alcohol consumption, late night visits to pubs and clubs, and disrupted sleep. Some halls of residence had a reputation for ongoing "partying", with at least one week night and Friday and Saturday nights devoted to social activities in which alcohol played a role. While some students joined in initially, they gradually

distanced themselves from active participation, both because of the costs of alcohol and because they realised that regular drinking would interfere with their studies. Even though used to alcohol, these students were not comfortable with excessive drinking, but felt pressured to join in:

> *Everyone keeps going on about getting drunk together at the hostel this weekend, and am kinda feeling a bit pressured into doing that as well, but I would really rather spend time with* [boyfriend] *and my family...* (European/ Pākehā female)

Others were less restrained, continuing to "party" on three or four nights each week, while reporting that their social life often led to insufficient sleep and irregular eating patterns, failure to attend classes, financial problems, and feelings of tiredness and being "run down". Although none admitted doing so themselves, several students commented on their peers turning up to lectures drunk or with a hangover. Rural students were more likely to continue with this pattern of behaviour than other students, although the ones that did were in a minority. When under the influence of alcohol, students placed themselves or others at risk, finding themselves intoxicated and alone in unfamiliar surroundings, suffering physical injuries, causing damage to university property (and having to pay for the repairs), damaging their own laptop, or witnessing a fellow student (not used to alcohol) consume a large amount of spirits in a very short time, collapse, and need to be resuscitated and hospitalised.

Having enjoyed the novelty of being able to do almost anything they chose, at any time of the day or night, some students needed time but eventually decided to change patterns of activities they could see were unhelpful.

> *Well I'm not going to drink as much and I want to get my sleeping habit right. Actually, I've been working on it, going to sleep early so I can get up early. We used to just stay up till five in the morning for no reason, just watching movies. One night we went to* [24-hour supermarket] *just to get some hair dye and we dyed our hair at three in the morning, it was silly (laughter)… I had an exam… the next day… at 8:30… so I had to stay up all night so I could go to it… From five till eight o'clock I studied, and then went to class and did my exam.* (Māori male)

There were also students for whom alcohol was not an issue. Some were simply not attracted to it. Most of the Pacific students did not join with other students in orientation and other social activities that involved alcohol consumption. In part this might have been because they lived at home and were under closer scrutiny from parents, because their discretionary spending was more limited, and in a few cases because their religious beliefs proscribed alcohol use.

Interestingly, there were also some students, particularly from small rural communities, who talked of early exposure to a youth culture that involved regular use of alcohol and

drugs such as marijuana while still at school, but who saw the move to university and away from home as an opportunity to get away from following this path. They were "over it" and ready for a different lifestyle, preferring to put their energies into more productive pursuits.

Sleep: Irregular and inadequate sleep was relatively common, particularly among students who had a busy social life that involved alcohol, but also among students who stayed up late (sometimes all night) to watch movies, or when completing assignments, studying for tests, or feeling very anxious about how well they were doing academically. Poor planning and time management, what participants usually referred to as "procrastination", meant that some were faced with almost impossible deadlines. In the most extreme case, a student reported staying up over three consecutive days and nights to complete three separate assignments.

> *We had a 25 percent essay for* [one subject], [another subject] assignment, 10 percent, and a [third subject] *essay to do, and I left them all to, kind of, the last minute. So for three days I was just totally stressed out and I felt the worst I had ever felt. Didn't get any sleep at all, so it was pretty horrible.* (European/Pākehā female)

Communal living and associated noise in student hostels contributed to some students staying up late and regularly failing to get enough sleep. Others were affected by intense periods of study and associated tensions and anxiety when tests or assignments were due. None reported seeking help or advice from the student health service or family physicians, although in at least one case a student took "a sleeping pill" provided by a friend for a few days.

Eating habits: Students living in catered hostel accommodation often commented on changes in diet and poor eating habits as they missed home cooked meals and grew tired of institutional food. Although this usually included options such as salads or fresh fruit with every meal, they found the food monotonous and unappetising and the portions small. Substituting or supplementing hostel meals with additional food impacted on their budgets, and seemed to do little to improve the quality of their dietary intake as they usually bought instant noodles, potato chips, sweets, chocolate bars and "energy" drinks, rather than anything more nutritious. Their perceptions of hostel food were not helped by an outbreak of food poisoning at two universities during the period of the study, affecting some of the participating students, and making them distrustful of the quality of the food they were served.

Students living at home, particularly those whose StudyLink approvals were delayed, could not always afford to buy food during the day. Even just meeting classmates over

coffee could be costly if done regularly, and some changed the venues where they preferred to meet to avoid such costs. The limited financial resources of some students, and their inability to join with others who used on-campus cafes and other eating places for social meetings that flowed on to discussion of academic work, made these students feel self conscious about their family backgrounds and more reluctant to step outside their own circle of friends.

The only student who moved into a flat during the first semester reported that a combination of limited finances, poor planning and the influence of flatmates contributed to irregular meals and a diet of little more than white bread, toast, instant noodles, tea, coffee and alcohol. The demands of study, and determination to maintain "a B+ average" produced added pressures. Unsurprisingly, this student felt "very stressed", slept poorly, felt tired and had frequent headaches and stomach upsets. Replacing coffee with herbal tea did little to help the situation.

Exercise: When interviewed for the first time, while still at school, most of the participants reported active participation in sporting and other physical activities such as kapa haka and other cultural dance practices and performances, often as captains of their teams. It was therefore surprising how few maintained such involvement once they commenced university studies. A small number joined clubs that allowed them to participate in competitive sports (rugby, basketball, netball or rowing), most of them going to the University Student Games in the mid-semester break. A few others joined a gym or continued with occasional social games of touch rugby, soccer, or badminton. The most notable change was among Pacific students, who went from participation in multiple sports at school to minimal or no participation in any sporting activities.

Stress: The majority of students reported feeling "stressed" at some stage during the transition process, whether when questioning their original plans for university study, coping with failure to achieve UE or gain entry to their course or university of choice, leaving home, moving to the city, or beginning a new life as university students. Once the academic year started, many students relaxed, spent much of their time meeting new people or socialising with old friends, and put off serious study. "Procrastination" seemed to be a favourite word in many of the interviews and journal entries from that period. Once assignment and test deadlines approached more students reported feeling stressed and concerned.

For a small group of students, feeling stressed related to their need to not only achieve passing grades but to do better than the majority of their first year peers in order to

gain entry to law or medicine programmes in their second year. Other students needed to achieve high grade point averages in order to retain scholarships that were important to their capacity to continue with university studies. Some students also wanted to do well in the first semester so they could enroll in extra papers in subsequent semesters and complete conjoint degrees in less than the usual four or five years. Often there was anticipatory anxiety before assessments, and relief when the results showed that in most cases these students had done well. Perhaps surprisingly, only one student reported feeling extremely distressed after the first round of tests and assignments in the middle of the semester, even though a number of others received similar results. He had failed some assessments and did not do as well as he expected in others and found the feedback unexpected and upsetting. (He did much better at the end of the semester.)

Sources of stress varied for different groups and across time:
- Māori and other rural students were more likely to experience loneliness, homesickness, and disrupted sleep, especially in the first half of the semester, and reported feeling unsettled and stressed as a result. One of these students was on the verge of giving up her studies and returning home, but was helped by her parents convincing her to stay.
- Pacific students on the other hand were more likely to be affected by family commitments, and to leave their study and assignment writing until "the last minute", feeling stressed when they failed to submit the work on time or were unsure whether they would achieve a passing grade.
- Students living in hostels were more likely to be affected by social activities and alcohol consumption that led to overspending, inadequate sleep and missed classes. Again, this was more likely at the beginning of the semester, with most (but not all) students placing limits on their social life and focusing more on study as the end of the semester neared.

It must be noted that it was the minority of students in each of these groups who reported feeling stressed and who identified specific sources of stress. It is also relevant to note that, apart from general intensions such as to drink less, get more sleep, procrastinate less, and "hit the books" more often, few students reported using more specific stress-reducing strategies. A few used sport to relieve tension and get away from constant focus on study, while a couple used "retail therapy", shopping for clothes, books or music CDs in order to feel better.

Although uncommon, a further source of distress for three students was the experience of having to deal with life threatening incidents involving fellow hostel students (at three different universities). In one case a study participant accidentally walked in on another student who was in the process of taking an unknown quantity of pills. She had to use force to prevent the student pushing her out of the room and locking the door, then summoned help, and accompanied the student in the ambulance to hospital. She stayed at the student's bedside for most of the night, leaving exhausted and concerned that, had she not walked in when she did, the outcome might have been very different.

Regardless of the source or reasons for feelings of stress, anxiety, or concern, students often dealt with their situations on their own; some shared their concerns with friends or other students, some with their families, and a few commented that participation in research gave them the opportunity to express how they were feeling, and to reflect on their experiences and put them in perspective. Even when feeling "depressed", anxious, unable to sleep, or physically unwell, students seemed reluctant to seek help from student counselling or health services, with some waiting until they went home and were able to consult their own GP, while others deferred taking action in the hope that whatever the problem was it would clear eventually.

Physical health problems: Whatever the underlying causes, minor illnesses such as the common cold and other flu-like symptoms were common. Three female students living away from home talked of feeling constantly tired and as though they were sick all the time. Feeling unwell during the examination period was a source of concern for some students, not all of whom knew that they could apply for special consideration in such circumstances. At least three of the students sustained physical injuries, although these were not serious enough to prevent them from attending classes. The food poisoning incidents at two universities (mentioned earlier) also added to the numbers of students who experienced a period of feeling unwell and being unable to give attention to their studies. Several students also mentioned dental problems but delayed going to a dentist because they could not afford the likely treatment costs.

Social engagement with academic staff

As already noted in section 6.1.7.4, the typical size of many undergraduate classes makes it difficult for students to develop any form of social connection with their teachers. Yet social engagement that can assist students to feel at ease in the academic environment and able to seek help from the person most qualified to provide timely advice relevant to their learning in a specific subject, can be critical to some students. This is particularly so for students struggling with academic engagement,

lacking confidence, and likely to fall behind with their studies. Advice that takes into account students' individual circumstances might be more effective but it also takes more time, requiring a degree of openness and rapport between a teacher and a student.

As expected, students in large classes reported little in the way of social engagement with their teachers, particularly in courses with few or no tutorials. Individual lecturers could be intellectually inspiring, academically engaging, or even entertaining, but this was largely a one-way process. Few students felt comfortable initiating a conversation or making appointments to discuss any aspect of their academic work with their lecturers or even tutors. Even fewer were prepared to discuss any personal problems that might have been affecting their studies. After being told that her tutors would read and comment on the draft of an introduction but not of a complete essay, for example, one of the students commented that she was disappointed but had learned not to expect help from the teaching staff in what was her majoring subject.

Students enrolled in programmes where classes were smaller and the learning environment more structured and interactive (such as in some foundation certificate programmes and degree programmes in performing and visual arts) tended to talk of their lecturers and tutors as more approachable. As students got to know them, the teachers proved to be not only knowledgeable and generally helpful, but also interested in individual students and (when the occasion demanded) sensitive to their personal needs. For students yet to develop confidence in their own abilities, who felt homesick or, at times, overwhelmed by what was expected of them, interventions by an astute teacher could be critical, as in the case of this performing arts student:

> *At first I was shy, I was shy and I was just not talking… I used to want to go home… But I'm getting used to it and now I've got people to talk to because my dance teachers are awesome, they support me fully… My choreography teacher… last week when I was so down, he turned it all around and he just made me realise why I'm here, and it was great. So yeah, it's getting easier…* (Māori female)

Importantly, mutually respectful relationships with her teachers made it possible for this student to take in their critical feedback and work through her emotional reactions to a deeper appreciation of what they could teach her and what she was capable of learning:

> *My* [subject] *teacher is so passionate about his work that if we're doing one thing wrong he'll stop and just, like, yell at you in your face… and people were just saying "Oh he's scary. Watch out…" But I've just listened to him and I find him good. He's alright I think; he's a wonderful teacher and everyone knows that; he's like the top dog teacher, yeah… I didn't think I would build a relationship with my*

teachers… [but] *we've just got so close to each other now. Everyone helps everyone.*

This contrasted sharply with the experience of students in large classes where the majority of students had no expectations, and no experience, of being seen as individual or special. Students enrolled in general arts or science degrees, taking papers spread across a number of disciplines, who were sometimes unsure about their study major and future subject choices, were the ones most likely to feel that no one cared whether they turned up for classes, submitted their assignments, or passed or failed their assessments. Once again, this situation was particularly unhelpful for students who had limited skills and resources for navigating the university environment, and needed more structure and help to engage with their academic work.

6.1.9 Outcomes and future directions

The purpose of this study was not to compare academic outcomes (both the overall size of the sample, and the fact that participants were selected purposively but not matched in relation to relevant demographic characteristics, makes any statistical comparisons inappropriate). Nevertheless, some comparative outcomes are presented in order to provide as complete a picture of the patterns of transition to university as possible. It is also important to note that the outcomes relate only to the first semester of study and provide no indication of how well the students performed subsequently[8].

Of the 33 students who were still in the study at the start of the first semester, 29 (18 females and 11 males) remained in the study until the end of the semester. One student completed the study but did not provide their academic results. Results for another student who withdrew late in the study were available and are included (see Table 6.1 below).

Overall, as shown in Table 6.1, 20 of the 29 students (69 percent) passed all the papers in which they had enrolled. This included nine of the ten European/Pākehā, four of the eight Māori, four of the eight Pacific, and all three of the "Other" ethnicity students. Eleven of these 20 students were female.

All five students enrolled in a Certificate or Diploma level programme passed all their papers. Three were female and two male (three Pacific, one Māori, and one of "Other" ethnicity). As shown in Table 6.2, the outcomes for the 24 students enrolled in Bachelor level studies were more varied – only one of the five Pacific students and only three of

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[8] All students who completed the study were invited to take part in a less intensive follow-up study until the end of their second academic year. That study is ongoing and the findings will be reported in early 2010.

the seven Māori students passed all their papers in the first semester of university study. Of the 15 students who passed all their Bachelor level papers eight were female.

Table 6.1 Participants by ethnic affiliation and semester one academic results (all programmes)

	Māori*	Pacific**	European/Pākehā	Other	Total
Passed all papers	4	4	9	3	20
Passed 3 papers	2	-	1	-	3
Passed 2 papers	2	-	-	-	2
Passed 1 paper	-	3	-	-	3
Passed 0 papers	-	1	-	-	1
Total	8	8	10	3	29

* results for one Māori student are missing
** results for one Pacific student who withdrew from the study but made their results available are included

Table 6.2 Participants by ethnic affiliation and semester one academic results (Bachelor degree programmes only)

	Māori*	Pacific**	European/Pākehā	Other	Total
Passed all papers	3	1	9	2	15
Passed 3 papers	2	-	1	-	3
Passed 2 papers	2	-	-	-	2
Passed 1 paper	-	3	-	-	3
Passed 0 papers	-	1	-	-	1
Total	7	5	10	2	24

* results for one Māori student are missing
** results for one Pacific student who withdrew but made results available are included

Overall, there was little difference in outcomes in relation to gender. The top three achievers included two males and one female, but more females passed all their papers. Ethnic differences were more pronounced, although it is important to note that these are likely to reflect socioeconomic as well as sociocultural differences. Most of the Pacific students came from a decile 1 school and most were first generation university

students. (As a group, they also had to deal with a disproportionate number of disruptive situations and family crises, both prior to and during the first semester of university study.) Most of the European/Pākehā and "Other" ethnicity students came from a decile 5 school and more had parents who had attended university. Most of the Māori students came from decile 1-3 schools in Northland and few had parents who had attended university.

- Nine of the ten European/Pākehā students passed all their papers and all were studying at the Bachelor degree level. On a 0 – 9 scale[9], their grade point averages ranged from 3.25 to 8.5.
- Four of the eight Māori students passed all their papers (three of these were at the Bachelor degree level). Their grade point averages ranged from 1.76 to 6.25.
- Although half of the Pacific students passed all their papers, only one of these students was in a Bachelor degree programme. Their grade point averages ranged from 0.0 to 6.0 (with the highest GPA for Bachelor level studies being 4.0).

Regardless of the academic results they achieved by the end of the first semester, all 29 students intended to return in semester two and continue with their studies. As a group Pacific students, although they did return, were the most uncertain in their decisions to do so. One considered going overseas to care for her elderly grandmother in the Islands. Another considered moving to another university, in order to be able to leave home where family tensions made focusing on academic study difficult, as well as moving to a smaller campus that, she hoped, would prove more comfortable and welcoming than the current campus she was attending.

During the first semester a number of students talked about the possibility of changing the papers or subjects they had already enrolled in for semester two, and some contemplated changing their study majors. These intentions were based on their experiences of either enjoying, and doing well in subjects they had not expected to find as interesting, or conversely, finding that particular subjects did not live up to their expectations or were proving too difficult. Students who failed papers in particular subjects questioned whether to repeat these papers or move away from the subject into another discipline in which they had had more success. A small number of students who did well in semester one decided to increase the number of papers they were taking in semester two, feeling more confident they could carry the extra study load. Often, financial pressures played a part for students who were dependent on scholarships for

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[9] GPA calculations are based on the following values: D (fail) = 0;   C- (pass) =1;   C = 2;   C+ = 3;   B- = 4;   B = 5;   B+ = 6;   A- = 7;   A = 8, and   A+ = 9.

their living costs, or who felt the need to complete their studies in the shortest possible time so they could get into full time employment and limit the size of the student loan they would need to repay.

Students in conjoint degrees considered changing to a single degree (and one student in a single degree planned to apply for a conjoint degree in the second year), while some considered doing more study in a subject they had initially taken largely for personal interest. Two students were more definite, deciding on a change of major as a result of their exposure to different university subjects and a clearer sense of what they wanted to do in the future.

In most cases students continued along the path they had mapped out at the beginning of the year, deciding to wait until the end of the first year before making any major changes to their study programmes. Similarly, although a number of students wanted to move away from home or out of student hostels, these plans also tended to be postponed until the end of the year.

Reflecting on their academic work and achievements, almost half of the students planned to change their study and social habits. Generally they intended to study harder, manage their time better, be more organised, resist procrastinating, and "party less". Students who had not done well academically also tended to talk about attending all classes, including extra tutorials and workshops offered by various learning support services, and submitting their assignments on time. Although such resolutions were more common among students who had failed one or more papers, a few of those who had done well (achieving a B+ or A- average) also wanted to put more effort into their studies in order to achieve higher grades. Most of the Māori students (regardless of their achievement) and all Pacific students who had not done well expressed the intention to work harder and achieve better results in semester two. Most of the other students wanted to maintain their current levels of achievement, whether this meant simply passing or achieving the highest possible grades.

In relation to longer term plans, most students indicated that they hoped to remain at university and complete their undergraduate degrees. Two were fairly firm about going on to postgraduate study, while others saw that as just one of a number of possible options. Two Māori students did not feel confident that they would remain at university long enough to complete their degrees. One had found academic study much more difficult than she expected; the other, who had done well and was enjoying university, had a lot of entrepreneurial ideas and thought that if a "great opportunity" presented

itself he might decide to pursue it, perhaps returning to university at some point in the future.

Although a third of the students intended to follow their original study and career plans, the majority were less certain. The university experience had both opened their eyes to options they had not considered before (e.g. becoming a sociologist, a mathematician, or a research scientist), and in other cases, undermined their confidence and resolve that they could succeed in the field they had chosen initially. This was particularly evident in the area of health sciences, with both Māori and Pacific students – whether in a certificate or degree programme, and regardless of their semester one results – feeling that they were not as well prepared as other students and that they might not be able to cope in subsequent years. Although they hoped to remain in the health field they were less certain about gaining entry to, or being able to complete a degree in medicine.

Other students who were less certain about their eventual career included those who decided to focus on subjects that engaged their interests and which they enjoyed studying. For one or two students this meant keeping their options open, completing a conjoint degree or a double major, and anticipating a career in academia, politics, or civil service. For some others this involved a retreat into a subject or field of study in which they had been successful while abandoning subjects that had proved too challenging, even if these were more likely to lead to greater career opportunities.

6.2 Narrative exemplars

Rather than identifying a single narrative pattern of transition, the findings of this study indicate that there are a number of possible patterns or ways in which students from groups that are currently under-represented in degree-level study negotiate the move from school to university. These patterns reflect differences in the students' personal backgrounds and resources (their cultural and economic capital), their academic preparation and social readiness for university level study, their goals and aspirations, their access to mentors and supporters with university experience, and their capacity to put in the effort needed to succeed in the new environment. Different patterns of transition also call for different levels and types of transitional support. In this section of the report, individual and composite narratives are used to illustrate how the transition to university fits within students' life stories, with particular reference to the key factors other researchers (Gabb, Milne & Cao, 2006; Tinto, 2000, 2008) have identified as

crucial to the transition process. These are the cultural and economic capital students can draw on, personal goals, academic preparation, work ethic or approach to study, and learning and personal support available during the transition process.

6.2.1 Narrative One: Making one's way along a little trodden path

Cultural and economic capital

AB was born in New Zealand and grew up in a rural town north of Auckland. He comes from a tight knit family and is close to his parents, siblings, and members of his extended family. Although neither of his parents has a university degree, formal and informal education is valued within the family – his grandmother completed an honours degree as a mature student, an aunt is a teacher, and an older cousin preceded him to university. His father is active in the local community and AB developed his interest in politics while still at school. He has traveled overseas on educational and holiday visits, and was a keen debater and rugby player at school. Financially, he needed to gain scholarship support to be able to afford the costs of living and studying away from home. His family is supportive of his study and career plans and he consulted with them as he considered evolving options. Although one of his parents is Pākehā, AB identifies strongly with his Māori heritage. He has a keen interest in Māori issues, studied Te Reo at school, enjoyed kapa haka activities, and was keen to forge strong links with other Māori students on campus.

Personal goals

AB had "always" wanted to go to university, valuing both the opportunity to learn and the prospect of a better paid job as a result of university education. While commerce and law offered greater career prospects, he wanted to include some arts subjects as a way of broadening his education. He was also keen to make use of other opportunities to hone his leadership skills, meet people in different spheres of public life, and make his own mark when he was ready.

Academic preparation

At school AB strove for balance, while juggling the demands of academic study, leadership roles, sport, and family commitments. His academic record was strong but not exceptional, although he was careful to choose academically demanding subjects relevant to his university plans. He considered that his (decile 3) school had prepared him well for university study. His decision to go to university was made in Year 10 (before he embarked on NCEA) when a cousin won a prestigious scholarship for Māori students and enrolled at university. Even at this early stage he was interested in

studying commerce, law, and politics. He completed UE and the NCEA Level 3 Certificate in five subjects from the approved list: physics, calculus, economics, classics, and Māori. He also learned a great deal from being in leadership positions at the school and community level. By the end of high school he felt ready to move on to university:

- He had solid preparation in the subjects relevant to his chosen fields of arts and commerce and a potential move to law;

- His academic track record at school and other strengths led to the award of two significant scholarships, which would give him financial independence while studying and gave him the confidence that he would gain entry not only to the university but also the course of his choice;

- His school and social experiences had given him the confidence to move away from home, make new friends, and get involved in cultural and other extracurricular activities at university. He was less clear about the academic work expected of first year students but was confident that he would be able to adapt and succeed.

Work ethic / approach to academic study

In his first semester of university, AB was prepared to give himself time to settle into the new learning environment and achieve the standard of work expected from first year students. He was determined to learn and do well but was not concerned about getting the highest possible grades right from the start. Nevertheless, he was organised and made good use of his time to attend classes and study, and was prepared to put in the long hours before exams or assignment deadlines. AB was confident that he had both the ability and the discipline to improve his performance as he settled into student life. He took a relaxed approach to his academic work but was prepared to back it up with regular serious study.

Learning and personal support

AB's greatest need during semester one was for timely and informative feedback on his academic performance early in the semester. He needed to know how the grades and comments on his work reflected the study practices he had used, so that he could adjust his efforts to achieve the results he wanted. He tried, but did not find the targeted learning support services particularly helpful or relevant to his needs. His grandmother was very supportive, proofreading assignment drafts he emailed to her, ensuring that he did not overlook the finer points of grammar and punctuation in his writing. AB enjoyed the social as well as the academic side of university life, and living in a hostel environment. He made new friends, especially with other Māori students, but maintained close contact with family at home and looked forward to sharing his holidays with them.

Although AB was the first in his nuclear family to go to university, he was aware that his grandmother and cousin walked the path before him and gave him pointers, and provided the inspiration that made his own journey a little easier. His cousin was a role model for him but AB was keen to find his own way and make the most of the opportunities presented to him. Having to leave home and his hometown, AB was careful to prepare for the move well ahead of time. He appreciated the value of money and was careful to live within the budget he had set for his first year. Although he appreciated the intrinsic worth of higher education, he was also a pragmatist, with an eye on opportunities for work experience and a step up to a worthwhile career. He was flexible, open to new ideas and challenges, and brought energy and enthusiasm to most of his activities. He made adjustments to his study routines and improved his performance over the course of the first semester and expected to do even better in the future.

Although he needed time to become fully engaged in his academic studies and start working to his potential, AB had no doubts about his ability to succeed and adapted quickly. His academic preparation was solid and his expectations of university life realistic; he expected to have to put more effort and time into his academic work than he had done at school. His experience of balancing competing demands, especially in his last year at school, helped him to organise his university life. He was busy, but diligent in his studies and able to enjoy an active social life. His family remained a source of strength and encouragement, and he developed additional social support networks at university in preference to using structured student support services. He completed the first semester with a B+ average, was happy with his plans for ongoing study, and confident that his academic results would improve further.

6.2.2 Narrative Two: A step back, or a step up?

Cultural and economic capital

CD was born in New Zealand and has lived in a working class, predominantly Pacific suburb of South Auckland all her life. She is close to her parents, grandparents and other members of her extended family spread across New Zealand and Samoa. Although she is a first generation university student, her family places great value on formal education and CD's older sibling is studying at university. While at school CD was active in several sports, as well as church and cultural groups, and had a number of leadership roles within and outside of school. Although she had never had a part time

job and was financially dependent on her parents, CD was keen to reduce the overall costs of her education and applied for several scholarships. Her family has always supported her study and career plans but did not always appreciate the amount of work involved or how they could be of help to her, other than by providing a stable home life, encouragement, and financial support. Although one of her parents is Palagi[10], CD identifies strongly with her Samoan ethnicity, culture and traditions. While at school, she was involved in Samoan cultural activities and in a Samoan church her family attends.

Personal goals

The prevalence of chronic ill health within her extended family and the wider Pacific community, including diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, provided CD with strong motivation to study medicine and work within the Pacific community in New Zealand or in the Islands. She also enjoyed and did well in biology at school, and felt drawn to further study in the science field. She expected university to be hard work, but felt it would be worth it if she could realise her goal of becoming a medical doctor.

Academic preparation

At school CD was a diligent and determined student who was keen to do well academically. She liked science subjects, had a strong interest in health issues, and was judged the best-all-round student in her final year at high school. She did not believe that her (decile 1) school had prepared her as well as she needed to be prepared for university, particularly for her chosen field of study. She completed UE and the NCEA Level 3 Certificate with 97 credits in four subjects from the approved list, with about a quarter of all credits awarded with Merit or Excellence. Although she had clear goals, was encouraged to aim for university education, and had demonstrated leadership potential, CD was not confident that she would gain entry to medicine:

- She had selected relevant Level 3 subjects at school, including chemistry, biology, and calculus but, because her school did not offer the subject, had no preparation in Level 3 physics;
- She applied through a targeted entry scheme for Māori and Pacific students and although not accepted for the Bachelor of Health Sciences[11] she was offered a place in the preparatory Certificate programme. This was a disappointing setback, but CD was determined to stay focused on her career goal and accepted the offer.
- For financial and family reasons, she needed to live at home and adjust to a lengthy commuting time each day. She was successful in winning three

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[10] "Palagi" is a Samoan term for a Westerner or European.
[11] At the university CD attended success in the first year of the BHSc degree is required for selection to the second year of the degree in medicine.

scholarships that covered her university fees, allowed her to contribute to household expenses, and left her with enough funds for books and other study expenses.

Work ethic / approach to academic study

CD came to university ready to work hard and stay focused on her main goal. She was determined to make the most of the opportunity the university gave her and she was academically engaged and committed to her studies from the beginning of semester one. She had good time management skills, attended all classes, and submitted her written assignments on time. She was prepared to put in the long hours, particularly when assignments were due, and was not easily diverted by others who were less focused on their studies. Knowing that distractions at home would lead to less productive study, she adapted to her situation by staying longer at university. She was aware that she needed to do well in the certificate programme in order to advance in her studies and worked hard in order to be able to do this.

Learning and personal support

CD appreciated the highly structured nature of the certificate programme, and the fact that learning support was built into the curriculum. The relatively small size of the student group and continuity of key academic staff provided her with a supportive group environment. Course tutors were approachable and fellow students shared similar challenges and aspirations. Even so, she felt that the amount and level of study was very demanding and she had little time or energy for anything other than her academic work. She started to learn to become more independent as a student but maintained close contact with her MATES mentor from school – a more senior student from a similar cultural background who shared her aim of becoming a doctor.

Transition experience

Although CD was initially disappointed that she did not gain direct entry to the Bachelor of Health Sciences programme, she took this setback in her stride and was prepared to do her best to step up the next year and eventually reach her goal. She had no familiar role models or anyone within her family network who had become a physician so she felt that it was all up to her, working hard and staying focused.

With limited cultural capital to draw on, CD focused on her personal resources to see her through the transition period and beyond. She was determined to succeed, and used her capacity to stay focused and work hard to achieve the best possible results.

Allowing herself to "drift off" or be distracted by less motivated friends was not an option she was prepared to contemplate.

CD's academic preparation for university was less than ideal, especially for the highly competitive and demanding field of medicine, and she was acutely aware of the gap between her academic work at school and university level study. She therefore drew on all the help available through the certificate programme, making sure that she did everything within her power to do well. Her family was supportive and she could depend on them for accommodation, financial support, and practical help, but had to rely on her own skills and abilities in relation to her academic work. CD completed the first semester with a B+ average, and was determined to do better in the second semester.

6.2.3 Narrative Three: A path, but to where?

In order to protect the identity of individual students, the following narrative is a composite story, combining elements from several study participants while focusing on the common themes evident in each story. For ease of narration, EF is referred to as male.

Cultural and economic capital

EF grew up in a working-class community. He had little contact with one of his parents and his extended family played a major role in his upbringing. EF was the first in his family to complete Year 13 at school and the first to go to university. At high school EF was active in sport and cultural groups and showed strong leadership potential as a prefect and sports captain, but did less well in his academic work. Although he had been left largely on his own when choosing NCEA subjects and had not selected his study options with a particular goal in mind, in Year 13 his teachers and school friends encouraged him to aim for university. EF lacked confidence in his academic skills and was not clear about the career options available to him and which might suit his interests and abilities.

Personal goals

While at school EF thought of becoming a doctor, an accountant, or an actor. His family was keen for him to do well, perhaps as a lawyer. He also considered looking for work, or going to Australia, linking with family members and seeking work or other opportunities there. These options seemed fluid and liable to change at any time.

Academic preparation

EF did well in his first year of NCEA, completing well above the minimum number of credits in the core subjects of English, mathematics and science. The following year he

chose subjects he enjoyed doing and which did not require too much independent study or involve many external exams. He completed a mix of NCEA standards, mostly in courses comprised of unit standards or a mix of unit and achievement standards. In his last year of high school he completed 14 credits in English, 11 in mathematics, 19 in physical education, 3 in biology, 4 in science, and 9 in social studies, all at the "Achieved" level and none with Merit or Excellence – enough to be awarded UE and just enough (the 60 credits minimum) to be awarded the NCEA Level 3 Certificate, but not enough to be admitted to a limited entry course he finally selected. Until then, EF was not aware that his academic preparation might not be sufficient for entry to this course. He had no backup plan and when declined entry to his course of choice spent anxious time trying to decide what to do next. He considered seeking work and deferring his studies, but at the last minute enrolled for a BA degree in history and psychology. He was financially dependent on his family, had no external sources of financial support such as a scholarship, and did not have a student loan in place at the start of the semester.

Work ethic / approach to academic study

EF came to university unsure of his goals and lacking in confidence and strategies to get started in university studies. He was drawn to people similarly uncertain about their place in the academic environment. He did not attend academic orientation activities and took some time to find his way around the campus. He tended to spend his days talking with other students and surfing the internet and social networking sites such as Bebo. His peer group reinforced his inclination to skip classes, and put off study and assignment work. He felt stressed when deadlines loomed and stayed up late writing assignments, often failing to complete them in time. He felt that he should be studying and felt guilty when he was not, but seemed unable to break the habit of leaving his work until the last minute. Once he was familiar with the campus and had a network of friends, he enjoyed the social aspects of student life but struggled to make any meaningful connections with his academic studies.

Learning and personal support

Feeling alone and hesitant about initiating contact with other students or staff, EF relied on a small group of friends from school for company and support. He was socially engaged with his peers but this did not help him to engage with his academic work. Facing similar difficulties, his friends were not in a position to help him develop effective study habits or use his time more productively. EF felt that it was up to him to make more of an effort to study harder, and he did not seek help from any of the learning

support services. His family was not aware that he was skipping classes and spending very little time studying.

<u>Transition experience</u>

EF started as an uncertain student, without clear personal goals, and enrolled in unfamiliar subjects for which he had limited preparation. His mood fluctuated, from being overly optimistic and seeing academic work as "easy", to feeling despondent and expecting to fail, but, on his own, he had no means by which to gain a more realistic perspective of his academic work and his role in it. So he gravitated toward peers who were in a similar situation and made the most of the freedom and social life university allowed him to enjoy.

He found his academic preparation for university less than ideal, both in terms of relevant subject content and essential study skills needed to cope with more independent study. Lacking a structured study programme and early attention from staff to his need for academic engagement, he was able to drift away from regular class attendance and contact with academic and learning support staff, as well as peers who might have been able to encourage his involvement in study and learning. His greatest need was for a personal mentor – someone with both sensitivity and firmness – who could have provided him with guidance and support to: organise his timetable, break the work into smaller chunks, set specific and attainable goals for each week, review progress and identify specific learning needs, and provide positive feedback on any achievements. Left to his own devices, EF completed the first semester having passed only one of the four papers he was taking, with a C- average, but was determined to return in the second semester and try to do better.

6.2.4 Patterns of transition

As the three narrative exemplars presented above illustrate, transition is an experience lived by individual students that is shaped by their biographies and what they bring to the experience, as well as what they encounter in their new environment. Categories such as rural, urban, Māori or Pacific, which are often used to identify students likely to require transitional support in their first year of university, tell only a partial and sometimes misleading story.

As illustrated in the first exemplar, a Māori student from a rural, low-decile school, whose parents do not have university qualifications, and who must leave his small-town environment and move to a large city, can bring with him many positive attributes and skills – a strong sense of self-worth and family support; clear personal goals developed

over time and supported by parents, teachers, and other mentors; a solid academic record with subjects chosen for their academic challenge and relevance to future plans and goals; study skills and a work ethic that can provide a firm basis for the independent study expected of university students; curiosity about the world and enthusiasm for learning, as well as social skills needed to make new friends and feel confident in a new environment.

Along with other students with similar backgrounds, he tried attending but found that the targeted learning support services did not match his perspective on university education, or his learning needs. For AB, being Māori was a source of strength and not an indication of deficits in either academic or social skills. His greatest need was for clear guidelines on what was expected of him in the subjects he was studying, and timely formative feedback on how his performance matched the standards and expectations of his teachers. He was not particularly interested in comparing himself with other students, but needed to know whether his study efforts were adequate for the results he wanted to achieve. The marks and written comments he received on his initial assessments helped him to intensify his efforts in the second half of the semester, although, like a number of other students, he found himself working on (and submitting) new assignments before he had received any feedback on his earlier work.

CD's transition experience (outlined in the second exemplar) illustrates a different pattern. She too came to university with many strengths – a positive sense of who she is and her place in the world, clear personal goals, and a supportive family. She brought with her a sense of purpose and determination, a love of learning, and a strong work ethic. She also came with a solid academic record, although without advanced study in physics – a critical issue in terms of her chosen field of study. Her NCEA record of achievement would have been more than sufficient for entry to a general science degree and, based on her track record, she would have been expected to do well. Yet in a highly competitive environment it did not give her direct entry to her chosen field of medicine. The university admission procedures identified her as a student with potential to succeed but needing additional knowledge and skills to cope with the demanding degree-level curriculum in health sciences and medicine. Being directed into the preparatory Certificate in Health Sciences for Māori and Pacific students was disappointing but, in retrospect, a helpful decision. CD had chosen a highly demanding and competitive field of study but, initially, was not fully aware of the gap between the amount and level of academic work she had done at school and what she would be required to cope with as a medical student. What could have been a stumbling block on the path to her chosen career had, probably, been turned into a stepping stone.

The structured and integrated nature of the certificate programme provided CD with a challenging but manageable transition experience and helped her to stay focused on her ultimate goal. She was able to extend her knowledge in basic sciences, get a clearer sense of the social context in which health services operate, build up her skills and confidence, and make up for the unavailability of physics in her last year at school by studying the subject in the second semester. The feedback she received strengthened her resolve as well as making her more aware of the areas in which she needed to intensify her efforts. More than that, the small group environment helped to build her confidence and enabled her to make more informed comparisons between her abilities, other students' abilities, and her teachers' expectations. At the same time, she was helped to hone her study skills, feel confident approaching the teaching staff, and feel more at home in the university environment. Although she had a long way to go, CD appreciated the importance of the transitional support she received during her first semester of university.

The third exemplar, a composite of a number of narratives, raises different questions. These are students who had demonstrated academic potential but had fallen behind by the time they completed high school. Often there were elements of family instability in these students' narratives as well as a lack of family role models or mentors who had been to university, suggesting a need for clearer guidance from their schools. Their academic potential was evident in their Year 11 NCEA results. Their natural talents, application, and leadership abilities in areas such as sport and cultural activities often shone through. But a common element in these narratives was a lack of adequate guidance and academic support as they navigated their way through the NCEA system, often ending with an unfocused mix of subjects and standards. Overall, these students' records indicated a loss of academic focus, enrolment in fewer achievement standards, and a tendency to avoid or fail external assessments. The result was often one of students achieving UE and/or the NCEA Level 3 Certificate with a bare minimum of credits, few if any with merit or excellence. In some cases, the result was a failure to achieve either UE or the Level 3 Certificate. Yet these students were the ones singled out by their schools as academically able, and encouraged to go on to university. Although their families might not have been in a position to assist in this area on their own, the schools could have made a significant difference by identifying these students earlier, providing them and their families with appropriate academic counselling, and ensuring that they stayed on an academically strong NCEA pathway that would have given them more appropriate academic preparation for university study.

Through academic and career guidance, schools might also have been able to assist these students to give more careful consideration to their post-school options and to clarify their goals. EF's narrative illustrates how unsure and, in some cases, unrealistic these students could be about their post-school plans, often without being aware of other options available to them. Lack of clear personal goals and doubts about university being the right place for them was a strong factor in some students' decisions to not enroll. Others, who enrolled at university or in a specific course to satisfy their parents' or teachers' expectations, struggled to become involved in their studies. In other words, there were stumbling blocks other than their academic preparation that made it difficult for them to engage with their university studies.

Their reluctance to initiate contact with learning support services reinforces the view that these students had other concerns that needed to be worked through before or at the same time as receiving help to strengthen their study skills. As well as struggling to engage with the formal curriculum, these students also struggled to engage with the "hidden curriculum"[12] – the values and practices that those "in the know" take for granted but which serve to reinforce feelings of difference and alienation for those new to the university environment and unsure about their place in it. This included understanding the discourses of different subjects and the expectations academic staff have of first year students, taking part in classroom discussions and asking for help, as well as initiating contact with learning support and counselling services. These students talked about sitting in lectures and not being able to understand much of what the lecturer was presenting, or feeling so removed from the topic that they could not see its relevance to themselves or their education.

Another way to look at this situation is to consider the idea of the students' academic self-efficacy – their "confidence in executing a variety of tasks such as preparing for examinations, asking questions in class, and reading textbooks" (Wilson & Gillies, 2005, p. 79). Varying degrees of self-efficacy are seen in the three narrative exemplars presented earlier, particularly in relation to academic engagement and the extent to which these students were successful in managing their time, staying focused, problem-solving, achieving a sense of control, and managing negative emotions. Academic self-efficacy is not a given but something that can and needs to be developed and strengthened. Students cannot develop academic self-efficacy without having the

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[12] "Hidden curriculum" is used in preference to related terms such as "informal curriculum" or "unintended curriculum", to indicate that the reference here is to those aspects of the university learning environment that are not necessarily obvious to all first year students and are not formally taught, but are nevertheless expected to be known by students deemed ready for university study (Devlin, 2009; Lawrence, 2003).

hidden curriculum made plain, and in some cases, without support, practice and feedback.

Gaining entry to university is not enough. EF's narrative suggests strongly that students in this group needed to be identified before their arrival at university, and helped to connect with their teachers and classmates in active learning from their first day on campus. In situations where the universities took a proactive approach, some of these students benefited from learning support services that initiated contact and focused on establishing personal relationships with individual students and normalising learning support as part of the transition process. Without such personalised or highly structured support built into the core curriculum, students in this group who enrolled in large general arts, business or science classes (sometimes because these were the only options available to them) felt overwhelmed by the totality of what they saw in front of them, and struggled to work out where or how to start. Not surprisingly, they were drawn toward other, similarly uncertain students, and quickly drifted away from academic work toward spending most of their time socialising and putting off going to classes, studying, or writing. Negative feedback, when it came, reinforced their sense of inadequacy and expectations of failure. Although all of these students returned in the second semester, intending to do better, their capacity to do so without external assistance must be questioned.

One of the critical elements needed to facilitate the transition process is the connection between school and university curricula and the extent to which academic preparation at secondary school level matches the expected entry knowledge and competencies of students enrolling in particular disciplines or programmes at university. As shown in the three narrative exemplars, the wider the gap or the disconnection (not necessarily of the students' making), the more challenging the transition process (which nevertheless is embodied in individual students' experiences, as their inability to cope, or their failure to succeed). For "minority" students from groups currently underrepresented at university who come academically well prepared for the demands and rigours of degree-level study, there are still many challenges in the transition process. For "minority" students whose academic preparation is weak, the challenges are much greater. If, as Tinto (2009) argues, "student learning is the key to student retention" (p. 2) then placing students in an environment in which they are unable (and not enabled) to learn, makes not only for a difficult transition but also jeopardises their chances of remaining at university beyond their first year.

Attention to the first-year-students' overall transition experience is as important as is the attention to the more specific academic achievements they are expected to reach. Ultimately, transition to university involves growth, learning and self-transformation for each young person embarking on university study, in an environment that, hopefully, is personally supportive and nurturing as well as academically challenging.

6.3 What sustained students through the transition process?

As with different patterns of academic engagement and transition experiences, students' views on what sustained them through the transition from school to university reflected both their reasons for being at university and the extent to which they felt connected and at ease in the university environment. By the end of the first semester some students were yet to engage fully and effectively with the learning required for success as university students, so their transition was a work in progress. Even so, all but one of the students who started the semester had lasted the distance. What sustained them through the ups and downs of the transition process included a range of experiences, motives and influences:

- Enjoyment of what they were doing: These students anticipated they would enjoy university study and felt free to choose courses that engaged their interests and in which they were successful. They enjoyed the stimulation and the challenge of learning as well as the rewards of positive feedback on their achievement. There was also the feeling that they were in the right place for this stage of their lives. They enjoyed being in the university environment, making new friends, and the greater freedom and flexibility in their daily routines.

- Sheer determination: Students in this group usually had a clear career goal and knew what they wanted to achieve in life. For them the university degree was not an end in itself but a means to a more important goal – a professional job, financial independence, or escape from poverty. Although they were competitive and achieved well, they often found study hard work that had to be done rather than something to be enjoyed. Their determination to succeed was the driving force that helped them to engage with their academic work and to approach it with diligence.

- Commitment to the ultimate goal, which had wider importance than the individual's achievement or career: These students came to university with strong altruistic motives, seeing their education and future career as a means of making a difference in the world. Even though they encountered significant

barriers in the transition process, the hope of achieving their ultimate goal made the hard work worthwhile.

- Family and faith: Students who were strongly encouraged by their families to go to university also drew on their families' encouragement and support to make it through to the end of the first semester. Fear of disappointing their families, and others who expected them to achieve a university degree, was also a factor, as were their families' and the students' personal beliefs that if they persevered, they would succeed in overcoming the challenges and be rewarded in the end.

- Focusing on the here and now and not looking too far ahead: Finally, there were also students for whom the transition to university was a difficult and possibly insurmountable challenge. Yet even without a clear goal in sight, they intended to continue. What sustained them was not looking too far ahead but focusing on doing as well as they could – one paper, one test, one assignment at a time.

Student support services need to recognise different sources of motivation and strength that enable students to manage the transition process. While these factors are relevant during the transition phase of the students' experience, it is not clear how they might change over time, or whether they are sufficient to sustain students over the longer period of degree-level study.

However challenging the transition experience for some students, it is important to stress that transition from school to university is not necessarily problematic. For some students the process is an expected and welcome rite of passage. Such students come to university with cultural capital, personal goals, and a work ethic and study skills honed through challenging but supportive school experiences that enable them to engage with the university environment in a way that eases their transition and helps them to successfully engage with their academic work. Although more common among students who come from "non-minority" backgrounds, there is no reason why all students should not have more positive experiences of transition from school to university. The findings of this study suggest that while individual biographies might not be amenable to institutional interventions, much could be done to ensure that students come better prepared for the demands of university study (academically, and in terms of personal resilience and self-efficacy), and that universities provide learning environments responsive to a diverse student population, in which students are enabled to learn, develop, and succeed.

7. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Helping to increase the participation and success in tertiary education of students from "minority" or "disadvantaged" groups, or those who are the "first-in-the-family" to attend university, remains a challenge that continues to be addressed by researchers, universities, and policy makers in many countries, most notably the USA, the UK, and Australia. The issue is also continuing to receive a great deal of attention in New Zealand, particularly in relation to the universities' obligations to the *tangata whenua* under the Treaty of Waitangi, and to other groups such as the Pacific peoples residing in New Zealand. Targeted admission policies and student support programmes are some of the expressions of institutional commitment to equity of access and participation for all students with a potential to succeed in university studies. Despite such policies and support services, research and official statistics in New Zealand (as indeed elsewhere) continue to show ongoing disparities in participation and outcomes between ethnic groups, with Māori and Pacific school leavers less likely to enroll in and graduate with a bachelor degree than school leavers from other ethnic groups (Earle, 2007, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2009; Loader & Dalgety, 2008; Ussher 2007).

Recent research has also pointed to specific factors that contribute to lower participation rates. Earle (2007), for example, has concluded that increasing the number of Māori secondary school students who achieve the University Entrance requirement is the most important precondition for more Māori students attaining university degrees. But, as our study has shown, it is not the only factor that affects students' decisions to attend university, or their ability to successfully adapt to the demands of academic study at that level. Neither is it usually enough for students to meet the minimum requirements for the award of UE because, as a number of students who participated in our study found, this may not be enough to gain the students entry to the university or the programme of their choice, or give them the essential preparation needed to cope with the demands of university study.

Transition to university is a process affected by a number of factors. In this study, rather than focusing on the attributes of the students alone, we have focused on the process of transition, bringing together the various elements that contribute to that process. The prospective, longitudinal nature of the study has also enabled us to document the challenges participating students faced along the way, and how they responded to the conditions they encountered during the first semester at university, and to the external factors that affected their lives. Our study findings confirm the view that transition to

university starts well before students set foot on campus or enter a university lecture theatre for the first time, and that it is the combination of what students bring with them and what they encounter when they arrive at university that together create particular patterns of transition experience.

The discussion that follows includes a review of the findings related to the "stepping stones" and "stumbling blocks" in the participants' experience, both before and upon entry to university. The report concludes with a list of recommendations for schools and universities, as well as some suggestions for how students can learn to help themselves and how their families can support them in this process.

7.1 Before university

Students' decisions to attend university and their readiness to do so are influenced by many factors, only some of which are within their powers to influence. Some of these factors provide a firm starting point and a clear pathway that can help students stay on track – what in this report we refer to as the 'stepping stones' of the transition experience. Other factors might prove to be barriers or 'stumbling blocks' that can trip students along the way and make the transition experience difficult for some and ultimately unsuccessful for others. Even when students and educational institutions are not in a position to change some of these factors, being aware of their role in the transition process can still be helpful, particularly in recognising the actual sources of difficulty and redirecting energies toward those factors that are amenable to change.

7.1.1 Key stepping stones and stumbling blocks on the way to university

Our findings indicate that <u>students who feel secure and supported in their family environment</u> during their high school years have a strong base from which to prepare for transition to university. A settled home environment with study as part of their daily routine can enable students to focus on their longer-term academic goals. Although having parents with university experience and qualifications was helpful, this was not a prerequisite for successful transition. It was more important that parents and other influential adults recognised the academic potential of the young person, encouraged diligence in their school work, and helped them to think seriously about their future career goals. Other helpful factors included having <u>role models or mentors</u> within their social network who could serve as inspiration, examples, and sources of advice and encouragement to continue their education. Having a person to talk with who had

experienced what these students were about to embark on, was more helpful than having access to general information.

Students appreciated the support of families that had high expectations of how far they could go, but who also gave them the freedom to make their own decisions in relation to what they wanted to study and where, and the likely career options that would come from that. The confidence such families showed was usually tempered by advice and encouragement that helped to keep these students on track, e.g. encouraging them to move directly into tertiary studies rather than have a "gap year" to work or travel.

Parental and school support for students to apply for scholarships was also significant. Winning a scholarship helped to reduce the financial burden of university study on the family and provided the student with a degree of financial independence. It acted as a boost to students' confidence, providing evidence that people other than their families and schools recognised their academic potential. Scholarships also helped to keep students motivated to do well in their studies, because of both the need to justify the trust others had placed in them, and (with longer term scholarships) the need to maintain a specified grade point average in order to continue to receive the scholarship.

Having the ability and support to plan early and attend to the necessary administrative procedures at the appropriate time was also an important stepping stone in the transition process. Critical to this was having adequate information, and knowing what needed to be done and when. Students who obtained copies of university calendars, prospectuses and specific course information (from the university websites or by contacting the university or relevant faculty or department) were able to make more confident and appropriate subject choices. They were also clearer about the subject content and the teaching modes they would encounter (lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions, field trips) in specific subjects. Timely applications for accommodation (for students moving away from home) and financial assistance from StudyLink also ensured that all non-academic matters were taken care of well before the beginning of the first semester. This enabled the new students to focus on academic matters, such as attending all initial lectures and tutorials and taking note of the guidance provided, at the start of the semester.

Students with such stepping stones in place were very likely to be more confident in their readiness for university and their ability to cope with the demands of the new environment, and to approach the prospect of becoming a university student with some anxiousness but overall optimism.

Although the presence of such cultural capital did not guarantee a smooth transition experience, it did provide a solid base from which students could develop further strengths. The absence of one or more of these stepping stones, in the case of other students, contributed to a more difficult transition experience.

A number of students reported that <u>changing family situations</u> affected their relationships within their family, as well as their schooling, and their plans and preparation for university. An unsettled environment, where both adults and young people have to deal with unpredictable changes, uncertainty, tension and stress, can make it more difficult for students to stay focused on their academic work and to keep up with learning and assessment demands. Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite the unhappy or challenging home situations some students recounted, what often came through their stories was <u>a sense of determination and resolve</u> to get to university and to make the most of the opportunities university education would offer them – in some cases to help their families, or help fulfill their families' expectations, and in others to escape the confines of their current situation. Although schools cannot change the home environment of their students, they are in the best position to recognise students with aspirations and academic potential who are at risk of not reaching their academic goals because of circumstances outside their control. Schools might be able to build in targeted support for such students, to help them keep up with their school work, develop their academic and social skills, and remain focused on their goals for the future.

For a small number of students the difficulties went deeper. Overall, these students were much <u>less confident or clear</u> about their plans. Students in this group lacked strong <u>role models or mentors</u> with personal experience of the university system who could advise them how to prepare for transition to university. Without adequate guidance from people around them, they tended to be less well organised and to have fewer arrangements such as financial support via StudyLink in place by the beginning of the first semester. Perhaps more importantly, these students appeared to <u>lack clear personal goals</u>, and to more readily <u>accept decisions others made for them</u>. Some of the Pacific students in this group reported feeling caught in a situation where their own goals for a different field of university study, work or training, were overridden by their parents' choices. While they complied with their parents' wishes, they did not necessarily internalise such goals and approached their transition experience with a degree of ambivalence and detachment.

Although it is difficult to determine the relative impact of personal and family factors on the students' transition experience, the evidence from our study leads us to conclude that having a strong personal goal and being determined to get to and succeed at university is particularly significant. Students with clear personal goals tended to be more organised, to seek and obtain relevant information earlier, and to approach university studies with more realistic expectations than students who reported feeling unsure or ambivalent about their reasons for seeking university education.

It is an accepted truism, and there is ample evidence to show that <u>academic preparation</u> is an essential prerequisite for successful transition and persistence at university (Adelman, 1999; Meyer et al., 2007; Perna, 2005; Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2008a & 2008b). Students in this study whose academic preparation acted as a stepping stone in the transition process had usually made an early and careful selection of NCEA subjects and standards, choosing Level 3 approved subjects appropriate to their intended field of university study[13]. They included academically intensive subjects and specific standards that required independent study and external assessment. Students who opt for and succeed in a significant number of external assessments in their final year of NCEA are also better prepared for university assessments that in the first year invariably involve examinations.

<u>Secondary schools</u> play a critical role in preparing students for university study. The students identified the following as having prepared them for the challenges ahead:
- Being able to take the subjects and the number and combination of standards they needed for their selected field of university study;
- Being challenged and stimulated to engage in independent learning, search out relevant information, develop a strong work ethic, and develop verbal and written presentation skills and the confidence to use them in a variety of situations;
- Being able to access appropriate academic and career counselling, accurate information about requirements for entrance to specific university programmes (often above the common UE standard), and support as they made decisions about their NCEA pathways, firmed up their plans to go on to university, and settled on their preferred field of academic study;

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[13] The choice of subjects and their constituting standards can be critical within the NCEA system, because selection of some standards over others can allow students to attain the requisite number of credits for the NCEA Level 3 Certificate, UE, or entry to particular courses but not necessarily cover subject content relevant (and sometimes essential) for study in a particular subject at university level. Just as importantly, selection of unit standards over achievement standards precludes a demonstration of higher levels of performance and the award of credits with Merit or Excellence – a critical point for students seeking admission to limited-entry courses.

- Being given additional challenges when appropriate, including accelerated progression through NCEA certificate levels, concurrent university study, field trips, and leadership responsibilities in areas such as cultural groups, sports, and school governance;
- Being helped to identify, apply for, and gain scholarships for university study.

NCEA achievements across all three years provided the clearest evidence of academic preparedness for university. But it was also evident from this study that students with solid NCEA records were also the ones most likely to have been involved in different forms of informal learning, often through leadership roles within and outside the school that required them to consult with others, discuss ideas, make decisions, and speak to or on behalf of others. Reading beyond set subject texts and general inquisitiveness about the world were also important sources of informal learning. These broader interests and skills contributed to the ease with which students adjusted to the university environment, particularly in the way they approached new experiences and how they related to academic staff and other students.

As reported in section 6.1.2, there was a wide variation in academic preparation among the study participants. Those who had limited academic preparation – having failed to achieve UE and/or the Level 3 Certificate, or having achieved one or both but with a minimum number of credits from an unfocused mix of standards from subjects that were often disconnected from their intended area of university study – found that their academic preparation was the key stumbling block in the transition process. These students were the ones denied entry to their course or university of choice, or redirected to foundation or preparatory certificate programmes (although as evidenced in CD's narrative exemplar, presented in section 6.2.2, assessment of academic preparedness varied between different courses and universities). Just as importantly, these students were also the ones who struggled to develop any degree of academic engagement during the first semester, and who faced major challenges in coping with the content of their chosen subjects and the level of performance expected of university students.

The following aspects of the students' secondary school experience recurred in their reflections on preparation for tertiary study that proved less than ideal:
- Limited access to the subjects and standards students needed for their selected field of university study. In some cases, students had been unable to access subjects such as Level 3 calculus, chemistry, biology, physics, or classical studies, or could access them only through the Correspondence School, with limited or no direct support from the teachers at their secondary school;

- Overly "helpful" teachers who provided whatever information students needed to complete the required tasks or assessments. On reflection, students referred to this as "spoon feeding" and saw that it did not challenge them to develop skills needed for the more independent learning expected of university students;

- Limited access to academic advice and counselling, and inadequate (and in some cases, inaccurate) information about university entry requirements. This contributed to disconnections between the subjects students studied at different NCEA levels at school, and between their NCEA subjects and the subjects in which they enrolled at university;

- Provision of additional challenges that did not necessarily contribute to the students' academic learning or resulted in students struggling to maintain a balance between their curricular and extra-curricular commitments. It was evident that in at least some cases the demands of multiple leadership roles in the final year of secondary school (prefect, sports captain, cultural group leader, among others) proved too onerous for some students and detracted from the time and effort they were able to devote to their academic studies;

- Low expectations of what students planning to go on to university could or needed to achieve in terms of academic subjects, standards, overall number of credits, and levels of achievement. In addition, students with weak academic records were usually not successful in their applications for scholarships, and were disappointed and discouraged by such outcomes.

It is important to note that most students did not express misgivings about their academic preparation for university in the early interviews, while still at school or before they received their NCEA results. It was only later, when they did not do as well as they had hoped in the NCEA external assessments or when faced with what was expected of them at university, that they were able to reflect on their academic preparation, including their own study effort. Part of their transition experience and growing appreciation of what it might take to succeed at university was a more reflective evaluation of what they had learned at school, what skills they had developed, and how their preparation compared to that of other students at university.

In summary, family and secondary school environments can provide students with firm stepping stones that greatly assist their transition to university. These include a sense of security within the family home, support and encouragement to set goals and work consistently toward them, and access to mentors and role models who can personalise the university study experience and act as sources of inspiration, information and encouragement. Schools can provide academic and social preparation, ensuring that

students complete relevant subjects and achieve at the highest possible level; that they set goals that require commitment and persistence, and that they develop academic and social skills needed to move to a higher level of academic study in a different environment with competence and confidence.

For some students, family and school environments can act as stumbling blocks, making the transition more difficult than it should be. Often the stumbling blocks such as inadequate academic preparation or lack of clear personal goals are the result of omission rather than commission, and the outcomes of family, school and community socioeconomic status and resources. Not all parents are in a position to guide their children through academic study and preparation for university, and not all schools have the resources to teach the full range of advanced level subjects such as physics, calculus, or classical studies for a small number of students. Whatever the reasons, however, the outcomes of such factors are embodied in the experiences of individual students who arrive at university less ready than they are perhaps expected to be for degree-level study. It is the individual students who make up the statistics of those who achieve low pass rates in their first year and who have to deal with the repercussions.

As other Starpath research has shown, greater engagement between schools and families throughout a student's secondary school career has the capacity to address some of these factors, to assist students to set their goals early and with adequate advice, and to ensure that they stay on appropriate academic pathway and receive the best possible preparation for university study (Madjar, et al., 2009).

7.1.2 The summer months

Although many students saw the summer period between school and university as a time to work, save some of their earnings, and enjoy the summer holidays with family and friends – a carefree time before moving on to the next phase of their lives – for others the summer months were a time of concern and doubt. The intention to go on to university study at the end of secondary school did not necessarily translate into university enrolment three months later. No longer at school, and not yet at university, some of these young people lacked the signposts that would have prompted them to attend to relevant tasks at appropriate times and consequently they delayed completing all the necessary applications and providing supporting documentation.

More importantly, some students experienced this period as a time of self doubt, loss of confidence, and weakening of their resolve to go to university. NCEA results, when they came in late January, helped if they were better or at least no worse than the students

expected. For students who achieved less well than they expected, or failed to gain UE, this was a time of disappointment and uncertainty about the options available to them. None of the students in our study who failed to achieve UE contemplated going back to school or taking correspondence classes in order to achieve UE.

Summer was also a time when a variety of factors unsettled individual students' plans for university enrolment. Achieving UE and the NCEA Level 3 Certificate was not necessarily the determining factor. Lack of clear personal goals, self-doubt, peer influences, and the more immediate rewards of paid employment – singly or in combination – undermined the resolve of some students, particularly if they lacked contact with mentors who could help them stay focused. A few, like many of the students in Zepke et al.'s (2005) study who withdrew from university, seemed to have "too much going on" in their lives to cope with the prospect of university study.

The summer period seemed to be particularly challenging for a number of the Pacific students. Encouraged to "prepare for university", and discouraged from any external activities such as paid work that might lure them away from the all-important goal of university education, these students were the most likely to experience self doubt and loss of confidence. Regardless of their intent, parental injunctions against outside employment did not help to make their children more committed or better prepared for the transition to university. Instead, lack of practical activities that could have been directed toward garnering resources and developing skills for life beyond secondary school contributed to feelings of boredom, demotivation, and loss of commitment to the challenge before them. Summer was a period when, instead of working actively toward realising the goal of starting a new phase of life and being ready for it, they found themselves in limbo – waiting, but unsure what exactly awaited them.

It was evident that students who lost confidence, questioned the appropriateness of their (or others') choices, or who failed to achieve UE and needed to review their current options, often had no one to turn to for information, advice, reassurance, or support during the hiatus between school and university. In the absence of other resources, a number of study participants turned to the research team when unsure of their next step, or when they encountered difficulties with enrolment and other processes.

Clearly, these students would have benefited from some form of planned and easy-to-access support service during the summer months. At the very least, they might have been helped by a series of friendly telephone calls from their intended university (or another source) to provide information and prompts about applications for enrolment

and financial assistance, to debrief about NCEA results and the likely implications in terms of their enrolment plans, and to discuss doubts, concerns or questions some of them clearly had during this period. A well-advertised "one-stop-shop" type of a drop-in and telephone call centre that could provide specific information, answer a broad range of questions prospective students are likely to have, and give clear directions might also have been able to meet the needs of these students during the summer months.

If the first year of university is not to be seen as largely a weeding out process (Gardner, Upcraft & Barefoot, 2005), more concerted efforts might also be needed by the universities to engage prospective students at risk of a difficult transition and help them prepare over the summer period. Courses designed to assist students with social and academic transition to university (in a way that traditional, large-scale, "orientation week" activities generally fail to do), are relatively common in American colleges, offered either prior to or during the first semester, and are often referred to as "University 101" or "Freshman Seminar" (Logan, 2000; Walpole, Simmerman, et al., 2008). A structured introduction to university study, its conventions and expectations, standards of performance, subject content, literature searches, and academic writing and referencing skills, perhaps offered in the summer semester, could go a long way towards not only demystifying the existence and nature of the "hidden curriculum", but also making the students more ready and confident to engage with their academic work once the first semester classes begin.

7.2 Beginning the first year at university

The primary reason students are at university is to learn, but to learn they cannot be mere spectators; they need to become actively involved in the learning process. As the findings of this study have shown, academic engagement is not automatic, and when students struggle or fail to become academically engaged their transition to university and their likelihood of succeeding are seriously compromised.

7.2.1 Key stepping stones and stumbling blocks at university
The factors that help students make the transition, building on the academic preparation and other resources they have brought with them – the stepping stones – include both student attributes and the conditions universities create as the context for their first year experience.

The fact that the majority of students, across all groups, experienced significant difficulties with the enrolment process, that a third had problems with StudyLink, and that a number could not get ready access to relevant academic advice, is an important finding of the study. The <u>practical difficulties of first engagement</u> with university contributed to the students' frustration and disappointment, and reinforced the perception of universities as big, impersonal places – formidable rather than welcoming to newcomers. Apparently minor problems, such as locating class venues, proved difficult to solve for students who were not given clear information and who lacked the confidence to ask for it from people they did not know. When it came to enrolling in the right courses, selecting specific subjects, connecting with learning support services, and taking the first steps toward academic engagement, some students clearly looked for personal contacts rather than bureaucratic protocols. They needed to connect with a person or a small number of people they could trust, who would provide encouragement as well as information from their first day on campus. Although not all students need this type of support during the transition period, research evidence indicates strongly that "minority" students at greater risk of withdrawal during the first year at university do much better when they are helped to become socially as well as academically engaged with fellow students and academic staff (Benseman et al., 2006; Gabb et al., 2006; Tinto, 2008). "Learning communities" provide one form of integration at academic and social levels and have been shown to have a positive impact on student transition and retention in the first year of university study (Gabb et al., 2006; Jaffee, Carle, Phillips & Paltoo, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2000). Without such human connections, students struggling with the transition process are at a high risk of relying on less helpful relationships with friends who are facing the same problems, and who are likely to draw them away from academic work and into social activities that will not address their need for learning and academic engagement.

Universities can do much to shape the nature of the initial engagement students have with them. It is evident from this study that for some students it is imperative that the universities, including teaching staff, initiate contact and make social connections with first year students from day one, or (as suggested in the previous section) even before the formal start of the academic year. Although it might be argued that university students need to be self-motivated, independent, and responsible for their own learning, if they arrive at university without such attributes then giving them access to university education, without appropriate support to learn how to help themselves, is not giving them the opportunity to succeed (Tinto, 2008).

As expected, our findings show that students who already had the cultural capital, and the competencies and skills to interact with their new environment in the way that is expected of them, had fewer problems with academic engagement. Such skills included ways of speaking, subject specific vocabularies, prior exposure to relevant ideas, knowing how to participate in discussions, and how to seek help. This made it more likely that they would receive answers to their questions and the guidance they needed to support additional self-directed learning during normal classes, and without the need to access learning support services. It is not that these students needed no help in order to learn, but that they knew how to obtain such help in the course of normal classroom activities. This is an important stepping stone toward a successful transition.

Students who lacked such skills and understandings of the "rules of engagement" found this a stumbling block. Not only did they find it difficult to understand different discourses within the classroom and how to become active participants, they also felt that the problem resided within them, not in the way their learning situations were constructed by the teaching staff. Being directed to learning support services reinforced this view, making academic engagement more challenging rather than easier for some students. While other students' learning needs appeared to be met in the normal classroom, their learning needs were seen to be of a different kind and the responsibility of specialised services rather than normal teaching staff. The hidden curriculum messages (Devlin, 2009) that some of the students in the study voiced (but were not necessarily able to identify in terms of their origins or effects), were that they were different, that they lacked the knowledge and skills (they assumed) other students had, or that they perhaps did not belong at university (or in their psychology, or history, or economics classes). Advice that they "drop" a paper that proved difficult, even when its completion was a requirement for their intended study major, reinforced these messages, as well as suggesting that the university did not expect them to succeed.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the difference between the hidden curriculum acting as a stepping stone in one situation and a stumbling block in another was in how two students in the study responded to feedback on their first assignment. In one case, a student who received a mark that was high but less than what he expected, or thought he had earned, concluded that the marker was either inexperienced or unfair and, rather than risk a similar outcome with the next assignment, sought a change of tutorial (that also changed the marker for his subsequent work). As far as he was concerned, subsequent higher marks vindicated his action. In contrast, another student, who was late submitting her assignment due to a critical family event, not only did not ask for special consideration, but seeing that the marks were already posted online by the time

she had her assignment ready, and that she was given a zero mark, accepted the mark, assuming there was nothing she could do to achieve a different outcome. The first student took the stance that his lecturers and tutors were there to help him achieve the best possible results. The second student felt that she would have been asking for a favour to which she was not entitled, and she could not bring herself to do that. Such differences in understanding clearly affect how students engage with their learning environment and the results they achieve.

Students who struggled to become academically engaged often lacked the self-efficacy and motivation expected of university students, in part because their school experiences had not challenged them sufficiently or they had managed to get by with minimal effort. In addition, they did not necessarily have an understanding of the time and effort involved in university study. Missing classes and minimising interactions with teaching staff, including learning support workshops and tutorials, made it even more difficult for these students to develop a sense of the work they were expected to undertake or the diligence and perseverance they needed to bring to it. Teaching approaches that limited small group interaction, and failed to recognise and accommodate the learning needs of all students, contributed to the lack of academic engagement by some students and diminished their confidence that they would succeed. A similar point is made by Tinto (2009) when he states that "student learning is the key to student retention, and by extension… the involvement of the academics, not just learning advisors, is critical to institutional efforts to increase student retention" (p. 2). If students are not learning in their chosen field of study, and not developing a sense of mastery and engagement within the new learning environment, they are at a much higher risk of failing their courses and abandoning university studies.

A critical attribute evident from this study's findings is the work ethic, or the approach to academic work that students bring to their new learning environment. University study and learning is work; it requires time, concentration, mental energy, perseverance, and mastery. Although some fields of study might be "easier" than others in terms of complexity of subject matter, amount of content, or evidence of learning students are expected to produce, all courses require work, and some a great deal of work. Students in the study who came to university with a solid academic preparation and ready to work might have been homesick or unsure how to budget, but they had few problems with academic engagement. They attended classes, participated actively in tutorials, kept up with readings, and sought and responded to feedback. But in this context it is important to acknowledge that academic engagement is a two way process and cannot be left to students alone. Students need to have teachers, not just ideas or facts, they can

engage with, and such teachers need to have some understanding of the students' prior knowledge, readiness to learn, and areas where help or remedial action might be needed. Opportunities for such academic engagement on a daily basis need to be an essential part of the first year experience of university.

Additional stepping stones for successful transition include <u>social engagement</u> with academic staff and fellow students, but the findings of this study indicate that such engagement can also occur with student support staff and peer tutors. The key point is that new students need to share their learning experiences with others, vocalise what they are learning, and have their understandings reinforced, corrected or clarified. When it occurred, social engagement helped to humanise the learning environment for students in this study and helped them to become more comfortable and more confident in the university setting.

Students who needed time to become academically engaged often turned what could have become stumbling blocks into stepping stones. Rather than being discouraged by a lower mark than they expected they used such feedback to learn how to improve their performance, or how to make the system more responsive to their needs.

The <u>students who were the least successful in the transition process</u> struggled with almost all aspects of what was expected of them. When reflecting on their approaches to learning, which involved procrastination, inadequate written work as a result of inadequate preparation and time given to such work, and reliance on lecture notes posted on the internet in place of class attendance, these students were often direct in their evaluation of their own performance. They referred to themselves as "lazy" or "bad", but this did little to show them how they could change the situation for the better. These students more than any others needed to be identified early, preferably before their arrival at university, and provided with structured support systems integrated into their normal curriculum.

Their <u>lack of awareness of the hidden curriculum</u> needed to be addressed along with their lack of academic engagement, their need for greater social engagement with people and activities that would support and encourage them toward mastery and success in their new environment, and their need to develop and grow in terms of self-efficacy. The experience of students whose struggles were recognised and addressed by academic staff within the context of the normal classroom suggests that such an approach deserves to be given greater consideration. Students who were left to initiate

contacts or to access learning support services as they saw the need were the least successful in overcoming the stumbling blocks in their way.

Young people moving from school to university are in a process of transition that includes a great deal more than their educational experience. As was evident from the data from across the ten months of the study, many students' perceptions and ideas changed over time. The majority commented on becoming more independent and self-reliant, settled in their academic and social environment, and clearer about their study plans and future directions. Those who started tentatively and needed time to engage fully with their academic work were likely to have grown in confidence and become more skilled at balancing study and other demands on their time. At the very least, students who did not do well academically were able to appreciate the need for change in how they spent their time at university and what they needed to do to be more successful.

There were also students who did well academically and had a network of classmates and acquaintances but failed to develop any firm friendships and a sense of belonging in a large city environment. Asked at the end of the first semester to suggest a title for her transition story, one student's initial response was "Lost". Social engagement is an important part of the overall transition process, not only because it helps with academic engagement, but also because social connections are an essential element of life. Failure to make social connections with academic and other staff, and with fellow students, can make the experience of being a university student a lonely, demoralising and difficult period of a young person's life. Although only one of the research students withdrew from the university within a few weeks of starting, other students commented on friends or classmates who decided to leave because they felt lonely, overwhelmed by the amount of academic work expected of them, or unable to deal with failing grades so early in their university experience.

Of particular concern among the group who took part in this study is the small number of students who felt unable to make appropriate social and academic connections during their first semester at university and whose experience of transition was marked by a lack of academic success, and personal regret and disappointment. It is evident from this study that schools and universities could do more to prepare such students for the demands of university study, and to support them to make the transition more successfully once they arrive at university.

7.3 Implications

The findings of this study have implications for students and their families, for secondary schools, and for universities and other tertiary institutions where students undertake degree-level studies. As the findings of this study show, successful transition to degree-level study depends on a range of factors – including the learning environments of schools and universities – which together contribute to the students' preparation, readiness, expectations, and eventual experience of transition from school to university. Transition itself starts while students are still at school, considering educational and career options, choosing courses of study, and honing study and other skills.

7.3.1 Implications for students and families

Successful transition is made easier if students have clear goals, have studied subjects relevant to their chosen field of university study, have challenged themselves to go beyond the minimum number of credits needed for the UE qualification and to complete externally assessed achievement standards, and have well developed study and communication skills. Families can assist by encouraging their young people to explore different educational and career options early, to set goals that match their abilities, interests and aspirations, and to make informed NCEA course choices that will contribute to their readiness for university study. Families can also help by encouraging their young people to have wider interests, and to develop skills that will build their sense of competence and confidence for education and life beyond secondary school.

As they move through senior secondary school, students need to be encouraged to take on increasing responsibility for their academic preparation at school, particularly in relation to the amount of time and effort they put into their studies and how they balance this against other demands, including sport and other activities. This is particularly important in relation to decisions related to study for externally assessed NCEA achievement standards and fronting up for external exams. Students need to be helped to make clear links between their motivation and effort and the academic outcomes they achieve so that they can develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy and insight into situations that affect their learning and academic success.

Transition to university, particularly for students who move away from home, also includes adjustment in non-academic areas without the direct oversight of parents or family. Students can prepare for these additional responsibilities by learning how to budget and live on limited income, select and prepare healthy food, know how to do basic housecleaning, be responsible in their use of alcohol, and practice good time

management skills, including getting enough sleep and balancing study and social activities.

7.3.2 Implications for schools

Most secondary schools are expected to meet the needs of a range of students and prepare them for entry into the workforce, vocational training, or higher education. For some low-decile schools the challenge of meeting the learning needs of university-bound students can be considerable. Yet because these are the schools attended by the majority of students from groups that are currently underrepresented in university education – Māori, Pacific, and students from low-income families without a history of university education – it is critical that they provide the quality of academic preparation and advice needed for successful transition to degree-level study.

Schools need to provide not only the subjects but also the number and combination of NCEA standards their students will need as preparation for their selected field of university study. This might require collaboration with neighbouring schools to provide the teaching expertise in specialised areas such as NCEA Level 3 physics, mathematics with calculus, or other subjects, or structured support for students who can only study specific subjects through the Correspondence School.

Teachers who are teaching Level 3 subjects to students planning to attend university need to be fully informed of the entry knowledge and skills expected of first year university students in their subject areas, so that as far as possible there is optimum articulation between the secondary and tertiary curricula in particular subjects. The aim should be to not only help students achieve NCEA credits and attain the UE qualification, but to also prepare them for the demands of degree-level study. Challenging students to excel and to go beyond the minimum number of credits and level of performance in each subject would also assist in preparing them for transition to university. It is helpful if schools have high expectations of students who demonstrate academic potential and if students are helped to learn to have high expectations of themselves.

Schools need to ensure that effective pedagogical approaches are used with senior students to challenge and stimulate them to engage in independent learning, to search for information, and to develop and exercise critical thinking and logical reasoning skills, as well as written and verbal communication skills, and a strong work ethic. These skills and attributes are essential for successful transition to university and provide a firm

base from which students are able to develop confidence in their ability to meet the challenges of more advanced study.

Schools also need to ensure that students receive early and ongoing academic and career counselling, so that they (and their families) can review their aspirations and career plans, make any necessary adjustments, and ensure that they remain on the most appropriate academic path. For students who are the first in their family to go to university, it is essential that schools provide information and support that families and students might not be aware of, or might not know how to access. Schools need to engage students and their families in a way that creates trust and provides a basis for open discussion, the provision of specific academic advice, and actions designed to produce the best possible outcomes for the student.

Schools can assist their students to make a successful transition to university study by presenting them with additional challenges. This could include carefully considered leadership roles, educational field trips, work experience linked with professional mentoring in the area of the students' intended course of study, and participation in summer work or education programmes likely to add to students' knowledge, skills, and confidence. Nevertheless, students should be encouraged to be realistic and to not over-commit themselves to extra-curricular activities, including leadership roles in sports, cultural groups or school governance, at the cost of their academic application and outcomes. Targeted academic counselling should help students appreciate the commitments they are making, assess their likely impact on their academic studies, and help them set priorities. This is especially important in cultural settings where young people are likely to feel obliged to accede to the requests of their elders, including teachers.

Finally, schools can assist students to identify, apply for, and gain scholarships for university study. Success in scholarship applications is almost always dependent on students' academic achievement to date and their potential to succeed in future studies, providing another reason for encouraging students to excel and work to their full potential. As noted in the previous section of the report, scholarships provide important assistance to students whose families might be limited in their capacity to support them financially through university studies, but they also provide other benefits, including affirmation of the students' academic abilities, and a boost to their confidence and motivation.

7.3.3 Implications for universities

One of the key questions arising from the findings of this study is how prospective university students can be assisted to stay on track during the summer period between school and university. It is evident that some students need help to access relevant information and services, to deal with their NCEA results and any implications these might have for their study plans, and to access the most relevant academic advice when selecting specific subjects or when forced to change away from their chosen degree programme or major field of study. If the universities are opening their doors to students from underrepresented groups, they also need to provide a more welcoming means for them to get past the front doorstep. Students whose confidence and resolve are likely to be weakened during the summer would benefit from some form of support during this period. As part of their commitments to equity and transition support, universities should give some consideration to how they can best assist prospective students who need support during this period.

One option might be some form of centralised, easy-to-access advisory service that is available to respond to requests for advice or help but is also responsible for pro-active outreach to prospective students, ensuring they are on track with enrolment and other procedures, are able to obtain appropriate academic advice, and have a ready point of contact for any unresolved matters. Text message reminders about StudyLink applications, enrolment deadlines, orientation activities, and contact numbers for advice, might be part of such a service.

Universities might also need to give consideration to more formal, on-campus summer courses designed to familiarise targeted students with the university environment and its conventions and expectations, and the academic work and performance expected of first year students. Whether short (two-three weeks) and 'not for credit', or longer and similar to other 'for credit' summer school offerings, such courses could provide students with an overview and taste of the selected subject content, introduce them to university libraries and electronic literature searching, and boost their skills in academic writing and referencing. As noted earlier in this report, such courses could go a long way toward demystifying the existence and nature of the "hidden curriculum" and helping students be more ready and confident to engage with their academic work once the semester classes begin.

Initiatives such as a summer support service, or more structured introductory summer courses should be trialed and evaluated as part of ongoing research into the transition experience of first year students.

Universities need to ensure that their enrolment procedures and student administration services are efficient, "user-friendly", and responsive to students' needs. Timely notification of acceptance or rejection by limited-entry programmes is essential for students considering other options. Academic orientation activities also need to be targeted in a way that engages students' interest and provides them with a helpful and positive experience.

The evidence from this study and other research indicates strongly that both academic engagement and social engagement are critical to successful transition and success at university. Although greatly assisted by the attributes and skills individual students bring with them, ultimately, student engagement is dependent on how the universities organise their interactions and structure the overall environment in which students are expected to learn. As Tinto (2008) stresses, nowhere is engagement more critical than in the classroom. The examples of students' experiences within highly structured preparatory certificate programmes and degree-level classes with a high amount of teacher-student contact demonstrate the role of social engagement in reinforcing academic engagement and helping students to feel more motivated and more at ease in the university environment. The critical element that helps students succeed in these contexts is the bridging of social distances between students and their teachers and the strengthening of the students' capacity to learn.

There is a need for universities to consider how they can be more proactive in facilitating academic and social engagement, particularly within large classes in arts, science, commerce, and first-year law programmes. Students struggling to become involved often find themselves in such classes – sometimes by choice and sometimes by default – and feel lost and overwhelmed by the size of the class and their inability to feel at ease in such an environment. The connections between their classroom experiences and the existence of separate learning support services with which they must initiate contact if they need help are far from obvious. The lesson here seems to be that learning support needs to be integrated into the core curriculum, as it is in some selective programmes, and as advocated by experts in the field such as Tinto (2008; 2009) on the basis of extensive research evidence. This would require a major reorganisation of the first year curriculum, significant commitment from academic and support staff, willingness to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries, and acceptance of the premise that all students learn more through greater social and academic engagement with their teachers and with each other.

The clearest example of the integration of learning support with the core curriculum is through learning communities (described in section 3.3 of the Literature Review of this report). Such collaborative learning environments need strong commitment from the institution and from individual staff members, and are driven by the assumption that students can learn how to learn and by high expectations of the students' contribution to their own learning. A critical element of learning communities is a constant flow of feedback between students and teachers – indicating to students the progress they are making as well as areas in which they need to intensify their efforts or seek additional help, and indicating to teachers how successful their teaching approaches are with the students they are teaching, and areas where they might need to use different strategies.

One of the findings of this study highlighted the difficulties students had with delayed and limited feedback on their early work. Even without learning communities, this is an area the universities might need to review to ensure that first year students, particularly during their first semester at university, are given early, frequent, detailed and constructive feedback as part of their formative assessment. When students find themselves working "in the dark", without a clear understanding of what is expected from them, and without feedback on their earlier work or suggestions for how they might improve on it, their learning and their performance suffer. Even students who are doing well need the reassurance that they are on track and that their study approaches are working.

If learning communities are out of the question, then learning support services need to go out to the students rather than waiting for the students to come to them. It is evident that students at greatest risk of failing to make a successful transition can easily become invisible in a system that depends on them to make their needs known. Data from students who enrolled at universities that take a proactive role in helping students to make connections with academic and support staff during the orientation period indicate that Pacific and Māori students in particular, often reluctant to initiate contact, find such initiatives helpful and value the relationships they are able to develop with learning support staff early in the first semester. Of particular value is the approach that normalises learning support as a necessary and accepted part of the transition experience, rather than as evidence of the individual student's inadequacies as a learner. Just as importantly, learning support needs to be closely aligned with the subject content students are studying. This might be done through peer mentors such as older students who can provide not only guidance or information about structuring an essay or completing a lab report but can do so in the context of a specific subject and task the student is working to accomplish.

Students with cultural capital and strong academic preparation are likely to survive the transition experience and succeed in their university studies regardless of the support they receive, although whether they too might learn more and be more satisfied with the experience if the learning environment they encounter is more engaging and supportive is an open question. What is evident is that students from less advantaged groups might be admitted into the universities but without an appropriate learning environment, support, and engagement are likely to struggle and to find the transition experience a more difficult and less successful and satisfying experience than it could or should be.

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