

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

A map, a bicycle, and good weather:
The transition to undergraduate study

Sue Purnell
2002

A thesis written in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master of
Education (Adult Education) at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

Thesis Abstract

This thesis set out to explore the experiences of a group of students in their first year of undergraduate study in a New Zealand university, in 2001. The students were full time, enrolled in two different degree programmes, and attended classes on two different sites.

The study used qualitative, interpretive methodology to enable the students' voice to be heard clearly throughout. This is their story.

The study also utilised a Transition Cycle Model to explore the ideas that arose from examining the data, and offers some suggestions to the university that might help it to improve the experience of its first year students in the future.

The major conclusion of this study are:

- The experience of the individual student needs to be considered and addressed
- Enrolment and academic advice strategies are not adequate to meet the needs of the wide variety of students enrolling in undergraduate study
- The first few weeks set the scene for the rest of the first year, and so every effort must be made to ensure those weeks are positive, and the students are well supported with the provision of an excellent initial teaching/learning experience
- The interaction between students and all university staff sets the tone for the year
- Assessment issues loom large for students. They need clear explanations and constructive and helpful feedback
- Students who live outside the university seem to feel less of a 'connection' with the university than academics would like
- A similar lack of connection is felt by students who need to have paid work to supplement their Student Loan/Allowance.

Recommendations for change, and for further research, are made in the concluding chapter.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the late Shane Town PhD. Shane sparked my interest in the first year experience, and gave me the courage to start writing.

Acknowledgements

The first acknowledgements must go to my daughters, Heather and Jenny, and - although he distracted rather than helped - my grandson Matthew. Their faith that I would complete this thesis never wavered.

I am extremely grateful to the 13 students who gave up their time and shared the ideas and experiences that are the foundation of this work.

Thanks are also due to my supervisors, Alison Viskovic and Graham Collins, both from the Department of Social and Policy Studies at Massey University College of Education, without whom this thesis would still be just an idea.

Finally to my colleagues who have helped, supported, advised, threatened and bullied me until I finished.

CONTENTS

THESIS ABSTRACT	II
DEDICATION	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.0 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	1
1.1 Why is the first year of undergraduate study important?.....	3
1.2 Why this current study?	5
1.3 The Research Question	6
1.4 The Structure	6
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	9
2.0 INTRODUCTION	9
2.1 Part One: The First Year Experience and Transition to Higher Education	11
2.1.1 The First Year Experience in the United States of America.....	12
2.1.2 The First Year Experience in Australia.....	21
2.1.3 Comments on the Literature from the USA and Australia	30
2.1.4 Changes in New Zealand Education policy since 1984	34
2.1.5 The First Year Experience in New Zealand	42
2.1.6 Comment	49
2.2 Part Two: Transition Theories	49
2.3 Conclusion	54
CHAPTER THREE: THE RESEARCH PROCESS	56
3.0 INTRODUCTION	56
3.1 The Research Question	56
3.2 Overview of the study.....	57
3.3 The Research Approach.....	58
3.4 The Research Process	63
3.5 Conclusion	74
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS- WHAT DID THE STUDENTS HAVE TO SAY?	75
4.0 INTRODUCTION	75
4.1 Thumbnail sketches of the participants.....	75
4.2 What the students had to say.....	80
4.3 Conclusion	128
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	130
5.0 INTRODUCTION.....	130
5.1 Propositions	130
5.2 The first year experience is not uniform: it is a personal journey.....	132
5.3 Institutional systems and processes affect the transition journey at all stages of the cycle	142
5.3 The political/economic/social context affects the first year experience.....	166
5.4 Conclusion	170

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	172
6.0 INTRODUCTION	172
6.1 Conclusions	173
6.2 Recommendations: To be addressed by the University.....	174
6.2 Suggestions for further research	178
6.3 Conclusion	180
BIBLIOGRAPHY	181
APPENDICES.....	198
APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPLICATION	199
Appendix 1.1: Invitation to Participate	208
Appendix 1.2: Participant Information Sheet	209
Appendix 1.3: Consent Forms.....	211
Appendix 1.4: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement.....	214
Appendix 1.5: Letter to Pro-Vice Chancellors.....	215
Appendix 1.6: Request for letters	216
APPENDIX 2: NICHOLSON'S TRANSITION CYCLE.....	217

CONTENTS – TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Findings of Chickering and Brower compared.....	19
Table 2. Education Policies and Reports 1984-1990	38
Table 3. Education Policies and Reports 1990 -2000.....	39
Table 4. Total numbers of students enrolled in tertiary study in New Zealand.....	41
Table 5. A comparison of the transition models of Boud & Griffin(1987), and Nicholson(1990)	52
Table 6. Quantitative and Qualitative paradigm assumptions (Creswell 1994:5).	59
Table 7. Characteristics of the Study Group.....	79
Table 8. Distribution by Site.....	79
Table 9. Students grouped by Site and by Degree enrolment.....	80
Table 10. Living arrangements.....	92
Table 11. Paid working hours of students on the study	113
Figure 1. Nicholson's transition Cycle (1990).....	143
Figure 2. The Role of management systems around the transition cycle [adapted from Nicholson (1990)]	175
Figure 3. The Transition cycle. Nicholson (1990:86).....	218

Chapter One: Introduction

Summing up the experiences of his first year at university Bob (one of the students in this study) said :

I was calm and composed on the surface, but paddling like hell underneath.

A good scholar, with family support and a reasonably clear vision for his future, Bob still felt this way for much of the year. If he felt like this, how were others feeling about their experiences - particularly those less well prepared, or less well supported in this new endeavour?

1.0 Background to the Study

In 2001, a total of 72,369 students enrolled for the first time in a New Zealand tertiary institution, and 22,970 of them enrolled in University courses (NZ Ministry of Education 2002). Just over 4,000 of these university students were enrolled in first year undergraduate studies at the university researched for this thesis

How did they cope with the transition? Did they drop out during or at the end of, the year? Did they pass their tests, assignments and exams? Did they fall in love, drink too much, get into a sports team? Did they, to quote Nicholson (1990), have ...*a map, a bicycle and good weather* to help them along? Nicholson suggests that:

The good weather is a climate of psychological safety and support, and the bicycle is the psychological freedom to explore and pathfind in the new environment; but the maps which organisations are usually able to give people are totally inadequate (1990:94).

With student numbers increasing all the time in New Zealand, it seemed an appropriate time to investigate the experiences that some of them were having, and that others might expect.

All students making the transition to the University setting for the first time enter unfamiliar territory. They face a veritable jungle of traps, challenges and new possibilities and experiences. Whether they come straight from school, or have been at home or in the workplace they may well not be prepared for the major challenges ahead.

It is more than five years since I first started to get curious about the ways in which first year university students perceive their new environment, and the challenges that face them. In fact, the interest was much wider originally, and encompassed all of the tertiary sector, but for the purposes of this thesis, I have limited the exploration to university.

Since the education reforms of the late 1980's outlined in *Learning for Life* (Minister of Education 1989) an increasingly diverse group of students has entered the New Zealand university system. The removal of barriers to education for groups previously under-represented in the tertiary sector meant that a paradigm shift was taking place. This major shift, and some of the policies that underpin it, is explored in Chapter Two. In practice this has meant that the students now entering university may not be as well prepared as students in the past, when mainly the 'academic elite' gained admission. I wanted to find out whether this shift was actually manifesting itself in some way in the experiences of new school leavers going to university. Were they feeling under-prepared, unable to cope, or confident, and excited about the future?

At the same time, an increasing number of mature (non-school leaver) students started to come into the university system. Ministry of Education figures suggest that over 60% of the 70,000 students who entered tertiary education for the first time in 2000 did not come straight from school. (Ministry of Education 2001) Numbers are not available specifically for the university sector, but in the university studied for this thesis, only just over 40% of new undergraduates came directly from the compulsory education sector. This mature-age

group, it might be assumed, would face other challenges, or have a different level of preparedness, compared with school leavers. They would also, perhaps, experience their change of role from another perspective.

1.1 Why is the first year of undergraduate study important?

Why is there a focus on this transition to university, on the so-called 'First Year Experience'? Perhaps the following quote from Peter Scott, in 1988 editor of *The Times Higher Education Supplement* in London, will help to explain. Scott delivered the keynote address to the First Year Experience Summer Conference in Cambridge, England.

His opening words were

The First Year Experience, I am almost tempted to say, is the higher education experience. ... it has elements of novelty, strangeness, excitement, and difficulty which the experience of the second and subsequent years can never match. They can never quite rival the intensity of the first encounter with higher education. So the first year experience is a crucial intersection, a meeting place between student expectations on one hand, and academic experiences on the other (Scott, 1988).

Here Scott encapsulates the importance of the first year as the gateway to the whole university experience, with all its challenges, and opportunities. He also recognises that although many other transitions and changes occur as students make their way through university, the first of those transitions is perhaps the most significant. The exploration and analysis, in this thesis, of the experiences of a small group of students in one university is one way of exploring how significant the students found it.

In the years since Scott's address much has been done internationally, with varying degrees of success and failure, to ease the transition to university for new undergraduate students. The nature of the student body has changed, (elaborated on in more detail later in the study) and transitions have been recognised at other points in the university calendar such as the transition between years of study, from university to the workplace, or from graduation to post graduate study.

A key factor in the development of this current study was the lack of substantive written material on the experience of New Zealand first year students, and a desire on the part of the researcher to discover whether their experiences are different from, or similar to, those of their Australian counterparts. Work from the rest of the world, and the United States of America in particular, was used for background information, but their tertiary education sector structure is substantially different from that found in New Zealand.

In 1994 and again in 1999, Craig McInnis from University of Melbourne, carried out extensive quantitative research surveys, examining the perceptions experiences and behaviours of thousands (4028 in 1994 and 2609 in 1999) of undergraduate first year students in seven Australian Universities (McInnis and James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000a). The results of the two surveys provide a useful benchmark for the exploration of first year experience in the South Pacific region. McInnis' work has provided a foundation for Australian institutions to make changes to the way that they manage the initial transition of school leavers and mature age students from school or work, to university. His findings may not be as applicable in the New Zealand context. However,

the two systems of tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand are very similar, and therefore there is likely to be significant overlap with any similar study carried out in New Zealand.

1.2 Why this current study?

The current study is not the first in New Zealand, and papers from various New Zealand tertiary institutions will be referred to throughout this work. Some excellent Masters theses have also been written in New Zealand, and I acknowledge the work of my student and academic colleagues. However, much of their work has focused on a very specific part of the first year experience, such as:

- international students' perspectives of quality service in one university college (Walker, 1995);
- the perceptions of overseas students in their first year of teacher education (Haworth, 1996);
- student and tutor expectations in tutorial settings (Dowds, 1999).

Although the study reported here is also restricted in its setting to one university, the nature of the exploration is far more general. It uses qualitative research methodology, based on semi-structured interviews, to explore the experiences of a small group of students as they undergo a great change in their lives. It will be interesting to see how they perceive the experience - is it a major transition, or is it just the next logical step in life's journey?

1.3 The Research Question

To discover the answer to this question, and the many others that arose from the literature and personal experience, this research seeks to answer the question:

What are students' perceptions of their experience of the first undergraduate year at one university in New Zealand at the beginning of the 21st Century, and what are the implications for the university of these experiences?

1.4 The Structure

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this study comes primarily from the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand. The review is in two parts:

Part One: A explores literature from the USA and Australia on First Year Experience and the Transition to Higher Education; and the relevance of that literature for the New Zealand situation.

Part One: B investigates both the legislative changes that have affected the New Zealand tertiary education sector since 1980, and the literature on first year experience from New Zealand.

Part Two reviews other literature relating to transition processes, seeking a framework to guide the study.

Chapter Three: The Research Process

This is a descriptive study that uses qualitative, inductive methodology, and processes that enables the students to describe their experiences in their own words. It does not rely on a previous well-formed hypothesis, and seeks to investigate student experiences without expecting any particular outcomes, other than to hear what they have to say. This chapter describes the process that was used, the challenges that were encountered, and the ways in which the data has been analysed and synthesised to provide some recommendations for the university involved in the study.

Chapter Four: The Findings - what did the students have to say?

Hearing the student voice was an important factor in this study, and this chapter records the student descriptions of their experiences at some length. The group studied was not large, but included a diverse mix of ages, cultures and educational backgrounds. Their individual stories make interesting reading.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In this chapter, the experiences of the students are compared with the reviewed literature. A number of propositions are made, and are supported by the findings.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

A number of conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from the results of this study. In this final chapter recommendations are made that provide a framework for the university

to make constructive changes in the ways in which it deals with the transition to undergraduate study for its particular cohort of students.