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

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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.

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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.

Chapter Two: Literature review.

2.0 Introduction

There is a growing body of literature on the First Year Experience (FYE) much of which is useful and relevant, and has informed this study.

Some of the literature, because of the context *in* which it was written, or the purpose *for* which it was written (such as planning for a freshman seminar in a two year college in the mid-western United States) has not been reviewed in this work. An example of this is one book that was located in the search for information in the area of transition – *Rites of Passage in a Student Culture: A study of the dynamics of transition* by Leemon. Written in 1972, this book is a shining example of the lack of relevance of some American FYE literature to the New Zealand context. To quote from the introduction, the book:

is an account of the process of recruitment, training, and eventual induction of a group of young men who, as pledges of a Greek letter social fraternity overcame a series of hurdles preparatory to their becoming ritually initiated as members (1972:v)

There is nothing in the New Zealand university system that parallels this experience and there are numerous other publications that similarly lack relevance, even though they address the first undergraduate year.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) (quoted in Silverman, 2000) suggest that existing literature can be used for five purposes in qualitative research:

- *To stimulate theoretical sensitivity:* 'Providing concepts and relationships that can be checked out against actual data'
- *To provide secondary sources of data:* To be used for initial trial runs of your own concepts and topics.
- *To stimulate questions during data gathering and data analysis*

- *To direct theoretical sampling:* To ‘give you ideas about where you might go to uncover phenomena important to the development of your theory’
- *To be used as supplementary validation.* To explain why your findings support or differ from the existing literature (Silverman, 2000:192).

The place of the literature in this thesis reflects all of these purposes. Creswell (1994) also describes a key factor related to the place of literature review in the qualitative study:

...namely that it should be used inductively, so that it does not direct the questions asked by the researcher (1994:20).

In a discussion about the placement of the literature in the study, he offers three possibilities

- As **an introduction** – used to frame the study or as a backdrop for the problem – who has written about it, who has studied it, who has indicated the importance of studying the issue
- As **a separate section** – a review of the literature, similar to the way in which it is used in quantitative studies, typically toward the beginning of the study
- At the **end of the study** – the final section, where it is used to compare or contrast with the results that emerge from the study. Often used in grounded theory studies, this model uses literature inductively (Creswell, 1994:22).

In this thesis, the literature appears as a separate section, early in the work, to provide an introduction and overview, and to frame the study. The literature is used again at the end of the study, in the Discussion Chapter, where it becomes one part of the data used to interpret the findings of the research project.

This chapter examines the literature, looking for the answers to three major questions:

- What does the literature say about the research that has already been done in the area of FYE and transition to university, in the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand?
- What literature is available that describes the changes to the tertiary education sector in New Zealand, in order to provide a context for this study?
- What transition theories might be available to provide a framework for analysis of data?

The chapter is divided into two distinct parts:

Part One: Writings on the **First Year Experience and Transition to Higher Education**

- a. A review of literature from the USA and Australia concerned with FYE and transition and their relevance for this thesis
- b. the tertiary education context in New Zealand, and writing about FYE from New Zealand authors

Part Two: A survey of writing about **Change, Transition, and Transition Theories.**

2.1 Part One: The First Year Experience and Transition to Higher Education

In the introduction to a recent special edition of *Higher Education Research and Development* (Vol. 20(2), 2001) devoted to the First Year Experience, James comments

The intensity of activity surrounding first year students comes from a realisation that the quality of the transition to university and the first experiences of university life are crucial to student retention. The early on-campus experiences also appear to be highly predictive of student satisfaction in the longer term, and the quality of overall academic outcomes. There is strong evidence that the patterns of expectation and study habits established in the first year are enduring (James, 2001:101)

This statement encompasses many of the reasons why this researcher and others working with first year university students are interested in the transition from school, home or work, to university.

It has become rather 'trendy' in some tertiary education circles to talk about FYE or the transition to tertiary education, as if everybody believes that there are problems and issues to deal with, or that this phase in the life of a student is critically important. Perhaps we are overstating the case, and making a fuss about nothing. This will become clearer when the literature currently available has been examined. I acknowledge here that the transition to

university is the focus of my research, rather than a general investigation of transition into the tertiary education sector as a whole.

It is important to examine the background research into FYE, before investigating what has happened in the New Zealand context, since that which has gone before informs this current study.

From small beginnings in the United States of America at least as far back as the 1920's, interest in the nature and challenge of the move into undergraduate study, or the first year of tertiary education, has spread internationally particularly to the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Writers have explored the experiences of students, the challenges facing students, academic staff and the universities involved with FYE, strategies for improvement, and evaluations of those strategies.

This literature review covers material on FYE from the USA, Australia and New Zealand. In each case it offers a perspective on the development of interest, research and writing about FYE, followed by more recent publications. Following the review of material from the USA and Australia, there is comment on the relevance of that material as a scaffold for this thesis, prior to examining New Zealand writing.

2.1.1 The First Year Experience in the United States of America

The First Year Experience movement has its origins in the United States. However the post-compulsory, or tertiary, sector in the United States is structured very differently from that experienced by students in New Zealand and Australia. In the United States, almost without exception, students - particularly school leavers - undertake a Freshman Year. This is a general, foundation year, which gives them the opportunity to settle in, to learn some fundamental university survival skills, and to study in common, general subject areas. At the end of that year, or during it, students then make decisions about a major study focus, which may be very different from their original intentions.

Fitts and Swift wrote one of the first publications in relation to the transition to university as early as 1928. Their paper on the construction of orientation courses for college freshmen is clear evidence that the challenges of the transition have been recognised for a long time.

Early writers in this area (Astin, 1964, 1977b; Tinto, 1987,1995,1998; Pascarella, Smith & Ethington 1986; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 1998; and Upcraft & Gardner, 1989) wrote about the challenges of low retention rates, the effect of university on students, and possible change strategies for universities to address these issues. Others groups, such as Astin, Tsui & Avalos (1996) and Astin, Parrott, Korn & Sax (1997) consider:

- the problems and needs encountered by students in their first or 'freshman' year at University
- the challenges facing the Universities
- the high attrition rate in first year
- possible options to alleviate the problems, such as 'University 101' or freshman courses.

Such courses have been developed and are now an established part of university curricula across the United States - assisting students to make the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Much of the American literature since the mid 1990's relates more to the pedagogy and evaluation of first year orientation courses, and is important in the larger picture of the FYE movement. However this body of writing is not reviewed here since it is so specific to the American context.

Astin followed up his 1977 work, *Four Critical Years*, with *What Matters in College? Four critical years revisited* (1993) in which he commented on the amount of writing being generated by FYE concerns:

The sheer volume of publications on college impact might tempt one to conclude that a great deal is already known about the answers ... However, since much research is either limited in scope, inadequate in design, or outdated, there is surprisingly little one can say with confidence about the impact of college on contemporary students (1993:2).

Astin co-ordinates the largest on-going study of the American higher education system, with longitudinal data covering some 500,000 students and a national sample of 1,300 institutions of all types. The study has three major foci:

- *Understanding the meaning of student change*
- *Developing a model or conceptual framework for studying student outcomes*
- *Designing the analyses of college impact. (1993:5)*

Interest in FYE is very strong throughout the United States, and the University of South Carolina (USC) has established a department devoted entirely to the study of FYE (and the other major transition point for any university student - from University out into the workplace). This Centre has been, and continues to be, a prime mover in raising awareness of the challenges of FYE around the world, and has organised and sponsored both National (USA), International, and Pacific Rim Conferences for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition.

In an unpublished paper delivered on the first day of the 12th International Conference on the First Year Experience in 1999, John Gardner (founder of the National Resource Centre for FYE at USC) set the background for the Conference. He outlined the reasons for international interest in the First Year College Experience:

- *The desire to increase access of more students to higher education as well as their retention and graduation rates, and rates of attrition (approximately one third of all students in US drop out before their degree is completed)*
- *The increase in costs of higher education*
- *Demographic changes in the population of new students*
- *A decline in the level of academic preparation of entering students*
- *Concerns over the quality of the undergraduate curriculum and related concerns about the inadequate preparation of faculty to teach, counsel, and advise today's undergraduate students (Gardner 1999)*

Gardner also identified measures of success for first year students, based on earlier research (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989) and suggested that freshmen succeed when they make progress towards fulfilling their educational and personal goals.

It is important to recognise Gardner as a leader in the field in the current USA environment. However his work, when viewed from a New Zealand perspective, appears to be very mono-cultural, and not in tune with the situation as it exists here. In New Zealand we have a student population that is extremely diverse, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, school background, life experience, expectations and abilities. This diversity is not reflected in much of the published work from the United States up until the late 1990s. Recent USA writing is now reflecting the changes in the university population (Levine & Cureton, 1998; Jacoby, 2000; Parr, 2000; and Light, 2001)

Two key issues written about by many writers from the USA are

- Attrition
- The impact of the college experience on students.

Attrition

One concern that has influenced research and writing about students at university, is the high rate of attrition – particularly of first year students. It is in the interests of all concerned to try to ensure that once students have enrolled and started their study, they stay at their chosen university and succeed in their academic endeavours.

Elliott wrote in 1997:

There is substantial literature on student attrition. This literature may broadly be divided into four categories. First there is much empirical research into this issue. Second, significant theoretical views have been developed. Third, there have been a substantial number of reports at university and government level. Finally, the implications for practice (especially for students) are discussed in a large number of self help books (1997:79).

However, writers in the *College Student Journal* of June 1999 did challenge the idea of full retention in an article entitled *Is all retention good?* They offer an alternative view and summarise the discussion:

- *A university does not want to retain students who are academically unsuited for their environment – its reputation might be damaged by below average students being allowed to graduate*
- *High-performing students and low-performing students are leaving for different reasons, and for the students the move may be a positive one. The University cannot be all things to all students*
- *Students even when attending university are still out ‘shopping’, and are aware of what is available elsewhere*
- *The university needs a clear picture of those who are leaving and those who should be retained, and efforts should be made to find out why they are leaving.*
- *Some segments of admitted students will not be academically successful at a particular university. (Rummel, Acton, Costello & Pielow 1999: 3)*

It is useful to have this alternative perspective.

Writers on attrition include Astin (1977b); Tinto (1987,1995,1998); and Pascarella et al (1986, 1991, 1998). They have all explored the possible reasons for high attrition rates in first year (students continue to drop out in later years but in smaller numbers) and the effects of the college experience. These writers have all approached the challenges from different perspectives, and proposed a number of strategies and models that may be utilised to endeavour to minimise the loss. They have also identified the effects on both the student and the universities/colleges of high drop out rates. Some of these effects are clearly financial, and thus measurable, but less easy to quantify are the emotional and attitudinal effects on the students, and the reputation of the university.

Vincent Tinto is probably the most well known writer in the area of student attrition and the first year experience. His work underpins much of the empirical work in the USA over the last 20 years. In his seminal work, *Leaving College - Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (1993) he establishes the role of the institution in promoting an

environment for student persistence and integration. Tinto suggests three principles of effective retention:

1. Institutional commitment to students.

*Effective retention programmes are committed to the students they serve.
They put student welfare ahead of other institutional goals*

2. Educational commitment for **all** students

Effective retention programmes are first and foremost committed to the education of all, not just some of their students.

3. Social and Intellectual Community

Effective retention programmes are committed to the development of supportive social and educational communities in which all students are integrated as competent members (1993:146)

Tinto continues to write about attrition, and his most recent publication, in 1998, suggests that despite extensive research on the topic, and the development of a plethora of strategies in universities throughout the United States to limit attrition, there are still major unsolved challenges in this area.

The reasons for attrition in any given year, or discipline, may change, but it appears that that students are still dropping out of university in large numbers.

The impact of college/university

Writers from America have also concentrated on the challenges for students, and the effect of the college experience on the general and specific academic development of students, all of which are closely linked with attrition.

There is an assumption in much of this writing that new undergraduate students are coming into tertiary education straight from school, are young, and therefore still developing as independent individuals. The different effects of university life on mature-age students have not been described in any depth.

In 1964, Alexander Astin began writing about the experience of students at University, and later published *Four critical years: Effects of college on beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge* (1977a). His early work was among the first to examine quite specifically the role of the University not simply as a disseminator and creator of knowledge, and to acknowledge that the university experience has a lasting impact on the overall development of the student into adulthood.

It is from these works that much of today's writing has developed. The influence of Astin is seen in work by writers such as Chickering (1969); Whitely (1982); Tinto (1987); Upcraft and Gardner (1989); and Pascarella & Terenzini (1991); all of whom have developed and explored the broad theme of the impact of the university experience on those who enter to study.

In 1991 Pascarella & Terenzini completed a comprehensive study in this field. In *How College Affects Students* they examine in detail the theoretical underpinning of a number of studies in this area, and offer a collection and critique of possible models for research. They also acknowledge the work of earlier writers of similar reviews, such as Feldman and Newcomb (1969) and Bowen (1977).

Chickering's work *Education and Identity* (1969) did not look specifically at the first year, but was more encompassing of the whole college experience; however the vectors he describes have their beginnings in the freshman year. He also assumed that students came to university straight from school, and developed what he described as the 'Seven Vectors of Student Development'. In the following table they are placed alongside the work of Brower at the University of Wisconsin (reported in 1992) who identified seven basic task domains critical to the success of the 'freshman' or first year student. Even though the works are separated by some twenty years, they are very similar:

Chickering's Seven Vectors (1969)	Brower's Basic Task Domains (1992)
<i>Achieving Competence</i> <i>Developing purpose</i>	<i>Getting good grades</i> <i>Establishing future goals</i>
<i>Developing Autonomy</i>	<i>Managing time</i> <i>Maintaining physical self</i>
<i>Managing Emotions</i> <i>Freeing interpersonal relationships</i>	<i>Making friends</i> <i>Being on your own without family and friends</i>
<i>Establishing Identity</i>	<i>Establishing identity</i>
<i>Developing integrity.</i>	

Table 1. Findings of Chickering and Brower compared

Astin's 1998 work, exploring the development of student identity and independence, is also relevant here.

The focus of American writers on these two important issues of attrition and the effect of university on the development of the student has not surprisingly influenced the writings of others in the field, and these are explored in the sections that explore writing from Australia and New Zealand. However, other issues have been covered as well.

Other general writing from the United States

Jorgensen-Earp & Staton, writing in 1993, investigated the experiences of first year students in two US universities by looking at the metaphors they chose to describe their experience. This article identifies key aspects of those experiences as being:

Newness, Status, Control, Engagement and Satisfaction (1993:135)

In their summary, the authors comment on polarity of the experiences in the freshman year. This relates to the expectations held by university lecturers of the abilities and motivation of their new students, and the poor fit with the reality the lecturers find in the lecture theatre.

The most intriguing aspect of the current study is the balance between opposing views of what it is like to be a university freshman (1993:138).

They also identify cultural considerations such as gender, ethnicity or economic status that warrant further study, and investigate the age of the student upon entering the university. They alert the reader to the fact that there is an untapped source of information in the student population, who may provide quite different results if questioned, and whose needs may not have been identified. There is reference to the fact that at the time the article was written, little research had been done into the experiences of first year students from their own perspective.

Over the years from 1992 to 1995, Levine and Cureton (1998) surveyed student affairs officers, over 9000 undergraduate students, student newspaper editors and student body presidents on 28 campuses across America. Their book - *When hope and fear collide* - seeks to paint a picture of the current generation of college students. It examines not only the student body, but also the major events that students say shaped their generation, campus politics and social life, academic issues and hopes for the future. Although the setting for this research is quite different, the comments made by the students echo a number of the findings reported in work from Australia (McInnis, 1995) which was carried on in a similar time frame. In particular there is substantive discussion of the diminishing 'engagement' of students with their university.

Another theme in Levine and Cureton's work that has parallels in the Australian and New Zealand environment is the changing nature of the student body, and the growth in 'non – traditional' students, those who are mature-age students, international, part – time, living off campus and so on:

What this means is that higher education is not as central to the lives of many of today's undergraduates as it was to previous generations...For many, college is not even the most important of these activities: work and family often overshadow it.
(1998:49)

This work indicates that there are some areas in which the situation (and thus the writing) in the USA is moving closer to that experienced in Australia and New Zealand.

The challenge of engaging students who do not live on campus – in the USA referred to as ‘commuter students’, has been explored in a recent publication (2000) edited by Jacoby. The stimulus for collection of articles was the fact that, in Jacoby’s view:

The unique needs of commuter students and the nature of their relationship to higher education have been neither adequately understood, nor adequately incorporated into policies, programmes and practices (2000:1).

Another contributor to Jacoby’s book is Chickering, whose earlier work has been referred to in this review. He writes about utilising experiential learning and learning contracts to build communities in the classroom, and suggests strategies to try to encourage commuter students to be more engaged with the university and their learning environment.

More recently, Parr (2000) in *Identity and Education: The Links for Mature Women Students*, explored how and why mature women return to tertiary study, and the impact of prior experiences.

Another recent addition to the available American literature is particularly relevant to my study. In his book *Making the Most of College: Students speak their minds*, Little (2001) reports on interviews with 1600 undergraduate students over a period of years. Whilst the context is different, and the magnitude of the study is far greater than this thesis, many of the issues that the students raise are similar to those for my student group. It also contains an in-depth look at issues of diversity on campus and the ways in which the students perceive this. The book itself concentrates on hearing what the students have to say, rather than describing what academics thought about their needs and experiences.

2.1.2 The First Year Experience in Australia

One of the earliest commentators on student experiences in Australia, was Little, who in 1970 wrote *The University Experience: An Australian Study*. However, Little was in fact an American and the study was the result of his undertaking his PhD at the University of Melbourne.

The key ideas raised by the students described in Little's book include lack of preparation for academic life, social issues, study and learning challenges, and the 'shock' of autonomy and independence. However, in other ways life for the students in Little's study was very different from that of students at the beginning of the 21st century. They were considered then to be part of a small elite group, did not have major financial concerns, and were almost guaranteed employment when they completed their studies. Surprisingly, even in that group retention was not certain, and attrition was identified as a concern.

In recent years researchers at the University of Melbourne, on behalf of the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), have undertaken two comprehensive Australian studies. In 1994 McInnis and James surveyed first year students in seven Australian Universities that were selected to provide a mix of Established / New/ Suburban /International / Regional / Applied Studies and Consolidated Universities.

That study was reported in 1995, and replicated in 1999, with only minor methodological changes, and the addition of questions relating to the use of technology in education. These were quantitative studies, using questionnaires. The numbers involved were large – 4028 in the 1994 study, and 2609 in the second.

Little's work raised awareness in Australian universities that all might not be well, and a number of studies on attrition rates from university were carried out in the late 1970's (Williams and Ainsworth, 1976; Watkins and Seaton, 1976; Baumgart & Johnson 1977, Gallagher, 1978). According to Williams and Ainsworth (1976) the vast majority of withdrawals in the first year are for social and emotional reasons rather than intellectual ones.

Attrition has been explored by a number of other Australian writers (McInnis 1995 and 2000, Tindle 1996, Stevens & Walker 1996, and Elliott 1997). For many students who had trouble adapting, a lack of intimacy and of friendships was found to be a major problem. There were many reasons why students left in the first weeks at university, and even those who stayed were not necessarily coping well:

many 'drop-outs' left despite academic success and those who persist 'make the best of a bad job'

(Powell 1979 cited in Stevens & Walker 1996:202)

In 2000, a review of the international literature regarding non-completion of students in higher education was undertaken by McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese for DETYA in Australia. It is a comprehensive critique of work from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. It is significant that New Zealand was not represented in this review.

In the executive summary, McInnis et al comment:

- *Non completion does not always equate with failure [this echoes Rummel et al 1999]*
- *For the most part non-completion remains a serious problem*
- *It is clear that student withdrawal is a complex and often very individualised process involving the interplay of institutional, personal and social factors*
- *Factors such as wrong choice of course or subject, poor preparation and lack of readiness and commitment feature prominently in the reasons for non completion*
- *Students are not at all well informed about the nature and demands of the courses for which they apply*
- *Student dissatisfaction with the university experience, the style and quality of teaching and learning, workloads and the lack of fit between student capacities and institutional demands are major contributors to early withdrawal (2000:2)*

The two major required strategies identified by this report are:

1. To help students make informed choices about their courses
2. To improve the quality of the initial student experience when adjustment and commitment are most problematic.

The report of the more recent study *Trends in the First year Experience* (McInnis, James and Hartley, 2000) has been a major influence in the development of ideas about FYE in the Pacific Rim area. They found that whilst there were changes in some areas over the

five intervening years, such as the need for technological competence, findings from the two studies were remarkably similar, despite:

...the introduction of a range of institutional strategies to improve transition from school to University (2000:xi).

They go on to comment that there has been little change in the considerable number of students who have a very uncertain start at university:

...two thirds (of students) are of the view that they were not well prepared for university study

...the proportion who find it difficult to motivate themselves to study has increased significantly from 42% to 48%

However, some positive trends were identified, such as the increased uptake of educational technology, a stable proportion (60%) of students who:

...find their course intellectually stimulating

and an increase in those who are:

...enjoying their course overall (61% to 64%) and are satisfied with their initial university experience (61% to 63%) (ibid: xi)

The reports from these two studies, and a further study undertaken in 1998 by Pargetter, McInnis, James et al. *The Transition from Secondary to Tertiary: A Performance Study*, form a significant body of information for the study of FYE in Australia.

Hemmings, Boylan, Hill & Kay's (1995) study of students enrolling in teacher education programmes explores the transition to university, and comments that at that time only a small proportion of the literature available actually described the specific transition made by the students. They emphasise the individual and personal nature of transition in a way that is seen in few other writings of that time.

Studies from Australia are not constrained by the perception that all first year undergraduates are school leavers. Most general writing about experiences in Australian universities acknowledges diversity in the student population.

Trigwell and Prosser (1991, 1994) and Ackerlind & Jenkins (1998), explore the dilemmas facing both students and their teachers in the early years in University. Ackerlind and Jenkins introduce their study by commenting

Staff and student conceptions, perceptions and expectations form part of the less tangible aspects of a teaching and learning environment, compared for instance with actual behaviour, materials or practices. Being less tangible, these factors are also more difficult to acknowledge and identify (1998:277).

In 1996 Stevens and Walker from the University of Wollongong examined the adjustments that residential college students make during their first year. They comment on issues relating to separation from parents, living in university hostels and social maturity. Their focus was students living on campus and therefore does not comment on commuter students. They explore the work of a number of writers in relation to this crucial adjustment phase and point to the development in recent years of study, not just into the effects of the environment on young students, but also into their interpretation of the events which affect their lives.

The majority of Stevens and Walker's paper is then devoted to examining their findings in relation to levels of dependence and autonomy, and the availability of peer and other support networks. They also comment that it is the students' perception of the adequacy of supportive networks that surround them that is crucial to their adjustment, the support networks by themselves do not solve their problems (Stevens and Walker 1996:204).

The 'First Year Experience' issue of *Higher Education Research and Development* (2001) contained a number of articles useful and relevant to the study of FYE in this country, but again, there is no contribution from New Zealand.

In the initial article in that journal, entitled *Where to from here?* McInnis surveys the research done recently in the South Pacific. He comes to a number of conclusions, one of which is that, although he applauds the institutions for undertaking research into their own student population, he cautions:

The small studies provide a useful but necessarily partial account of the first year experience (2001:113).

McInnis goes on to say

If the study of the first year experience is based solely or even largely by the short term needs of institutions or governments, the possibility of systematic reforms of the process of transition to University study and, indeed the form of the undergraduate degree will be limited. The work of many academics who systematically study the first year because they believe they have or can make a difference to the quality of student experience will be enhanced if they can put their work into the context of the larger social structures whereby new possibilities might emerge (ibid).

The context shapes the nature of the students, their expectations of the university and the ways in which they respond to the challenges that face them. It therefore cannot be ignored. A short section of this thesis is therefore dedicated to explaining changes in the New Zealand Tertiary Education policy over recent years to endeavour to provide a context for this current work.

Another writer from Australia, who is actively involved in the day-to-day Transition experience, is Kantanis, Transition Co-ordinator at Monash University – with close to 44,000 students, the largest university in Australia. Her work over the last few years (2000, 2001, 2002) has provided a practice and research based insight into the day to day challenges of managing the first year at university, and she has written recently about the issues that particularly affect mature students (2002).

There have been several recent journal articles and conference papers related to FYE and its impact on student success rates and attrition, that appear to be relevant and useful to guide the present study:

- de la Harpe, Radloff & Parker (1997) discussed the impact of paid work on student grades. As in other studies, they found that paid work had both positive and negative implications for student, and also that although the time spent working did not appear to impact greatly on the time spent studying, students in paid work had lower grades than their non-working peers.

- In 1998, Hargreaves instituted and evaluated an orientation and mentoring programme for first year engineering students. Her experiences share much in common with other writers, but she also points to other challenges in the future:

The next, and perhaps the biggest hurdle to developing a positive first year university experience for students is to change the entrenched culture of many academic staff that first year teaching is not a worthy and rewarding exercise (1998:10)

- Bennett, (1998) explored *Transition Orientation and Motivation*, and provided a number of suggested strategies to enhance student motivation and engagement with their learning. He comments on a transition model from Van Gennep which he used to describe 'rites of passage'.
- In 2000, Hinton and Tickner examined attrition in three faculties in their university. Their report concludes with a number of recommendations, but in summary they say:

Institutions need to reach a student focused perspective... simplify its communication to students, develop its staff in area of teaching and learning, and increased awareness of support services (2000:16)

- A study to establish major predictors of successful transition was reported by Huon & Sankey (2000). They comment:

Students overall course enjoyment and satisfaction are also important predictors of student's transition success.

and...we need to enhance student identity, appoint staff who are...genuinely concerned about the welfare of students (2000:9).

- Krause and Duchesne (2000) discussed the role of social interactions in FYE, and concluded that social interactions, making friends and getting to know their lecturers (and being known by them) impacted strongly on the whole transition experience.
- In relation to preparation for the university experience, Watson, Johnson & Billett, (2002) discuss an orientation week survey of education students. They comment:

Overall, the respondents expressed strong levels of preparedness in terms of intentions and attitudes to coming to university, medium levels of

preparedness in terms of confidence regarding doing the work...and low levels of preparedness in terms of 'know how' and understanding how to achieve successful outcomes (Watson et al, 2002:6).

- Amongst other contributors to the First Year Experience edition of *Higher Education Research and Development* (2001) (already mentioned) were Pitkethly and Prosser, suggesting a model for university-wide change; and Johnston, who examined student perceptions of learning in first year.
- Dickson, Krause, & Rudman (2002) examined the results of a survey issued to students following a university-wide academic orientation programme. In the conclusion to their paper, they remark on a number of issues that arose from the survey. These include:

The need to interact with fellow students and staff and to establish support networks

A lack of awareness from many of the students about the need to be computer literate

The success of the Student Mentor programme

A request for more subject/discipline specific information (2002:3).

- Slee (2002) identifies some of the experiences of students who are the first in their family to enter university:

Students ... articulated that they experienced adjustment difficulties in several domains, including family relationships, time management, understanding university expectations and creating conditions conducive to study in the home (2002:1).

Slee also comments

A high proportion (66%) of commencing students...who are the first to represent their immediate family at university have more difficulties in adjusting to university than students who come from families with university experience (2002:2)

There is an increasing volume of material emanating from the Australian universities, exploring all aspects of the transition to university, including orientation programmes,

socialisation, and the acquisition of academic skills and knowledge. There are few major gaps that can be readily identified, although a number of writers have suggest the need for further longitudinal studies and an examination of the educational and institutional contexts.

One work from the United Kingdom

I have not surveyed material from the United Kingdom for reasons described earlier, however one particular book was recommended to me. It is Silver and Silver(1997) *Students: changing roles, changing lives*. This work examines the lives of students, their expectations, experiences, and the university community. Many of the issues described in this work correlate with the findings from my study, in particular the way that Silver & Silver focus on the *students*, rather than statistics, student attrition, academic outcomes or other similar factors that have been the focus of much of the previous research. They focus on students as 'real people', and comment that:

Students have become less and less homogeneous as a community themselves; their backgrounds and profiles make them an extremely diverse constituency - within a diversity of contexts (1997:2).

The student is not indeed divided into unrelated 'academic' and 'other' categories, and it is important therefore to retain in the discussion a sense of how closely interrelated are the fragments of the student's experience. Attending lectures and visiting the library are not unrelated to the student's allocation of time, relations with peers, need for recreation, anxieties about the future (ibid:14).

This recognition of the interweaving of the influences on students' lives, and the individuality of the student themselves, features in the Discussion Chapter of this thesis.

2.1.3 Comments on the Literature from the USA and Australia

Literature emanating from the USA forms a background for the majority of studies about FYE world-wide and it is important to acknowledge the works of recognised writers in the field of FYE and transition. However, although work from the USA is valuable as underpinning theory and research, it is not wholly relevant in Australia or New Zealand.

As McInnis, comments

The work of Tinto (1975,1988,1993) has been particularly important in establishing the role of the institution in promoting an environment for student persistence and integration. It must be emphasised however that for the United States, most of the theory and research is based on the assumption that the experience of school leavers is the norm. This is not the case at all in Australia where part time and mature age students have traditionally been a large proportion of the undergraduate student population (McInnis et al. 2000a:16).

The notes that follow also acknowledge that there are similarities as well as differences, and comments briefly on the use (or not) of American and Australian research in this study.

The structure of the tertiary, or post-compulsory education sector is very different

- The tertiary sectors in Australia and New Zealand are very similar to each other, but very different from that found in the USA. Neither New Zealand nor Australia have a common first or 'freshman' year, nor is there an equivalent to the American Two Year College. Students in Australia and New Zealand are generally expected to make decisions about their future goals before entering the tertiary education environment. Many change the focus of their study during, or at the end of, their first year.
- New Zealand has an undergraduate cohort that in 2000 comprised only 37 per cent school leavers (Ministry of Education 2001:16) and like Australia has a diverse multicultural student population.
- Findings from studies in Australia are important in many ways for the New Zealand reader. Australian studies reviewed are, for the most part, relevant and useful, and

the suggested strategies for change can be applied, with due caution, in the New Zealand context.

Attrition

Attrition is of increasing concern to university administrators and management all over the world, and New Zealand, with a tertiary education sector that has for some years utilised a competitive model, is no exception.

It is hard to accurately quantify the figures for first year due to the way in which statistics are collected, and the fact that some students who apparently 'drop out' from a programme are simply moving to another programme, rather than leaving university all together. Other issues are:

- many of the students in this study had considered dropping out, or changing courses during the first year
- Published NZ work is relatively minimal, and larger scale and longitudinal studies in this country would be a useful addition to the available data

The effect of university on the student

The relevance of the American theories to students seen in New Zealand universities, with the wide mix of age and experience, full and part-time students, living on and off campus, may be tenuous. Australian figures and theories are more relevant.

- The relationship between the students in the current study, and the lecturers and tutorial staff they had encountered in their first year, may prove to be a critical factor in their academic success or failure and is one area that featured strongly in the interviews.
- The impact of teaching quality is not discussed in depth in the literature from the USA, but often appears in Australian work, and was therefore included in the interviews.

- Lecturers were not interviewed for this study, but comments from the students - and personal experience - would suggest that the disparity in perceptions noted by Jorgensen-Earp & Staton (1993) also exists in New Zealand.
- Jorgensen-Earp & Staton see students as an 'untapped source' of information. This student resource is the focus of this current study.

The influence of the Department of FYE and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.

It is from the publications generated by these USC FYE Conferences that some of the recent literature for this study has been drawn. Whilst not underestimating the influence of earlier major works, the work that is being done right now, by practitioners in the field, seems to be the most relevant for this study, for example:

- There is an increase in the number of presentations from Australia, the UK and New Zealand at these International and Pacific Rim conferences, which indicates a recognition of the growing interest world wide.
- attendance at one of these FYE conferences sparked my interest that led to this research

The relevance of literature about "University 101" courses designed to be part of the freshman year

This review is limited to writing that has particular relevance to the experiences of the students and the issues and challenges they face, rather than the way in which universities might enhance those experiences.

Similar foundation or bridging courses are being offered in some polytechnics and universities around New Zealand and in Australia. There was not a course of this nature in the university studied, although I understand that one is planned to run for the first time in 2003. This could perhaps be one focus of future research in the New Zealand context.

The special needs of commuter students

This is an area which is becoming increasingly important in the New Zealand context, and is causing some concern in relation to 'on-campus' life. Key factors are:

- The demographics of the New Zealand university student body shows that the majority fall into the category of non-resident students
- The impact of the increasing lack of engagement with university life felt by commuter students is discussed in my study.

The nature of the studies

The studies done in the USA and Australia are predominantly quantitative in nature. There is a need to balance these studies with others where the student voices can be heard describing their experiences, rather than asking students to complete a predetermined questionnaire.

I acknowledge, however, that a number of the starter questions used when interviewing the student group in this study came from the work of McInnis et al. (1995, 2000).

The key differences between the United States and New Zealand are the structure of their tertiary sectors, and the fact that in the majority of the written material from the USA there is an assumption that first year undergraduate students are entering college/university straight from school. However, no study of the transition to university would be complete without recognition of this body of work.

All of the areas identified by overseas writers, whether from the USA or Australia, add something to the emerging picture of the dilemmas and challenges faced by new tertiary students, and by those who both administer and teach the courses in which they enrol. But what else has been happening in the New Zealand context?

2.1.4 Changes in New Zealand Education policy since 1984

The first year experience of students entering university in New Zealand takes place in a social, political, and economic environment that has been shaped by major changes in this country since 1984. This chapter puts the current study into the context of a New Zealand education system that has undergone a paradigm shift in the last 20 years.

One author who has provided the New Zealand reader with a summary of the changes in the Tertiary Education sector is Zepke (2001) who argues that:

Since about 1987, adult education, both formal and non-formal was completely made over, and that the change process is continuing (2001:7).

There has been a plethora of writing on social and economic policy in the New Zealand context (The Treasury, 1984,1987; Douglas, 1980, 1993; Codd, Harker & Nash 1990; Codd, Middleton & Jones 1990; Lauder, 1990; Patterson, 1991; Kelsey, 1993, 1995; Harre-Hindmarsh, 1996; Easton, 1997; Zepke, 2001).

In this section I have outlined some of the changes that have directly impacted on the university sector over the past eighteen years in order to provide a contextual perspective for the current study.

In the years leading up to the election of a Labour Government in 1984, New Zealand had a social democratic interventionist economy, with heavy emphasis on protectionism, subsidisation of primary producers, and the welfare state. However, these policies were very expensive and the tax take was insufficient to meet the demands of the welfare state, particularly as our traditional markets were disappearing. The situation continued despite a worsening economic balance of payments situation, and rising unemployment. Codd describes the shift in the 1980's:

...during the 1980's there was a shift in government policy ...to the monetarist position. This shift was to influence all other areas of government policy, including education" (1990:134).

Ever since the first Labour Government in 1935, the state had funded education, and even at post-compulsory level it was largely non-means tested (Boston, Dalzeil & St. John 1999). This was largely made possible by a low unemployment rate, but by 1983 the unemployment rate was climbing and was over 5%.

Major concern about the fiscal situation, and the direction of government policy, led the Treasury to write *Economic Management*, its briefing paper to the incoming Labour Government in 1984. In it, they set out the policy framework for Labour's subsequent economic reforms, based on two key beliefs:

1. *An intervention free market place will be the most efficient and function to the benefit of all, and*
2. *There is a division between the goals of economic policy and the means required to attain those goals* (Patterson, 1991:12)

Treasury was to decide the ways by which the means could be acquired. Social policy was left to the government, which Treasury felt should be limited largely to assisting targeted groups, rather than the general welfare of all. Patterson describes these initiatives as being fundamentally in conflict with the welfare state policies, and designed to encourage Labour to accept more free-market policies (ibid).

Specifically in reference to the tertiary education sector, Treasury made it quite clear that they believed that education was a personal investment, for the private, rather than the public good, therefore to be paid for by the individual:

The poor performance of the education sector has adverse effects on the adjustment of the labour market and directly and indirectly on the performance of the overall economy. Demand for education is substantially derived from the need to acquire labour market skills and because of this individuals have clear incentives to invest in education (1984:268).

There was also a strong statement about the need for competition in the (education) workplace, to achieve efficiency in the education sector. By 1987, Treasury briefing papers had become:

An unprecedented attempt by treasury officials to influence the direction and nature of future education policy in New Zealand (Grace, 1990:170).

In 1984, Roger Douglas was the Minister of Finance in the newly elected Fourth Labour Government. The New Zealand that the Fourth Labour Government had inherited from the outgoing National party was in financial straits. The situation gave Douglas the opportunity (backed by the report from Treasury) to make sweeping changes to the NZ economy. This began an era of *laissez faire* government, a time that Lauder (1990) describes as:

...a New Right revolution in New Zealand which has sought to change the relationship between the state, the economy, and civil society (1990:29).

The economic structures implemented at this time, influenced so greatly by Treasury, had a significant impact on the policies that were to dominate New Zealand tertiary education for the next 15 years.

In the years leading up to the end of the 1980's, the Government commissioned a number of reports on the education sector. However the philosophy that came to prevail in the 1980's seems to have had its beginnings with the work of the economist Friedman (1962), whose work *Capitalism and Freedom* may well have laid the foundations for market driven education (Barratt 2001).

Along with later influences from the USA in reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), Friedman's ideas almost certainly impacted on 1994 Treasury briefing papers. He was an early advocate of individuals paying the dominant proportion of the cost of their tertiary education, and the introduction of market competition in the education sector.

These policies have a direct bearing on the situation experienced by the first year students in universities in New Zealand in 2001. Students currently pay high fees for their education (about 25% of the total tuition costs) and many are amassing considerable Student Loans. All are making their learning decisions in a competitive education environment at a time of employment uncertainty.

It is important to note, however, that the sector is about to undergo a further radical change. In 2001 the Labour Government commissioned the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC) to undertake a total review of all aspects of the tertiary Education Sector. Their report, *Tertiary Education Strategy 2002 - 2007* was published in May 2002, and so had not been implemented at the time the student interviews were completed in 2001.

The path from 1984 to the publication of *Learning for Life: Two* (Minister of Education, 1989) was a long and tortuous one, with review after review of the funding, administration and direction of the tertiary sector. The Education Amendment Act No.2, (New Zealand Government, 1990) was passed to implement the changes suggested in the *Learning for Life* documents, and its implementation led to tertiary fee changes, the Student Loan scheme, and targeted Student Allowances. Since 1990 there have been other reviews, notably the White Paper *Tertiary Education in New Zealand. Policy Directions for the 21st Century*. (Ministry of Education, 1998).

The changes following the Education Amendment Act 1990 have been less radical than those seen in the 1980's. In the rest of this section, there is a table of the reports and reviews that impacted on the New Zealand education sector, followed by one writer's summary of the key changes that have been implemented as a result of them.

Glenys Patterson, in her book *"New Zealand Universities under the Fourth Labour Government* (1991) provides an comprehensive overview of the reviews carried out during 1984-1989. The reports, reviews and proposals, listed chronologically are:

Year	Reports/ Reviews/proposals
1984	Economic management –Treasury report
1985	Review of University Funding
1986	The Beattie Report
1987	The Probine/Fargher Report The Shallcrass Report Treasury briefing to the incoming government The Watts Report Government tertiary reviews 1987/88 Tertiary Education in New Zealand - Issues and comment Further Education and training who should pay?
1988	The "April " Report The Picot Report Tomorrow's Schools The Business Roundtable Report The Hawke Report The STAC report
1989	Learning for Life: Education and Training Beyond the Age of Fifteen (February) Learning for Life: Two (August)

Table 2. Education Policies and Reports 1984-1990

Following this sequence of reports came the Education Amendment Act 1990, which implemented government policy decisions.

It is worth keeping in mind here Patterson's comment

It was during the period of the Fourth Labour government's second term, in which conflict and confusion over policy issues was so apparent, that the government's major decisions affecting the education sector were made (Patterson, 1991:17)

Another major thrust of *Learning For Life: Two* was the commitment to wider access to tertiary education. It stated that the Government is committed to making education:

...more accessible and affordable to all New Zealanders...Participation in post-compulsory education and training has risen rapidly in recent years – but not rapidly enough (1989:12)

Most significantly, the report made it quite clear that:

The opportunity and encouragement to participate should be extended to those people and groups who have been under-represented in the past (ibid).

The effects of these policies, such as high student numbers, the competition throughout the education sector, and less well prepared students entering university, are being felt throughout the tertiary education sector, formal and non-formal in 2001.

Implementation of the policies outlined in *Learning for Life: Two* occupied much of the 1990's but governments do not sit still for long, and other reports and policies were drafted during that time, as outlined in Table 3. The following table continues where Patterson's ended:

Year	Reports/ Reviews/proposals
1990	Education Amendment Act Establishment of New Zealand Qualifications Authority
1992	Industry Training Act
1994	The Todd Task Force Report White Paper: <i>Tertiary Education in New Zealand: Policy Directions for the 21st Century</i> Ministerial Tertiary Lead group established
1996	Tertiary Advisory Group
1997	Two Green papers released: <i>A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand: A Plan for the National Qualifications Framework</i> And <i>A Future Tertiary Education Policy for New Zealand: Tertiary Education Review.</i>
1998	Tertiary Education Review White Paper
1999	National Qualifications White Paper
2000	Education Amendment Bill Establishment of the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission(TEAC)

Table 3. Education Policies and Reports 1990 -2000

Through the 1990's successive governments pursued the economic rationalist theme. Zepke reports comments from the National Qualifications authority:

Employers want high skill employees in order to gain an advantage over competitors.

Later, he suggests:

... it seems adult education here has been trapped by an economic and technical rationality that focuses on vocational skills for a global capitalism (2001: 18).

The adult education, or post-compulsory, sector includes university study, and many university students have this same vocational perspective.

Summary of the key changes in the tertiary sector

La Rocque (2000) offers a different perspective on the key changes that followed the tertiary sector reforms of the 80's and 90's. His concerns are summarised in an address to members of the World Bank. They are primarily fiscal in nature, but changes in monetary policy and shifts in the funding formula for tertiary education have impacted on the day to day life of students. He listed some historical changes:

- *Government and Management changes continue*
- *Introduction of tuition fees followed by deregulation of tuition fees*
- *Targeting of the student living allowance (means tested)*
- *Introduction of income contingent student loan scheme*
- *Successive reductions in per student subsidies to state institutions*
- *Introduction of competitive neutrality in funding of private training providers*
- *Introduction of bulk funding for tertiary institutions*
- *Development of capital charging regime for TEI's (Tertiary education Institutions)*
- *Introduction of the qualifications framework*

The tertiary sector clearly has undergone major change since the early 1980's. Changes specifically affecting the university sector in particular are summarised by Le Rocque below:

- *An entrenched position that education is a privilege not a right, and has a cost which should be born substantially by the individual, not the state*

- *Increased competition from a large number of alternative tertiary education providers, including*
 - *Polytechnics*
 - *Private Training Establishments, Industry Training Organisations*
 - *Maori Training Providers, Whare Waananga*
 - *Internet provision of education from overseas universities.*
- *This competitive approach persists despite the current Labour Government urging tertiary providers to embrace a co-operative approach.*
- *Increased access to tertiary education made possible by changes in government funding. (More places are now funded, although at a lower dollar level per Equivalent Full Time Student- EFTS. Between 1980 and 1999 Dollars per EFTS fell by an annual rate of 2.3% or by 36% in total [Demonstrated in Table 4.]*

Year	1981	1992	2000	2001
University	55,152	93,182	122,727	125,547
Total tertiary	103,187	202, 143	264,353	282, 808

Table 4. Total numbers of students enrolled in tertiary study in New Zealand.

(NZ Ministry of Education figures 2002)

- *Internationalisation of the student body*
- *Majority of students have student loans to fund their study*
- *Increasing numbers of mature students commencing university studies*
- *Growing expectations of research 'outputs' from academic staff. Teaching in the university sector does not have high status.*
- *Increased societal expectation of the need for tertiary qualifications.*
- *Most universities have not 'bought into' the NZQA National Qualifications Framework*
- *An increased expectation on the universities to provide 'value for money' and to be accountable for the quality of their academic programmes.*
- *An awareness that, as participation becomes more universal, issues of quality assurance become greater.*

This is a summarises the environment in which this study is located. The context clearly impacts in a myriad of ways upon the student, the organisation and the individual academic staff, and it is this environment that has shaped the organisation into which the students in this current study entered in early 2001.

2.1.5 The First Year Experience in New Zealand

The earliest work that I have been able to locate that refers specifically to the fate of students in the New Zealand university system is by Parkyn. Written in 1959, *Academic Performance and the Entrance Standard* is Vol. 1 of *Success and Failure at the University*. In common with much of the international early work on FYE, this study is restricted to the study of school leavers as university entrants. The reason that this book is reviewed at some length here is that it demonstrates clearly that the challenges faced by both undergraduate students, and the universities in New Zealand are not new.

Of particular interest in this discussion are comments from the foreword to Parkyn's book, written by the Vice Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, G. Currie:

The idea that all young people who have the necessary academic ability should be given the opportunity for university seems to be generally accepted.

...It is essential to avoid the wasted effort that could result if university teachers were overloaded with unsuitable or ill-prepared students

...In view of complaints by university teachers that many students admitted to the university are in fact insufficiently prepared or unsuited for university studies, the Senate ...decided to seek an investigation into the relationship between the academic standard of students at entrance, and their first year university work (1959:vi).

It would appear that the perception that 'current students are less well prepared than in the past' is not new to the New Zealand university environment. Changes to legislation and the introduction of a number of policies and strategies to encourage life long learning have

meant that the doors to university are open wider than ever before. However these changes are apparently not the only cause of current academic concerns about student competence, since this is clearly not a phenomenon of the 2000's, but a longstanding issue. Is one of the continuing problems lecturer perceptions and expectations? Parkyn's work analysed the tendency to lay much of the 'blame' for under-preparedness on the secondary school system, not on the university. He commented:

It is less usual to find suggestions that failure might be due to factors first operating at the university level itself, factors such as poor adjustments to university life, insufficient staffing of departments, inappropriate teaching methods, over rigorous standards and so on (1959:7).

The conclusions from this volume of the report show that there was little correlation between the level of competence at which students entered the university, and their subsequent performance in their academic studies:

The conclusion seems inescapable that a large proportion of actual failure is unnecessary, in the sense that it is neither inherent in nor irrevocably predetermined by the level of ability and attainment reached by the unsuccessful students before they entered the university (1959:248).

Parkyn suggested two major factors that appear to impact on the success or failure of the students that he studied. The first was the conditions under which students study such as full-time or part-time, and the subsequent access to university facilities. The second influence he described as the mix of individual and personal qualities possessed by the new entrant to university.

In 1965, a seminar was held at Victoria University in Wellington that examined *The Transition from School to University*, a topic identified as:

Of critical importance within university education at this point in time...particularly relevant to so many of the problems being faced by students at universities in New Zealand. (Bizard,1965:1)

In the concluding remarks, the editor of the papers from the seminar comes to very different conclusions from Parkyn, in relation to the role of 'easy access to the university':

It was thus asserted that where you have a relatively low level of selection and where this is juxtaposed to an imprecise ability to predict university success in advance, a high failure rate, particularly in earlier years of study, is an inevitable result (Blizard, 1965:125).

Other comments were made in relation to possible solutions:

Inadequate preparation at secondary school, inadequate teaching at the university level, unsatisfactory academic persistence by individual students - as well as the pressure of finance and unsuitable accommodation - were all stressed as elements contributing toward student failure (p.126).

It was felt that there was a general inadequacy of tutorial and guidance facilities (p.127).

There is a demonstrable need for Study Methods Courses at some universities in New Zealand... the need for training in specific university skills was stressed: skills such as note taking, writing and speed reading skills (p.128).

There is a need for more specific help in the choice of courses for students and Restrict the load of academically 'at risk' students (p.129).

The close resemblance of the issues raised by these suggestions to the findings from my research, undertaken almost 30 years later, is startling; improvements have been made and systems have changed, but the challenges remain very similar.

A thesis by Palmer(1972) highlighted factors affecting first year students in relation to the information they were able to access prior to enrolling at university. In today's politically correct climate, this thesis jars on reading, as the male pronoun is used throughout (even though 46% of the students referred to were acknowledged to be female). When Palmer wrote in 1972, only 15% of first year students were over the age of 20. These figures have changed rapidly in the intervening years, as mentioned elsewhere. However there are some comments relevant to my work, and in particular where he highlights inadequacies of information to incoming students:

The investigation provides factual information on the many facets of first year student life, and points to inadequacies in the provision of information and guidance to incoming students, schools, parents, and the community in general (1972:4).

Palmer refers to work by Small in 1966, who explored achievement and adjustment in the first year at university. Small's study found that:

...the most important single factor in the first year failure seemed to be an intellectual-academic combination in which varying levels of academic ability, aptitude and attitude had correspondingly different effects on performance (1972:6)

and suggested some key factors towards improving adjustment to university:

The provision of educational guidance, more effective counselling at school, strengthening the work of liaison officers, improving the circumstances under which students move from school to university, and improving living and working conditions (1972:6).

One fact that also emerged in Palmer's research was that only 12% of the students in his study came from homes where the parents had university qualifications. Anecdotal comments from university staff in 2001 have suggested that this phenomenon of 'first in the family' is a relatively new one, but it would appear not.

There is little written evidence of major interest in FYE in New Zealand between 1972 and the first New Zealand offering of the Pacific Rim Conference for the First year Experience in Higher Education, held in Auckland in 1997. This is despite the fact that work was being done in Auckland, at the then Auckland Institute of Technology. Now Auckland University of Technology, this organisation has developed a substantial first year support programme, but it has not been written about until much more recently (Morrison, 2000; Boyes, Bretherton, Hudson & Vile, 2000)

Attrition as a stand-alone topic does not appear very frequently in the New Zealand literature. However there are references to the concerns about retention and attrition in a number of studies, as described below.

At the 1997 Pacific Rim FYE Conference, Boddy and Neale, from Victoria University in Wellington, presented a paper entitled *Why do Students Leave?* They identified a number of issues arising from a study of 130 students who left Victoria University after their first year. In the conclusion to the paper, they quote Kalsbeek (1987):

...since the focus of the retention effort is the quality of each student's academic and social experience, and the fit students experience within the institution, then everyone who works, teaches and studies at an institution has a role in that retention effort... It is a collective challenge to the total college or university community (1997:9)

In a short article in *NZ Education Review* in October 1997, Hotere surveyed opinions about first year experiences in the New Zealand Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) environment, and is particularly concerned about what appears to be a high drop-out rate. She quotes from some informal interviews with students at the University of Auckland. The students' comments echo the *emotional and attitudinal* bias identified by Stockwell (1997). Words used to describe their transition to university were:

... negative experience, isolating, unfriendly, horrendous experience, unexpected pressure (Hotere, 1997:3).

These very negative comments do not appear to have been followed by action on the university's part, or in any subsequent articles by Hotere.

Also in 1997, a report was commissioned by the Ministry of Education, which investigated barriers to participation in PCET. (It is acknowledged here that PCET does not only mean university, there are many other types of institutional and non-institutional post-compulsory learning opportunities available in New Zealand). Stockwell (1997) conducted 45 interviews across New Zealand. The findings in relation to individuals who once experienced barriers, and overcame them to enter further education and training, are echoed in the reasons that some of the students in my study gave for their decision to enter university. . They identified the following to be particularly important:

- *Sharing goals and having the support of family, work colleagues and friends*
- *A desire to be role models for others eg for their children*
- *Having mentors who believe in their abilities*

- *Being expected by others to enter Post Compulsory Education and Training(PCET)*
- *Having enthusiasm and a positive attitude*
- *Being adaptable and able to accept disappointments (1997:41)*

All of these suggestions are linked to the affective domain, and this area is certainly critical to our understanding of student experience. Although financial concerns may have prevented some mature students from entering tertiary education when they were younger, often less tangible barriers arise as they get older, hence the need for plenty of support and positive re-enforcement.

These findings are echoed in an article by Miller (1993) who investigated the experiences of mature women at the University of Canterbury; and in a recent study, yet to be fully reported, from Victoria University, about education in mid- and later life (Morris-Matthews, Neale and Ng, 2000)

More recently, thesis students have added a variety of different perspectives to the New Zealand picture of FYE. This list includes writers such as:

- Haworth (1996), who investigated the experiences of international students in their first year.
- Fulljames (1997), who focused on the student as customer
- Dowds,(1999) whose work focused on the student/tutor relationship in tutorial settings, and
- Barratt (2001), who investigated mature students' experiences and reasons for entering university

A number of writers have also started to explore the particular needs of Maori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) coming in to tertiary education settings. In 1999, Purnell wrote about an initiative taken by one NZ university, in partnership with Maori, to try to make the transition to university more achievable for Maori extramural students.

Morrison (2000) challenged tertiary institutions to consider Kaupapa Maori theory in relation to a 'space' for Maori. Reeder (1999) also addresses some of these issues in *Wahine Maori: their participation in adult education*, and Chalmers and Kumeakwa (2000) include specific reference to Maori students in their exploration of decision making by secondary school students in relation to higher education. There were only two students in my study who identified as Maori, and they have commented on some specific issues that affected their transition.

Eagle and McDonald (1998, 2001) from Manukau Institute of Technology in Auckland, have been particularly interested in the experiences and challenges faced by mature students in the tertiary system, and also in attrition from Business Studies courses. Whilst their work concentrates on polytechnic rather than university students, the second phase of their study that examines the perceptions of mature students in their first year of tertiary study is relevant. Approximately 50% of my interviewees are enrolled in a degree in Business Studies, and most of them are mature age (25+) students.

Also from Auckland, Leys (1999) writes about student retention in a large metropolitan polytechnic. Her findings are also pertinent to this thesis, in particular her discussion of the academic advice that uncertain students require to make informed decisions about their study.

One of the most common problems for first year students is uncertainty about the choice of their programme...Thus it is even more important that orientation and first year programmes provide academic or career advice as soon as undecided students enter the campus (1999:7).

In April 2001 there was a 'first ever' conference of Bridging Educators in New Zealand. A number of papers relevant to this thesis were offered at that conference, and include writings by Benseman & Russ, from the University of Auckland, Barnett, and Anderson from Manukau Institute of Technology. They provide a very useful summary of bridging education in New Zealand, its foundations, purpose and approaches, that are relevant in the study of first year experience in New Zealand. Anderson's work in particular links closely

with earlier work reviewed in this literature review chapter, dealing with the consequences of legislative change in this country, and the impact on students.

2.1.6 Comment

There has been a great deal written about the transition to university, by writers from many corners of the world. However, having explored all of the literature described in this review, I found a number of gaps, mainly in relation to the specific experience of students in New Zealand, which were not specifically answered in the available literature. Questions arise from the literature that played a large part in the formation of the questions for this study. They are outlined at the end of this chapter, and will be addressed in this thesis.

2.2 Part Two: Transition Theories

Academics in a number of fields such as psychology and business/management have written about processes of change and transition; the impact of change on people's ability to cope; and strategies for helping them. Much of the writing concentrates on either personal coping strategies following major trauma; or loss and grief; or managing the changes associated with organisational change and restructuring.

I reviewed some of this work, looking for models or structures that might help to scaffold understanding of the transition to university. (Lindemann, 1965; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Moos & Tsu, 1976; Nicholson, 1990; Bridges, 1996; Bee, 2000; McAdams, Josselson & Lieblich, 2001; Hayes, 2002). There were certainly areas where these works served to shed light on the general area of transition theory, such as the perception of transition as a process of 'death' and 'birth', or as a journey, moving from one stage to the next, or growth and development of the individual.

One book that was particularly useful in increasing my understanding of transition processes was Schlossberg (1984), *Counselling Adults in Transition*. Schlossberg defines the transition process as:

Any event or non-event that results in change in relationships, routines, assumptions and/or roles, within the settings of work, family, health and or economics (1984:43).

A transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's own perception of the change (ibid).

For an individual undergoing a transition it is not the event or non event that is most important, but its impact, that is the degree to which the transition alters his or her daily life (1984:52).

She suggests that her model of transition is trying to explain:

The extraordinarily complex reality that accompanies and defines the human capacity to cope with change in their lives.

It is important for helpers to discover what determines whether a person grows or deteriorates as a result of a transition... we cannot assume that all people react similarly to a similar change. Nor can we assume that the one individual will react similarly over time (1984:67).

Another view is that of Cowan (1991) cited by Huon and Sankey:

Transition is a process that involves the qualitative re-organisation of inner life and of external behaviour. Life changes that are transitional involve a restructuring of the way individuals feel about themselves, and about their world (2000:1).

This is a relevant interpretation in relation to my study, since students entering university are in the process of restructuring their lives, and their perceptions of their experience are crucial.

In the education arena, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have contributed to the discussion with their comprehensive work *How College Affects Students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research*. The second chapter of their book brings together a number of theories and models of student change. They comment:

Most of the prominent contributors to theory development and research on the impact of college on students are psychologists. As a consequence, the study of

college students and the training of many higher educational researchers and administrators for the last quarter of a century have been based largely on one theoretical genre. Theories from other fields have only more recently begun to receive attention (1991:15).

The theories and models explored in the work by Pascarella & Terenzini were described under a number of headings

- Developmental theories of student change
- Psychosocial theories
- Cognitive structural theories
- Typological models
- Person environment interaction theories
- College impact models of student change
-

The work of Vincent Tinto (1987, 1993) is included under this final heading, and most people who write about transition to university, or the first year experience, quote Tinto and his work in exploring student attrition. His *Model of Institutional Departure* has formed the foundation for attrition studies world wide since it was developed in 1987.

All of the models and theories discussed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) above were developed in the USA. This does not mean that they are not of great value in other contexts, but it does raise questions about the need to develop models that reflect more explicitly the experiences of students in other parts of the world, with different structures, and a different student population.

Another perspective was described by Boud and Griffin (1987) in Australia. One section of their work, *Appreciating Adults Learning: from the learner's perspective*, deals with transitions to self directed learning. The model that they describe has eight critical points. Four of these are phases in the transition:

Disorientation

Exploration

Re-orientation

Equilibrium

The other four critical areas are the passages between those phases:

Disconfirmation

Naming the problem

Reflection

Sharing the discovery (1987:183)

This model could perhaps have been adapted for my thesis, and it has a number of similarities with Nicholson's (1990) Transition Cycle Model (Appendix 2), which I have used. These similarities are shown in the table below:

Boud and Griffin (1987)	Nicholson (1990)
Disorientation <i>A crisis of confidence</i>	Preparation <i>Developing helpful expectations, motives and feelings</i>
Exploration <i>Gathering insights and confidence – satisfaction with strategies</i>	Encounter <i>Confidence in coping, enjoyment in sense making</i>
Reorientation <i>Taking a new approach to the task</i>	Adjustment <i>Personal change, role development and relationship building</i>
Equilibrium <i>New approach elaborated, refined and applied</i>	Stabilisation <i>Sustained trust, commitment and effectiveness with people and tasks</i>

Table 5. A comparison of the transition models of Boud & Griffin(1987), and Nicholson(1990)

In addition, Nicholson's Transition Cycle Model has a number of cycles which lead the investigator more deeply into the transition process, and I chose to use it because it appeared to offer different and interesting possibilities for exploration of the student experience.

In a report written in Australia, *Transition from Secondary to tertiary: A performance study* (Pargetter, McInnis, James, Evans, Peel & Dobson, 1998), the authors provide us with a review of:

the theoretical and empirical literature relating to factors and problems in the transition of students from secondary to tertiary level education...The review includes most of the recent Australian literature, and key works from a plethora of overseas material, particularly from North America, in addition to studies of theoretical models from the education, psychology, sociology, economics and statistics literature, and their application in specific discipline areas. (Pargetter et al. 1998, Ch. 6 :1).

The review is comprehensive and examines literature published since 1959. The review has been organised under the following headings:

- Theories and Models
- Analyses
- Factors identified as significant
- Student Demographic characteristics
- Student psychological characteristics
- Student prior performance
- Social Factors
- Institutional factors
- Outcomes
- Institutional Actions

The Pargetter report concentrates on school leavers, and much of the work that the group has reviewed also assumes that the student is in a residential situation, common practice in the United States. This is not a common situation in New Zealand, however there is much useful information in this report, and the literature review in particular provides a number of leads into relevant material for further study.

In relation particularly to transition models and theories, Pargetter et al. start by examining Tinto's work (1975, 1987, 1993), which has been confirmed by other studies, Christie & Dinham (1990) amongst them, but found to be less useful by others like Neumann &

Neumann (1989). Pascarella (1982) also found Tinto's work contextually based in the residential situation, and developed an alternative model.

Some key writings in the transition literature may have been missed. However, as soon as I read Nicholson's (1990) work it seemed to provide a framework that would be useful to apply as an underpinning for the analysis of the student interviews, and drawing together of the information that has been acquired in this study. I acknowledge that Nicholson's Transition Cycle Model was not developed for the education sector, but it appeared to provide the framework that I was looking for, and to combine issues related to both student experience and the role of the university. A more detailed description of the Transition Cycle Model is included in Appendix 2.

2.3 Conclusion

This review of the literature relevant to the current study has shown that there has already been a considerable amount of research and exploration in the area of the transition to university, and the experience of students in their first year at university.

The intention of my study is to add to this body of work, and to contribute a more New Zealand perspective to the discussion. Clearly there have been studies undertaken in this country, and their contribution to the literature is acknowledged. New Zealand readers may want to recognise the voices of their own students, and to read about the university structures that are familiar and uniquely theirs. In endeavouring to ensure that these voices are heard, and that the study is situated in a New Zealand context, this research has a place in the overall picture.

The general questions that this thesis will explore arise from the literature, and in answering them, the overarching research question relating the experience of students as they make the transition to university will also be answered. Questions arising from the literature are:

- What, in general terms, is the experience of students as they make the transition to undergraduate study in New Zealand?
- How do they describe these experiences?

- Are their experiences substantially the same, or essentially different from that of their counterparts in the USA and Australia?
- What is the role of the university in the transition?

The chapter that follows explores the way in which I conducted the study to answer these questions.

Chapter Three: The Research Process

3.0 Introduction

I have chosen to place this chapter on methodology as a stand-alone component in the overall plan of the study. The advantage of this approach is that it:

...separates the theory from other components of the research process and enables a reader to better identify and understand the theory base for the study (Creswell 1994:89).

The disadvantage of placing the discussion of methodology in a separate chapter such as this, is that:

...the theory discussion stands in isolation from other components of the research process, and as such, may not be connected by a reader with other components of the research process (ibid.:189).

In studies such as this one it is generally the convention to have a chapter on methodology that stands apart from the rest of the research, to enable the researcher's voice to be heard, unfettered by the constraints of theory and process. The theory underpins the research, but should not restrict or confine it.

3.1 The Research Question

This research originated in my concern that little was known about the experiences of first year students in New Zealand universities. It is clear from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two that academics in many countries have written about the experiences of the students in their universities, but there is a dearth of published literature that describes the experience in this country. Is the New Zealand experience unique, or does it reflect that of Australia or the United States?

An increasingly diverse group of students has entered the New Zealand university system. since the education reforms of the late 1980's - outlined in *Learning for Life*, Minister of

Education, 1989) in which the government affirmed commitment to expansion in the post compulsory sector. In particular there was support in *Learning for Life* for the removal of barriers to education for groups previously under-represented in the tertiary sector. In practice this has meant that the students now entering university may not be as well prepared as students in the past, when only the 'academic elite' actually gained admission. *Learning for Life* also espoused the concept of 'lifelong learning, and learning for all, which meant that an increasing number of mature-age (non-school leaver) students started to come into the university system.

A significant number of new entrants to tertiary education have worked for a few years after leaving school, or received a benefit for a year or two before returning to study (1989).

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, approximately 60% of students enrolled at the university researched in this study did not enter straight from school.

Do these figures make our experience unique? It seemed that one way to discover the answer was to ask the students.

The research questions for this study is therefore:

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?

3.2 Overview of the study

To answer that question, a qualitative, rather than quantitative approach is indicated. This is a descriptive study, designed to examine and explore the experiences of a group of students to discover how they describe the transition from school, home or the workplace to one New Zealand university. This transition occurs on many levels, continues to occur throughout the years at university, and is a complex one, described by the students in a variety of ways. It is also important to acknowledge that the transition challenges associated

with the move into tertiary/higher education are not confined universities. However this thesis is restricted to the study of transition to university undergraduate study.

A specific purpose of this research is to add student voices to the voices of others, such as university academics who have described these transitions from other perspectives, and in other ways. As I have already discussed in the literature review, much of the previous work has been quantitative in nature.

There are few qualitative studies reported in the area of the first year experience, or transition to university in New Zealand. This desire to enable others to hear the voices of students dictated the methodological choices made. Light (2001) comments on this need for different approaches to researching student experience:

I am a statistician, but I am impressed with the power of individual's heartfelt stories...These personal interviews paint an entirely different picture from the kind of information that comes from a large scale check-box style of survey questionnaire. For this particular research, personal interviews offer a special depth and richness that no check-box questionnaire, however well designed, could easily tap (2001:6).

3.3 The Research Approach

The qualitative approach taken was chosen because of its 'fit' with the purpose of the study.

Knowing what you want to find out leads inexorably to the question of how you will get that information (Miles & Huberman 1984).

The link between my interest in finding out about the world of the students, and my choice of a qualitative, interpretive research approach, is supported by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) :

The interpretive paradigms strive to understand and interpret the world in terms of its actors...meanings and interpretations are paramount (2000:28).

Creswell (1994) set out a number of assumptions about research, comparing the qualitative and quantitative paradigms. This table is reproduced in full below, as it underpins the rationale for using qualitative methods for this study.

Assumption	Question	Quantitative	Qualitative
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is objective and singular, apart from the researcher	Reality is subjective and multiple, as seen by the participants in a study
Epistemological	What is the relationship of the researcher to that researched?	Researcher is independent from that being researched	Researcher interacts with that being researched
Axiological	What is the role of values?	Value free and unbiased	Value laden and biased
Rhetorical	What is the language of research?	Formal Based on set definitions Impersonal voice Use of accepted quantitative words	Informal Evolving decisions Personal voice Accepted qualitative words
Methodological	What is the process of research?	Deductive process Cause and effect Static design – categories isolated before study Context – free Generalizations leading to prediction, explanation and understanding Accurate and reliable through validity and reliability	Inductive process Mutual simultaneous shaping of factors Emerging design – categories identified during research process Context bound Patterns, theories developed for understanding Accurate and reliable through verification

Table 6. Quantitative and Qualitative paradigm assumptions (Creswell 1994:5).

A qualitative/interpretive approach was chosen because it does not rely on a previous hypothesis, and enables data and theory to emerge from the participants during the research.

They [interpretive researchers] begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretations of the world around them. Theory is emergent and must arise

from particular situations; it should be 'grounded' on data generated by the research act. Theory should not precede research but follow it...Thus theory becomes sets of meanings, which yield insight and understanding of people's behaviour (Cohen et al, 2000:23).

This study is not based on prior assumptions of what might be discovered and theory is emergent, not predetermined. However, as acknowledged in Chapter One, I had read widely before research was commenced and had also attended three International and Pacific Rim Conferences on *the First Year Experience in Higher Education and Students in Transition* prior to the start of the data collection. Both of these actions meant that the themes and concepts that might arise from the data were probably already taking shape in my mind prior to the interviews, and may well have influenced the questions that were asked and the ways in which the data was analysed.

At the beginning of the project, the challenge was to decide which university to study, how many sites, how many students, and what methods might be used. After discussion with my supervisor, and an exploration of the possibilities, I decided to sample two sites from an accessible university with multiple sites, and to interview students in two different degree programmes, to try to get a reasonably wide coverage of the possible experiences. It was clearly going to be impossible to have a selection of students from every type of degree, the numbers involved would have been too high to manage, and a qualitative study of that magnitude would have been too large to address properly within the time and resources available for a Master's thesis.

I considered the possibility of using case study, grounded theory and phenomenology, as research approaches, but as a novice researcher and a pragmatic, action orientated learner I felt neither competent nor confident to use these methods as the specialists in these processes prescribed them.

Creswell provides a useful brief description of these three research methods:

Case Studies - in which the researcher explores a single entity or phenomenon (the case), bounded by time and activity (a program, event, process, institution or social group) and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time. (Yin, 1984; Sturman, 1999).

Grounded theory – in which the researcher attempts to derive a theory by using multiple stages of data collection, and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Two primary characteristics of this design are the constant comparison of data with emerging categories, and theoretical sampling of different groups to maximise the similarities and differences of information.

Phenomenological studies –in which human experiences are examined through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied. As a method the procedure involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Dukes 1984). Through this process the researcher 'brackets' his or her own experiences in order to understand those of the informants (Nieswiadomy 1991).

(Creswell, 1994:12).

Any one of these might have been appropriate to help me to answer the questions that form the basis of this research, but as I said above, no one method seemed to really fit the study that I hoped to do.

I decided to use a pragmatic approach to design a study that would use some well accepted strategies such as semi-structured interviews, and in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts to determine emerging themes and concepts. In essence this was a semi-grounded theory approach.

Lincoln and Guba comment that:

...the unstructured interview is useful when the researcher is not aware of what she does not know, and therefore relies on the respondent to tell her...the more one wishes to acquire unique, non-standardised personalised information about how

individuals view the world, the more one veers towards qualitative, open-ended, unstructured interviewing (1985:269).

The structure of the interviews in this thesis fall somewhere between Lincoln and Guba's definition and the standardised open-ended interviews described by Cohen et al. as having:

The exact wording and sequence of questions determined in advance. All interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order (2000:271).

The semi-structured interview techniques used in this study included asking one or two starter questions and also provided space for the participants to share their own perceptions of their experiences and the things that were important to them.

Creswell (1994) does sound a word or warning about relying on interviews to provide data for analysis. He points out that the interview process provides information that is *filtered through the views of the interviewees* who may not remember incidents clearly. He also comments that not all people *are equally articulate and perceptive* (1994:150). A middle ground seemed appropriate, and was attempted, although at times I acknowledge that the interviews became a little less structured than might have been desirable.

Nicholson's (1990) Transition Cycle model was chosen as a framework for the final analysis. The Transition Cycle made sense as soon as I discovered it, and even though it was designed for quite a different purpose, it has proved to be a useful tool for the purpose. Details of this model are to be found in Appendix 2.

Before the Cycle was used in this thesis, my supervisor was consulted, and I explored its use as a framework for my thesis in a paper delivered at the 6th Pacific Rim Conference for First Year Experience in Higher Education in Christchurch, July 2002. The paper was well received, and the feedback was that the model appeared to give meaning to the data. I had some useful discussions with conference participants about ways in which the model might be adapted. I have since received feedback from one conference participant who had later read my paper, and took the time to let me know that he felt that the model offered some

interesting possibilities for understanding and constructing the transition experience of students.

The alternative, relying solely on analysing emergent categories as indicated in grounded theory, was rejected in favour of the Transition Model as it appeared to give more meaning to the data. The transition model also seemed to offer the possibility of refinement to a specific contextual model to enable further study of students and their transition to university

3.4 The Research Process

The research process and methods used in this study are described below.

3.4.1 Planning

Following a major literature search, the research proposal was developed under the guidance of my Supervisor, and was presented to the Massey University College of Education Research Committee for approval in March 2001.

The research starter questions were designed after reading the work of writers like McInnis (1995, 2000), and taking note of the comments received from a trial interview. They are listed below, but were only used as a guide during the interview:

1. Has anyone else in your family been to university?
2. Why did you decide to study at university?
3. What were your expectations before you arrived?
4. How were the first few weeks?
5. How did you get on with studying/assignments etc?
6. Do you have any advice for the university?

Other steps taken were to decide where the study would be carried out, the number of students that might be involved, and the degree programmes that might be suitable.

3.4.2 Ethical approval

An application for Ethics approval was made to the Human Ethics Committee of the University under study, since the study involved students. Key ethical considerations in relation to this research project were:

- Informed Consent
- Confidentiality
- Risk of harm to the students and/or the organisation
- The role of the researcher

These issues reflect the three areas of concern identified by Cohen et al:

Informed consent, confidentiality, and consequences (2000:292).

All of these issues were dealt with in the application to the ethics committee that was required before the research was able to proceed. Extracts from that application are included at Appendix 1. That appendix also includes the letters that were sent to the students inviting them to participate, participant information sheets and consent forms, and confidentiality agreements for transcribers.

Once Ethics Committee approval had been obtained, in July 2001, I was free to proceed with the research, and to try to interest some students in taking part.

3.4.3 Selection of the sample

In order to try to gain access to a relatively large number of participants, whose distribution and characteristics were as representative as possible, two degree programmes and two sites were chosen:

- Site One site is large, and attracts a high number of school leavers to its undergraduate programmes. Hostel accommodation is relatively plentiful.
- Site Two is smaller, attracts a higher proportion of mature age students, and has less hostel accommodation.

The initial intention was to have ten students from each degree programme, and each site, involved in the research - a total of 40 participants - and to use focus group interviews. I had also originally intended to also send questionnaires to staff (both academic and general) on both sites, to gain insight into the student experience from another perspective, however my supervisor advised me that this might detract from my focus of hearing the student voice, so the section was abandoned. In retrospect I believe that it might have added an interesting dimension to the study, but could now be the focus for future research.

Letters of invitation (Appendix 1.1) were sent to 240 students in total

- Students from Site Two were selected by taking every 5th person on the student enrolment list of two compulsory first year papers – one in each discipline - and sending them an invitation. [160 in total]
- Due to the small numbers enrolled on Site One, all 40 students in the two selected first year compulsory papers were sent invitations to participate [80 in total]
- The slip that they were asked to return included questions about
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Living arrangements (hostel, flat, own home)
 - Last school qualification
 - Previous university experience [This was the only criteria upon which they would be excluded]
 - Contact details
- I also went personally to both sites after about three weeks, to try to encourage participation, because initial returns were very disappointing.
- 29 of the 240 students replied expressing interest in the project. Some were not eligible to participate, because they had attended university in New Zealand before.
- Those 23 that were eligible were sent Information for Participants, and Consent forms (Appendix 1.2), and asked to return the Consent forms to me.
- 15 consent forms were finally received, and these students became the group studied in this research. Details of all the students, including thumbnail sketches, are in the 'Findings' Chapter.

3.4.5 Letters, interviews and transcripts

The students who signed and returned a consent form were contacted by phone, to thank them for their interest, and to ask them to write me a letter, or email, as if to a friend, with some brief impressions of their first weeks at university. This was followed up with a written request, confirming what I hoped they would do (Appendix 1.6).

The response to this request was enlightening, as all of the students who responded wrote interesting and thought-provoking notes. Some were hand written - one in the back of a car on the way to the ski slopes, some as succinct emails, others as outpourings of heartfelt concerns about their time at university, typed at apparently great speed with little thought for spelling or punctuation. Every single one, however brief, left me with questions such as *'why is this student having such a hard time?'* or *'this is exciting - this change in perception, and enjoyment of learning – I must ask about that'*. They also raised concerns and areas to follow up in interview, and included comments that showed a level of openness and honesty that was as surprising as it was welcome. Two examples of this were:

With my experience of university I would not recommend it to anyone with a family or commitments (Christina:B2¹)

I was so afraid I was too dumb to go to university and absolutely terrified of failing (Hannah:S2).

It was clear from the start that most of the students were really keen to tell their story. The students who took the time to write a letter were those who ended up as the participants in the study.

To pilot the interview process, I interviewed three second-year students from another university, and asked them to recall their experiences in the previous year. This was a useful exercise. It made me aware how easy it is for the interviewer to bias the results of the interviews, and also, to my horror, highlighted my tendency to interrupt when others are

speaking. The 'starter' questions seemed to be appropriate, and the participants suggested some modification of the interview structure. This pilot was also useful as it reminded me how easy it is to restrict a line of discussion with closed questions.

Once all the letters had been received, I made appointments to interview all of the participants individually, since with the smaller numbers, spread over two sites, focus group interviews no longer seemed to be appropriate. They were interviewed in venues of their own choosing. Some were interviewed on neutral ground - I am indebted to the University Students Association for the use of one of the rooms in the Student Building. Others chose to meet me in my office, still others chose to be interviewed in their own homes or hostel rooms.

As described earlier, the interviews were only loosely structured, as I really wanted the students to be able to tell me of their experiences in their own words. This process fits well with the guidelines from Cohen et al. (2000) who describe the semi-structured interview as being appropriate for qualitative research:

This enables respondents to project their own ways of defining the world. It permits flexibility of sequence and discussions, and it also enables participants to raise and pursue interests and matters that might not have been included in a pre-devised schedule. (2000:146).

I had a number of questions that I used to start the conversation. These questions were not always asked verbatim, but the issues they address were raised in a number of ways, as appropriate in individual interviews. Often the students themselves raised the issues without prompting from me. The list of starter questions is on Page 68.

This type of interview process is appropriate in the sort of inductive study described by Creswell(1994) as informal, using the personal voice, with evolving decisions. Cohen et al. (2000) echo this when they say:

The central endeavour in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience (2000:22).

Asking the participants, in an interview situation, about their perceptions of their experiences is an appropriate strategy for an interpretive researcher.

Interviews enable participants – be they interviewers or interviewees – to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view (ibid:267).

It is also important for the researcher to remember:

It is crucial to keep in uppermost in one's mind that the interview is a social interpersonal encounter, not merely a data collection exercise (ibid:279).

I followed up the ideas as they arose in the discussion. I also took the students' letters with me to the interviews and raised any issues mentioned in the letters that had not otherwise surfaced. Some students needed prompting to tell me of their experiences; others spoke freely and at length.

Generally the students were very happy to discuss their experiences, both positive and negative, and I took rough notes to act as *aides memoirs*. In one interview I pushed the wrong button on the tape recorder, and the whole of one side of the tape was blank. I had taken some notes as the conversation progressed, but the particular student happened to be a student for whom English was a second language, and I had to concentrate to follow what she was saying so the notes were minimal. I was devastated when I realised what had happened, but she graciously agreed to repeat the interview, and I returned a couple of weeks later. This time the recorder was double-checked to ensure that it was working. I used the scanty notes from the first interview to try to replicate what had been discussed, but inevitably some of the spontaneity was lost.

Two of the students from Site Two elected to be interviewed together. This made for an interesting discussion, as each prompted the other, and confirmed or reinforced comments. However I did not feel able to probe the individuals as much as I had with the other interviews and was left with a feeling that the interview had been a little superficial. The

transcript confirms my concerns, but there was still sufficient useful information to contribute to the study. Cohen et al (2000) quote Kitwood (1977):

Each participant in an interview will define the situation in a particular way.
(2000:267).

Cicourel (1964), also quoted in Cohen et al (2000) lists five of the unavoidable features of the interview situation that would normally be regarded as problematic. The first is particularly relevant to the situation described above, and made me realise that what I had on tape was a different kind of interview, not necessarily inferior, just different from the others. I have quoted all five features as they are relevant more widely in the description of my thesis. Clearly some of the respondents felt more comfortable to share their ideas and experiences.

1. *There are many features which inevitably differ from one interview to another, such as mutual trust, social distance and the interviewer's control*
2. *The respondent may well feel uneasy and adopt avoidance tactics if the questioning is too deep*
3. *Both interviewer and respondent are bound to hold back part of what is in their power to state*
4. *Many of the meanings which are clear to one will be relatively opaque to another, even when the intention is genuine communication*
5. *It is impossible, just as in everyday life, to bring every aspect of the encounter within rational control* (Cohen et al, 2000:268).

I received funding to enable me to have the interview tapes transcribed. Two people were found to transcribe the tapes, confidentiality agreements (Appendix 1.4) were signed, and the tapes were sent off for processing.

Unfortunately, four of the tapes sent to a transcriber in the Wellington region were lost in the post. NZ Post was contacted but, following a thorough search, they were unable to find them. Two of the four students have since been re-interviewed. The other two declined to be re-interviewed.

This was a low point in the process for me, and has meant that the findings and analysis are based on the experiences of just 13 students. However, that group is very diverse, in age, background, ethnicity and prior experience, and their comments make fascinating reading.

3.4.6 Data analysis

A major feature of qualitative research is that analysis commences early on in the data collection processes so that theory generation can be undertaken (Cohen et al 2000:148).

Data analysis started when I received the first information from the participants about their basic details and continued when the letters and emails were analysed, and key ideas or themes from them identified for further discussion. Major analysis started with the transcripts of the interviews. As the transcripts were returned, I began to immerse myself in the data, listening to the tapes a number of times, reading and re-reading the transcripts. I used coloured pens to underline themes, at the same time transferring ideas to matching coloured paper for easy identification and sorting. Each new theme had a new colour – (I call this rainbow analysis!). In all twenty themes emerged:

1. Previous university experience in family
2. Reasons for starting study
3. Reasons for this university/this degree
4. Expectations
5. Academic advice
6. Finances
7. Work - Paid/Voluntary
8. Health issues
9. Social life
10. Sport/physical fitness
11. Academic/learning issues
12. Study skills
13. Teaching and Academic Staff
14. Use of available services

15. Influence of living arrangements
16. Family and other support
17. Safety and Individual challenges
18. Ways in which I've changed
19. Looking forward
20. Random comments/Advice to the university

Using Nicholson's (1990) Transition Cycle as a framework, these were later grouped under the four phases of the cycle, Preparation, Encounter, Adjustment and Stabilisation. Comments are explored more fully in the Discussion chapter. Some categories were later collapsed into each other such as Finances and Work, Social life and Sport, Academic /Learning issues and Study skills.

All transcripts were read at least three times, searching for finer detail and/or issues that I had missed, and any new themes that might emerge. Hycner (1985) describes this as

Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole. This involves listening to the entire tape several times and reading the transcripts a number of times in order to provide a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes later on.

Cohen et al, 2000, suggest that there are several stages in analysis, for example;

- *Generating natural units of meaning*
- *Classifying, categorising and ordering these units of meaning*
- *Structuring narratives to describe the interview contents*
- *Interpreting the interview data (2000:282).*

These are broad categories that are not specific to any particular qualitative methodology, and all of these steps were followed in the analysis of the transcripts. Cohen et al (2000) use Kerlinger's definition of coding

The translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purposes of analysis (2000, p283).

Miles and Huberman (1994) (cited in Cohen et al, 2000) attach a great deal of importance to the coding of interview responses, partially as a way of reducing what is typically data overload from qualitative data. Certainly the interview transcripts generated a great deal of information, which was coded and sorted during analysis, and grouped into general clusters. The 'Findings' chapter was written using the headings that had emerged and with a substantial number of quotations from the transcripts to support the ideas, since, as stated previously, one key purpose of this research was to enable the student voices to be heard.

3.4.7. Validity and reliability

In any qualitative research project, reliability and validity are key issues of concern - if a piece of research is invalid it is worthless. However:

It is unwise to think that threats to validity and reliability can ever be erased completely (Cohen et al, 2000:105).

It is important therefore, for the researcher to be as thorough as possible, to try to improve the validity of the data:

For example, in qualitative data validity might be addressed through the honesty, richness and scope of the data achieved, the participants approached, the extent of triangulation, and the objectivity of the researcher... In qualitative data the subjectivity of the respondents, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together contribute to a degree of bias. Validity then should be seen as a matter of degree rather than as an absolute state (ibid:105).

How did I know that the students were not just making up stories to satisfy my need for data, and their desire to provide it? The short answer is that I did not.

I trusted the students, since there appeared to be no obvious reason for their lying to me. I endeavoured to approach the interview situation as openly as possible, with no hidden agenda that I was aware of, and a genuine desire to explore their experiences with them. I used an open process, and asked, in the main, open questions.

In order to try to determine internal validity, which seeks to demonstrate that the explanation of a particular event can actually be substantiated by the data, I examined each interview as a whole, as well as looking for the component parts. Was the student consistent throughout the interview, in the points that he/she was raising, and in the responses to my questions? Clearly, they were not always consistent, Luka.S2 is an example of someone who said:

... if I wasn't in class I was in the library... this was my study area. No, I have no social life!

Later on though, she says

I've met some really cool people here and have some kind of social life with them outside university (Luka:S2)

Inconsistencies like this are commented on in the findings, but do not appear to significantly impair overall validity.

Cohen et al refer to writers such as Le Compte and Preissle (1993) who argue that, for research to be considered authentic, it needs to demonstrate the following

- ***Fairness*** - *there should be a complete and balanced representation of the multiple realities in and constructions of a situation*
- ***Ontological authenticity*** – *the research should provide a fresh and more sophisticated understanding of the situation*
- ***Educative authenticity*** – *the research should generate a new appreciation of those findings*
- ***Catalytic authenticity*** – *the research gives rise to specific courses of action*
- ***Tactical authenticity*** – *the research should benefit all those involved – the ethical issues of beneficence (2000:108).*

This research meets most of these criteria. I am not sure that there was any particular benefit to those who were the subjects of the interviews, except perhaps that they had the chance to have their voice heard, and their experiences acknowledged. The principle of non-maleficence also applies – do no harm.

In addition to looking for consistency through the interview transcripts of any one individual, another check was made, to compare the transcripts from students at one site, and also within the degree programmes.

Obviously there are considerable individual differences in the ways in which students within each set of groupings experienced their transition to university, however I did not find any obvious inconsistencies that were sufficient to invalidate the research findings.

In the Discussion Chapter, I also compare the findings from my research with the findings in the literature. There were sufficient similarities to lead me to believe that my findings were valid, in a general sense, and enough points of difference to make the research interesting and worthwhile.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has described the process of this research project, the decisions that were made, theoretical underpinning for those decisions, and the ways in which, as is so common in projects of this kind, things did not go according to plan!

In the Analysis chapter that follows, the student voices are clearly heard. The ideas, experiences, comments and concerns described by the students, are grouped under the themes.

The Discussion Chapter then draws on material from the letters, the interviews and the literature, and uses Nicholson's Transition Cycle as a framework for making sense of the emerging data.

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

4.0 Introduction

Analysis of the interviews and letters from the students shows that the participants in the study represent a wide variety of backgrounds, expectations, experiences, and perspectives. Although their experiences in the university were personal and individual, common threads run through much of what they had to say.

This chapter commences with thumbnail sketches of each of the participants and then describes the key factors that have emerged from examining their letters and interview transcripts.

4.1 Thumbnail sketches of the participants

Thumbnail sketches of the students demonstrate the wide variety of backgrounds and prior experiences of the group. All of the students have chosen their own pseudonyms, to maintain confidentiality. They are all studying full-time.

Anne

Anne:B1² is an international student, from China, who has been in New Zealand for just a few months. She is 21, single, and has undertaken some previous university study in her own country. Her father has a university qualification. She is a student in Business Studies. She does not do any part-time work, as she is on a student visa. She is not involved in any sports and does not have a partner. She lives in a flat with another international student, having had a bad experience with an initial home stay arranged by the university.

² Student references carry the notation 1 or 2 for Site 1 or 2; and B or S for Business or Social Sciences. ie. (Bob:B2)

Bob

Bob:B2 is 18, European, single, and a Business Studies student. He lives at home with his parents. He passed Bursary, and went straight from school to University. He comes from a family where no one else has been to University, although one of his parents has a Polytechnic Trade qualification. He is working part time (15hours a week) to fund his study, and he has a steady girlfriend. He participates regularly in team sports.

Christina

Christina:B2 is 35, from South East Asia, is married and lives in a flat. She is a student in Business Studies. She left school at 14 without formal qualifications in her country, and was in a refugee camp for some time before coming to New Zealand. English is her third language, she has lived here for a number of years and is a New Zealand citizen. Her parents have no tertiary education, but she worked for years to assist a number of her siblings to complete both high school and university, and feels it is now her turn. Her husband is not very supportive of her study, and it has put a strain on their relationship. She has worked part-time throughout the first year. She has no children of her own, but does have stepchildren, in their late teens, who live with her.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth:B1 is 18, European, single, and a Business Studies student. She has moved well away from home, and lives on campus in a hostel. She left school with University Bursary, and went straight to university. One of her parents has a professional qualification, but neither of them has a University degree. She has worked throughout the first year, and plays in a social soccer team. She was a victim of sexual harassment early in her university experience.

Hannah

Hannah:S2 is 23, and describes herself as having Maori heritage. She is a Social Sciences student. Neither of her parents went to University, nor do they have any tertiary education experience. She left school with Sixth Form Certificate. She did not come straight to

University, but had experience working overseas prior to deciding to study full time. She got married during her first year and they live in their own house. Her husband is very supportive of her decision to study. She is a class representative, active in student politics and has 20hours paid work a week.

Jane

Jane:S1 is 38, Maori, and the mother of a college age son. She is a solo parent and lives in rented accommodation. She is a Social Sciences student. She left school with Sixth Form Certificate. No-one in her family has had tertiary education experience. She had been on the Domestic Purposes Benefit for a number of years prior to starting full time study. She did attempt extra mural study a few years ago, but found studying alone did not work for her, and pulled out. She does not have paid work.

Jimmy

Jimmy:B1 is 19, born in New Zealand of Asian descent. He is living at home, and is a student in a Business Studies degree. He left school with Bursary and came straight to university His father and a number of other family members have University qualifications. He is working part time (up to 16 hours a week) to fund some of his studies, and does not play any sports. He does not have a partner.

Kathy

Kathy:B1 is 18, European, single, and although her home is in the same town as the university, she is living in a flat. She left school with University Bursary and came straight to university. She is a Business Studies student. Her mother has a post graduate degree, and works in a university. She participates in a number of activities outside the university, plays social netball, and works part time. She is in a long-term relationship. She says that her boyfriend is not particularly happy about the fact that she is doing university study, he appears to feel that it will change their relationship.

Lee

Lee:S1 is 18, European, and single. She left school with University Bursary. The university is quite a long way from her home, and she lives on campus in a hostel. She is a student in Social Sciences. Neither of her parents has a tertiary qualification. Lee:S1 does not have a job during term time, but she worked all over the Christmas holidays to pay for her fees. She qualifies for the student allowance. She plays social netball. Lee:S1 joined the gym, but doesn't feel she has time to go. She does not have a partner.

Luka

Luka:S2 is 26, European, and single. She left School with University Entrance, and did a number of different things before deciding to come to university. She had a partner when she began first year but they are no longer together. She lives in a flat and is studying in a Social Sciences degree. Her parents have not been to university but her grandmother has a degree. She has been on a Social Welfare benefit and does not currently have any part-time work. She "does not have a social life!"

Ruby

Ruby:B2 is 30, European, single, and lives in a rented flat. She left school with School Certificate. No one in her family has ever attended University. She had been working for a long time in a job that she hated, prior to coming to university. She now works part time - five hours a week. She is a Business Studies student.

Virginia

Virginia:S2 is 51. She comes from South East Asia. She has no formal school qualifications from her country and no one in her family has a tertiary qualification. She is married, and lives in her own home. She is a Social Sciences student. English is not her first language, but she is married to a New Zealander and has been here for many years. She has working children still living at home. Her husband was not supportive of her starting full time study because of his concern about the family finances. She did not do any paid work during her first year of study, but did some voluntary work in her church.

Sam

Sam:S1 is 29 and European. She is the first in her family to attend a University. She is single, "romance isn't even *on* the priority list" and lives in a rented flat. She is a Social Sciences student, and finished 7th Form with University Entrance. She worked for a number of years before coming to university. She is not involved in sports, but has active involvement in her church. She has paid work for eight hours a week.

Total number	13
Male (Aged 18-19)	2
Female (Aged 18-54)	11
School leaver	5
Mature student (21 +)	8
NZ European	7
Maori	2
Non European NZ residents	3
International	1
English as first language	10
English as second or third language	3
Students who are the first in their family to attend university	9

Table 7. Characteristics of the Study Group

Site One	7
Site Two	6
Business Studies Site One 4 Site Two 3	7
Social Sciences Site One 3 Site Two 3	6

Table 8. Distribution by Site

Site One	Site Two
Elizabeth Kathy Jimmy Sam Jane Lee Anne	Hannah Virginia Ruby Christina Luka Bob
Business Studies	Social Studies
Elizabeth Kathy Jimmy Ruby Christina Bob Anne	Hannah Virginia Sam Jane Luka Lee

Table 9. Students grouped by Site and by Degree enrolment

4.2 What the students had to say

The information gained from the students was analysed as described in the Research Process chapter. The data obtained was varied, and reflects the somewhat unstructured nature of the interviews. Some clear themes emerge that form the basis of the rest of this study. These themes emerge partly from the interviews with the students, and are also informed by the literature.

I acknowledge that the contributions from the students are based on their experience and their interpretations of the unfamiliar environment in which they found themselves and so cannot necessarily be extrapolated to generalisations about New Zealand student experiences in first year. As a group they have had widely differing prior experiences in school, the workplace or the home that have coloured the ways in which they perceive this new environment.

The information from the students has been divided into themes and sections within this chapter, for the purpose of clarity. However it is acknowledged that many of the ideas and

concepts are interrelated, and some of the divisions are artificial ones. The interviews are explored under the following headings:

- Choices – reasons for enrolling at university
- Preparation for university
- Expectations
- Academic advice
- The transition
- Social and Sporting involvement
- Accommodation
- Study issues
- Teaching and Academic Staff
- Finances and paid work
- Safety and Individual challenges
- Using the available services
- Dropping out and hanging in
- Looking forward

4.2.1 Choices - reasons for enrolling at university

Reasons for enrolling at university varied, but many were instrumental. Jimmy:B1, Elizabeth:B1, Lee:S1 and Luka:S2 all mentioned feeling that in order to get ahead in life, make a lot of money, or get a worthwhile career, they needed to have a university qualification:

If you are going to get anywhere, you've got to get a degree and get some qualifications... I think it was expected that I would go to university (Elizabeth:B1).

Kathy:B1 felt that university was a natural progression from school. Anne:B1, who had already done tertiary level study in China, wanted an internationally recognised qualification.

Luka:S2 clearly also wanted to follow a career path decided some years before:

In today's society you almost need a formal qualification... you have to be a professional, be the best you can be (Luka:S2).

Elizabeth:B1 had always enjoyed accounting, and wanted to know more, to learn enough to have a career in the area.

A number of the group, mainly the school leavers, had faced reasonably sustained pressure from school or family expectations. Sometimes these pressures were specific to a career path - Bob:B2's father expected him to do a law degree:

it was pre-determined by my father -he wanted me to do law. He wanted to give me direction in life. But it didn't interest me.

but mostly the encouragement had been less content specific.

Some of the mature students made decisions on quite a different basis. Both Ruby:B2 and Sam:S1 were dissatisfied with their current jobs. Ruby:B2 commented:

I had a terrible job. I wanted to leave regardless of whether I had another job to go to or not, and I was seeing good jobs in the paper that I couldn't apply for, then (a friend) said why don't you go to university so you can get one of those jobs?

Sam:S1 did not feel quite as strongly, but said:

I was really dissatisfied working full time ... I got to the point where I thought I don't want to do this forever, but also she says later I always wanted to go to University, it wasn't an option before. It was definitely something I wanted to do.

Virginia:S2, Jane:S1 and Christina:B2 had reached a time in their lives when it was possible to make choices for themselves, rather than the family, or had acknowledged that the time was right for further personal development. Christina:B2 had *always dreamed of going to university* but with a less clearly formed content area or goal in mind:

I decided well, look I'd had enough with family responsibilities and so I want to go to university (Christina: B2).

It has always been my wish to have a degree, but my mother couldn't afford it... so now I am studying in New Zealand because the Government is allowing people to loan, so I have to take that loan. If I get the degree and then when I am working I will make more money, rather than doing cleaning or something like that (Virginia: S2).

I wanted a good job, a good career and to be a role model for my son. To help make decisions about things that concern Maori especially (Jane: S1)

4.2.2 Preparation for university

The length and nature of the preparations that students made prior to going to university varied considerably. For the mature students, whose enrolment has meant a total restructuring of their lives, the planning phase was necessarily quite a long and complex one. They needed to take into account issues such as the financial situation, childcare, leaving work, persuading partners and older children to take on extra work around the house, and generally rearranging their lives.

They also had to try, in some way, to build up their level of confidence in their ability to succeed at this new challenge. Sam:S1, Virginia:S2, and Christina:B2 all went to study skills courses before they started, and found them helpful, but not really enough to prepare them for what was to come.

I'm glad I went to that, I would have found it a lot more difficult if I hadn't done that... but still it didn't tell you everything, not at all (Sam:S1).

Ruby:B2 would have gone, but lack of information meant that:

It was on a Friday (the Orientation day) and I asked xxx about learning support, yeah, the study stuff, and she said 'that is on Saturday and Sunday'. And I thought wouldn't they have sent something out to say that? and she said 'No' and I had to work so I couldn't go.

The students who came straight from school, especially those who stayed living at home, had done considerably less planning, possibly they felt it was not necessary. Other than ensuring that they were enrolled in the appropriate course, and in some cases organising part-time work, they have treated the move to university much like changing schools. Many had friends who were going to the university alongside them, and the subjects that they chose were similar to those that they had just been studying for Bursary examinations. Bob:B2, like many of the other school leavers, was quite confident:

I didn't think I needed to do, like study skills or anything 'cause I had the skills straight from secondary school.

Jimmy:B1 also said that he was confident that he didn't need help.

4.2.3 Expectations

For some reason, most of the group studied did not have much in the way of specific expectations of their transition to university life. However, most did think that they would have to study reasonably hard, and that perhaps the workload would be more than they had experienced in school or in the workplace.

Since the interviews were done at the beginning of second semester, it may be that they had forgotten, or perhaps they did not clarify their expectations at the time, and they were therefore harder to recall. When probed a little more deeply, the school leavers seemed to think that it would be similar to school, and that the study skills that they had developed for recent examinations would be appropriate and sufficient to carry them through the first year. They made comments such as:

Not really, only a general idea of what it was going to be like (Bob:B2).

I thought you just had to listen to the lecturers and write it down, and then learn it (Jimmy:B1).

Some were excited -*it will be a big adventure* (Virginia:S2), others very concerned about issues such as finding and coping with big lecture theatres and big classes:

one of my biggest fears - having to sit through some lecture because you are too scared to get up and walk out!(Kathy:B1).

I was actually expecting an orientation in the full sense of the word... I expected an understanding that we didn't know much and need more help (Sam:S1).

Ruby:B2 wondered if she would be able to take useful notes:

I was worried I wasn't going to be able to take notes properly enough to learn anything.

The students who had English as a second or third language were worried that they would not understand the lecturers if they spoke too fast, or used unfamiliar terminology.

Anne:B1 commented that:

I am a good student in China, but things are very different here, and I worry I not be able to keep up. My English is not strong enough when people talk very fast.

One mature student was really worried (because of previous experiences in school) that other students would bully her:

I was thinking about going back to school and it just trigger the anxieties in me... I was thinking 'my God I don't want to go there and the people bully me and pull my hair' (Christina:B2).

Most had no real idea of the workload involved, only a general idea from friends or the movies, and said that they hadn't really thought that far ahead. Ruby:B2 and Virginia:S2 wondered if their age would set them apart, particularly in the social context.

I was also worried because I was so much older, felt so much older, that it would be a bit of a barrier - but it was fine (Ruby:B2).

Luka:S2 anticipated being extended and challenged, but also expected rules, guidelines and clarity.

I'd think – 'great I've got a rule', then furiously apply it, and find it doesn't apply to this and this and this. Give me a rule, tell me what the exceptions are, but I need a rule! (laughs).

Few of them actually sought advice or information from the university staff, other than that required for enrolling.

4.2.4 Academic Advice

The key feature in this section is how few of the students asked for any academic advice. Those who *did* seek more information tended to talk to uncles, friends and parents, anybody they knew, rather than university staff.

A lot of people in my Mum's extended family have got degrees, so talking to them was pretty important...but, they had done it so many years ago, so it was completely different. But I got the general idea (Bob:B2).

Students suggested a number of reasons for talking to relatives and friends rather than university staff. Anne:B1, Kathy:B1 and Ruby:B2 said, in various ways, that they didn't know where to go for information. Christina:B2 mentioned that the college staff were not helpful

To speak frank, the College of xxxx here, I don't think they are very easy to communicate with.

Lee:S1 and Anne:B1 felt that it was too intimidating to consider contacting somebody in the college or department, and that the information booklets were not clear about who and where and when to contact staff. There were also comments that the contact centre phone staff were not as helpful as perhaps the students expected. The comment from Bob:B2 was typical:

They didn't really give me the information I needed. The person I spoke to seemed very rushed. (Bob:B2).

In fairness to the university, it should be stated that not all of the students had actually *read* all of the information that they had received. They found that there was so much paper in the enrolment pack it was overwhelming. Ruby:B2, Virginia:S2 and Lee:S1 mentioned what they saw as the lack of really useful information in the prescription statements about courses, although they took the information in the booklets very seriously. They felt they need more detail to help them chose their courses.

There was confusion about terminology, the difference between lectures and tutorials, semester and full year courses, and internal and extramural offerings. Anne:B1 and Virginia:S2 had trouble filling in the enrolment forms, and Virginia:S2 enrolled for too many courses because she did not understand 'the system'.

Yes, four was too much really. Because actually it is not only four subjects that semester, like that because I had two that were double semester. So it was really six- they put me into eight subjects for the year.

Also the two full year papers, one of which was Te Reo Maori, were both extramural, which she did not realise at the start.

For many there was a reasonably strong sense that there was insufficient academic advice available on a one-to-one basis for those who really needed it.

The problem is that now I have been here for a while I know what to ask, but I didn't then, and it's hard when you don't know the right questions (Sam:S1).

Another issue that surfaced, particularly for the mature students, were the papers that were described as '*assumes no prior knowledge*'. However they found very quickly that there was a level of understanding and knowledge required which they just did not have. This made coping with the subject extremely difficult, and they all felt they would have made different course choices if they had known about this.

Choice of papers was also mentioned by Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2 in this short exchange:

Bob:B2: I actually found out from friends that I could have done law in the first semester

Ruby:B2: *Right , but you thought you had to do what was in the booklet*

Bob:B2: *Yes, you know I could also have done a level one paper in psychology, but I didn't know anything about it*

Ruby:B2: *you get the timetable and you think that's the timetable – ok, well, we are doing these papers.*

Bob:B2: *Its not that I'm worried about actually doing it, but the option would have been nice.*

4.2.5 The transition

Some of the students had a very easy transition to the life at university.

It was a big adventure, yes, a lot of fun (Elizabeth:B1).

I thought I was going to have to constantly think about taking notes, but it wasn't like that at all, much easier (Kathy:B1).

It's been pretty easy actually. It's pretty easy to make friends here, I've made quite a lot of them (Jimmy:B1).

These students found their way around quickly, made links with friends and developed new friendships easily, and coped more than adequately with the demands of study at tertiary level.

For many of the others however, the transition went considerably less smoothly. One student recalls that she was:

a real mess the whole of the first semester. I was crying and crying and wanting to go home (Lee:S1).

Christina:B2 commented

When I'm first started I'm thinking oh my god I will never get to the end of the year.

Elizabeth:B1 had to cope with unwelcome sexual advances from another student in her hostel, which affected her study and her perceptions of university life quite considerably. Others found the whole process and the multitude of challenges quite intimidating:

It's quite overwhelming as it's so huge, and you are not sure if your knowledge is going to be enough and if it's going to be suitable to get you from class to class and actually know if you are doing ok (Sam:S1).

I had trouble with new friends in the hostel, personality clashes, so there was that added burden, and trying to cope with university on top of that. I'm not extremely academic and so I was stressed out. I had a lot of health issues as well. I was really scared that I wouldn't pass the first semester... and it was kind of overwhelming that you have all this spare time- it was just kind of strange at first (Lee:S1).

The students for whom English is not their first language frequently felt slow and stupid because they were unable to keep up with lectures, taking less than adequate notes, and feeling isolated from the discussion. Anne:B1 commented:

People, they try to be nice at first. But the Kiwis talk fast, and they talk about things I do not understand. I feel on the outside. I have not made Kiwi friends.

4.2.6 Social and sporting involvement

A look at the social and sporting life of the students in this study shows that they all have very full lives, and most manage to fit a great deal into their days and weeks.

The students who were living in the university hostels felt that they had a pretty good social life on the whole, and some participated in sports, or joined the gym on campus. Elizabeth:B1 talked about belonging to a Christian fellowship, which meant she knew people at all levels of study. She also played social soccer in a hostel team and enjoyed some of the aspects of hostel life:

the big hostel parties, special things like that. The hostel has been a very big part of it [university life] for me.

Lee:S1 also talked about how much easier it was having 'ready made' friends in the residence.

So we socialise a lot within our hall. We did all the orientation stuff... In a way it's kind of good, there is always someone that you can talk to.

Lee:S1 also plays indoor netball - *but we are pretty bad!*

Students like Bob:B2 and Jimmy:B1 who live at home have made friends within their classes, but generally socialise outside university. Bob:B2 is actively involved in team sports, and already had a girlfriend before he came to university:

... but its hard to try and maintain a relationship - you do have to try hard to make it work.

Jimmy:B1 on the other hand, is happy to do family things, he has made friends from his classes, but does not socialise much with them outside university. He:

... was supposed to join cricket or something, but I just haven't bothered yet.

He does not like waiting around on campus for lectures, although he enjoys the lectures

I don't want to wait around for two hours... and its too late, it's a long day. Well, I start at 11. 11 to 4 is a long day for me.

Jimmy:B1 also has a sister with a young baby, so much of his free time is spent with her.

Kathy:B1, who is at university in her home town, lives in a flat, and already had an established social network and a boyfriend before she went to university, although she has made new friends from her classmates. She is involved in drama and speech, as a learner and teacher, and works part time. She has not joined any clubs at university:

I thought about the gym, but only got as far as the car park... I did have good intentions, but no.

Luka:S2 spends a great deal of time at the university studying:

Before I shifted into this flat which was quite recently, I virtually lived here. People used to joke that I really should have my own bathroom!

However she was working, not socialising, and commented:

if I wasn't in class I was in the library... this was my study area. No, I have no social life!

Later on though, she does say

I've met some really cool people here and have some kind of social life with them outside university

Some also had to meet the demands of family and home, and so did not stay around on campus when their classes were over. Jane:S1, who has a son, sometimes stays around campus meaning to work, but:

I tend to get a bit side-tracked you know - I might not be studying, I could be mucking around and talking. You can do that now and then, but not all the time. I do most of my study in the library.

Generally she goes and works at home.

Hannah treats university like a job:

This is my job, this is what I'm supposed to do in the day. I just have to organise my time, and I'm prioritising all sorts of things.

Hannah has a full life as she also has paid work for 20hrs a week, is the class representative, has just got married and plays social soccer and squash.

Most of the school leaver group had at least one friend who had come to the university with them from school. Sometimes this was a positive thing, but at other times these 'old' friends were seen to restrict their new-found freedom. Small groups formed around study groups and other common interests, or hostel activities, but a number of the group found the first semester a lonely time, particularly those in private flats with non-students.

I found it really lonely the whole year actually, quite lonely, quite hard developing friendships with people... It's hard because everyone goes home to something or someone...most people have a real life outside the university, and sometimes it's hard for people to fit new friends into that, as well as work and study (Sam:S1).

4.2.7 Accommodation

The breakdown of accommodation statistics is as follows:

Place of residence	Number
Halls of residence/Hostel	2 (from outside the district)
At home with parents	2 (both of the young men)
In own home or flat	5
Sharing in a private flat	4

Table 10. Living arrangements

The influence of living arrangements appears to have had a strong impact on the students' experience of university. Some of the aspects of this have already been discussed in the section above on social and sporting activities.

Where you live influences whom you meet, how long you stay on campus after classes, how and where you study, how much sleep you get at night, how many parties you hear about (and go to!) and what responsibilities you have to manage in addition to study.

Some had problems that arose directly from their living environment. Anne:B1's home stay mother:

... treated me very badly and expected me to do outside cleaning for no pay. And she didn't feed me properly. I was very unhappy.

She subsequently moved into a private flat with another Chinese student.

The hostel experience had its highs and lows. All of the students who were living in this kind of accommodation felt that they were lucky to have people around, and activities helped in the transition period. However, it was difficult for people like Elizabeth:B1, who was working, and trying to sleep at night:

especially in a small hostel, when they've been drinking and come in at 3am everyone's like shhhh, Elizabeth's sleeping... but mostly they can't be bothered being

quiet for me anymore. I just don't get enough sleep. Sometimes in the weekends they don't want to know me and I don't want to know them.

The students who live in the hostels are looking forward to flatting next year, but feel that it is going to be a bit scary. Despite any of the challenges they have had to face, both have enjoyed their time in the hostel.

Many of the younger students felt that they had done a lot of growing up because they had had to deal with unfamiliar situations, and cope with the communal living of a hostel or a private flat. There was mention of learning negotiation skills, coping with noise, financial planning, hangover cures, and the art of compromise. The two students who live at home mentioned that their parents cook for them and they do not pay board:

I don't have the desire to move just yet (Bob:B2).

However they are on a tighter rein socially and are expected to study regularly:

If I'm at home I've got two particular people on my back saying have you studied? (Bob:B2).

Mature students living with partners and/or children talked about the challenges of trying to study at home when the family made demands on them, and of feeling guilty when they were not able to give the time to the family that had been the norm in the past. One student tried to study in her kitchen (the only available space) but was constantly interrupted, and often had to work late at night and into the early hours of the morning to get reading done. She had not considered studying in the library quiet room.

I study at home in the kitchen. I cannot avoid the phone. If it ringing I have to answer it. Some people, when they study at home, they put their favourite figurine out to remind the family that they are studying - it means Do Not Disturb. My family do not always notice, and ... I have to stay up late to finish it when it is quiet - and then I am tired in the morning (Virginia:S2).

Ruby:B2 did not have study issues that were affected directly by her home environment, but commented that living alone and managing a home gave her added responsibilities that those at home or in flats and residences did not have to deal with.

I think it makes a big difference. The ones that are living at home don't have the responsibility of running a house. Even though they may be working, it's not the same as having all those extra things to do when you have your own flat...all the organising things. It takes a lot more time from your mind.

Hannah:S2 talked about how her new husband is very supportive of her study, and went on to say:

It's so important to have a home environment which is really stimulating intellectually, and supportive. I will just so strive to provide that in my own family – something that wasn't there for me. It wasn't their fault, but the environment is SO important.

4.2.8 Learning and Study

Study issues and comments about academic staff and teaching featured strongly in the interviews. I acknowledge a particular interest in this area, but tried not to let it influence the interviews unduly. I merely asked the students to consider issues related to their coping with the study demands that were placed on them, and to tell me their perceptions of effective and less effective teaching and learning situations that they had encountered. In fact most of the time I did not need to ask the questions. These issues surfaced as a natural part of the discussion on their transition experiences.

Comments from the students about their study, content understanding, academic issues, assignment writing, marks and feedback fell into a number of broad categories, although the detail varied from student to student. A comment made by Bob:B2 seems to encapsulate much of what this year has been like for many of them:

You feel like you're calm and composed on the surface but paddling like hell underneath

A related comment came from Lee:S1:

Other people are just so calm and cool eh? But you don't know what their background is.

Virginia:S2 enjoyed her year:

Even though I didn't do well, I'm glad I got something in my brain – I have learned a lot from the lecturers. It's really good stuff I learned from all the subjects.

Attending lectures and tutorials, and the availability of lecture notes in the library or on the web were an important part of the experience for many of the students. Generally they attended the time-tabled lectures and tutorials (although Jimmy:B1, mentioned above, clearly felt the waiting around between lectures on any given day to be onerous).

Jane:S1 was conscientious about attending lectures:

I might have missed about four, I always make an effort to go, and to tutorials, and I'll always do that.

She also commented on the availability of lecture notes:

After the end of the lecture they would usually put them in the library, most of them do...Not all the lecturers encourage that though, because that means students will skip their lectures, and go straight to the library!

Most of the group commented on the fact that they really appreciated the lecture notes being made available either on the web or in the library. They found this very helpful if for some reason they had to miss a lecture, or hadn't understood part of what they had heard. The students like Anne:B1, with English as a second language, found them particularly helpful.

Taking notes is hard sometimes. If I can look at the lecture notes in the library, or on the internet, it helps to fill the parts I miss. Sometimes they are not there though.

Not all lecturers make their notes available:

Some do, most of them, not all of them so if I miss lectures I just get them off there and print them out. Or from the library...you just copy them – I've done both (Jimmy:B1).

Hannah got embarrassed at the beginning because she didn't know how things worked:

I wish I knew more about university. When you get those lists where they say lecture and four different times for tutorials - I thought we had to go to all the tutorials so I drew up my timetable for the first semester and I was doing tutorials literally Monday to Friday. I felt really embarrassed when somebody told me that you just pick one.

Ruby:B2, struggling in one particular paper, chose to go to more tutorials:

Actually I started going to both tutorials because I just had no understanding of it, and I thought practice might help, but...(sigh).

Other comments were made about understanding university terminology such as undergraduate and graduate, lecture/tutorial, even the term 'orientation'

It was probably my fault as my expectations were wrong, but when they said two or three days of orientation, I thought they meant two or three days of being shown the ropes to some degree and going on a tour of the university, that kind of thing. It turned out to be a five minute exercise and I took the whole three days free...so that was probably a bit of a fright (Sam:S1).

A number of the group worried beforehand about their ability to take effective notes during lectures. Ruby:B2's comments were typical of the mature group of students:

I was really worried, on my first day that I wouldn't be able to take notes down properly enough or accurately enough for me to learn from them.

Ruby:B2 commented later that she:

...found that the notes you take from the lecture are not complete when you go back to study them for a test. So now I read the whole chapter then go back and make my own notes, and then incorporate the notes from the lecture. It takes ages. I think it would help if the lecturers said you will need more notes than this - they will not be enough.

The school leavers, on the whole, were less concerned initially and felt that they had sufficient in the way of study skills to cope with the new environment. Kathy:B1 felt she was prepared:

I thought it was going to be constant note taking all the time, because at school they were saying "we can't write it on the board because when you get to university you're going to have to learn to take notes for yourself". So I thought I was going to have to constantly think about taking notes, but it wasn't like that at all, much easier, yeah.

Lee:S1, made a comparison with school

There you're kind of given them, here's your notes, write them, here you have to think about them and write your own notes. I'm a person that writes too much- heaps and heaps... because I can't rely on my memory. Your skills do come through though, and you adapt to the new ones you need.

Questioning is an area that most of them did not feel comfortable with, especially in lectures. They did not ask questions, or participate particularly actively. When asked 'Do you ask questions?' most said 'No' Never? 'Never'.

The reasons given for not asking varied:

'Cause I'm not the sort of person to ask questions (Jimmy:B1).

I wasn't sure how much we were expected to know, because I didn't go straight from school and I was getting back into that sort of process (Sam:S1).

I think university students don't bother putting their hands up when the lecturer at the end says "Now, are there any questions?" No one asks and yet someone is burning with something! (Jane:S1).

Jane:S1 did ask the lecturer on an individual basis, however, and it felt:

Good - I'm not afraid, it's just the big group thing, and I'm not the only one, I think there are lots of us feel like that, they just hate it.

Sometimes they don't ask questions because of the responses they receive

People are afraid to ask questions, I feel, in that particular subject, simply because it's like - he's very rude - "don't be stupid" kind of thing. "It's common sense". Well, what is common sense to him isn't necessarily common sense to us. You know, like we are really stupid, or it's really easy and we should get it (Comments from both Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2).

Hannah though, felt more comfortable at participating than she expected:

I am much more interactive in class than I ever thought I would be.

Most of Hannah's sessions however, were much smaller group numbers (20+ rather than 200+) and she did feel that this made a big difference.

Virginia:S2 plucked up the courage to ask, but was:

Nervous. Different from where there is a close small audience, to a big one. It was just in my mind that they would laugh at my accent (Did they?) No, it was just in my mind.

Others who would not say a word in lectures felt much more comfortable and participated much more freely in tutorials, as might be expected. Jimmy:B1 though, did not find some tutorials useful and ended up not attending (and thus forfeiting marks)

I hate some of them, they are like a waste of time for one particular subject, having to get into groups and stuff and answering all these questions and then reporting back.

He is someone who much prefers lectures - mentioned as one of the 'best things' about his year.

Questions about the use of the library elicited the response that it was quite a scary place for some at the beginning, but they seem to be overcoming the challenge.

I hate libraries. I've got this big library phobia – yeah, I can always remember going into the public library as a little kid, and when they shifted to this big one I just got so lost in it. And then I just refused to go in it pretty much 'cause I kind of just didn't want to learn to use it properly. And then when you get to university you kinda have to know how to use the library. I did learn and it was really good, I felt really proud that I could just go and find a book I had looked up on the computer
(Kathy:B1)

On the whole, most of the group found that the library staff were very helpful, and that they were gradually coming to terms with using it effectively, and also finding information on the data bases. People like Jane:S1, Ruby:B2 and Christina:B2 also found it a good place to study, although noisy at times:

I like the library, and the quiet room, and there is an area where you can talk and discuss (Ruby:B2)

I particularly like that study room – the silent one (Bob:B2)

Study habits were mentioned a number of times. The place where people study is determined by a number of factors, and issues of accommodation have already been described above.

Students were also fitting study in around work, social, sporting and family demands. Some were very disciplined, with well thought out timetables, others spend a great many hours on their study, but with less direction or organisation.

I had good time management skills before this anyway, with a lot of commitments on top of study. That plays a big part – like you have to squeeze stuff into every ounce of the day that you have (Bob:B2)

A frequent comment was the concern that assignments seemed to be timed to be due in very quick succession, at certain times of the semester, and the exams followed very quickly after the last assignment. For some this was the cause of very real stress:

It's hard when assignments come all together – difficult to make time for everything
(Anne:B1)

Time management is really hard. I had gaps of tests of only three days (Virginia:S2)

Access to computers and the Internet is also a factor. Ten of the students have their own computer, the others use the drop in rooms. Only seven of the ten who have computers have Internet access.

Some, like Jane:S1, tried hard to be part of study groups at university, but found it was extremely difficult to find people who had similar timetables and who wanted to form a group.

The papers I seemed to be in couldn't find time to have a study group, which I think is really important... it just didn't work out – we all had different timetables
(Jane:S1).

However Jane:S1 went to Te Atawhai, a common room for Maori students, and commented:

We go there and chat, talk with the other students, get advice off them, no matter what degree they are doing... we've got the support there.

Virginia:S2 had more success at working with a study group:

yes, we have a study group at the library, and that helps. We will read the guide and then we ask each other questions, and helping each other like homework.

Perceptions of the amount and level of work required varied. Some found it was enormous, others wondered why it was so little. One school leaver who had done seventh form accounting, commented:

I'm surprised at the amount of work I have to do to stay on top – I'ts not as much as I expected. ... I have actually talked to my accounting tutor and said "this is basic, I know this, I could sit up there and take the lectures if I had the chance" (Elizabeth:B1).

Jimmy:B1 too felt that the workload was - *pretty easy actually - easier than last year* (at school).

Of course not everyone found the workload as manageable as Jimmy:B1 and Elizabeth:B1.

Jane:S1 talked about one of her biggest challenges being:

Not being at school for a very, very long time and having to learn how to write academically. Previously there was none of that, nothing academic at all, and that was a real challenge to learn how to write, how to study. It was a barrier for quite a while - in some ways still is, but it's a learning curve.

Lee:S1 too, worked hard:

I'm not a person who's academic, so I don't strive to be top of the class. I have to work really hard, and I have to keep going and asking for help. I'm just the kind of person who works their butt off, and if they get it they are really happy (Lee:S1).

Jane:S1 and Lee:S1 did experience success. Virginia:S2, however, failed all but one of her courses in the year. She found the work was considerably more, and harder, than she had ever expected it would be. She made a number of comments:

I never been to university like this and I didn't know what to think - all this reading now, and so in the end I thought this is so hard... I had no background about writing, about summarising in your own words, but still having to put the references, where it has come from... They give us a book to read for the course - I didn't know I had to look for other books, so I only have one book.

Virginia:S2 also was not able to gauge her readiness for exams, or her level of competence:

Not all of them were hard, but I did not pass. I thought I would pass...well, I wasn't able to answer the questions, that is why I didn't pass. I will try harder next time, and better time management.

It was clear that generally the group felt they needed to learn how to 'play the academic games'. Learning how individual lecturers and tutors expected assignments to be written, was part of getting to grips with learning and assessment in the university. A number of them commented on this - these examples are fairly typical:

One lecturer explained what he was looking for, and I could see where I had gone wrong, but the difference was that I thought they wanted our interpretations. So I was writing the key points in my own words, when basically he wanted to see them written word for word from the paragraphs. I thought they would probably want to see that we understood the concepts. It was quite confusing because I thought I'd done a good job (Sam:S1).

Later she says:

One paper - this is what we want - and ok you try to do it. Then another paper, we don't want that we want this, and it's like oh, ok, and it's a real juggling act sometimes to remember which tutor is marking, which lecturer you are doing it for, who is going to be looking at it and what do they want. You are trying to remember all the different styles of the different teachers (Sam:S1).

Picking up the way they want their essays written is another big one... at uni. they are looking for some sort of - your opinion to come through, I think. Yeah, establishing how to write essays in the first place - the way they want it written is a bit different to school (Kathy:B1).

Anne:B1 has had different issues with her study, since she has not been in the country long. She receives help, and has an English tutor. She manages well reasonably well in tutorials, but finds writing assignments hard.

It is very different from at home, and I have to learn a new way. The learning centre have helped me.

She also has found it hard to come to terms with subjects like New Zealand Law - compulsory for her degree, but set in a context that is foreign to her.

4.2.9 Assessments and feedback

Whilst learning to write essays and present work in the appropriate format was seen as important, far more criticism was directed at the variable nature of feedback given on assignments. The comments that follow illustrate something of the depth of feeling:

I think the worst thing I got was a C. The lecturer who marked it obviously hated it. It had comments on it like "did you even read the question?" but didn't tell me what I needed to do to improve it, or where I had gone wrong (Luka:S2).

Well that's great, I've gone wrong in sections B, C and D, but how do I go right in them? They don't go through things (Bob:B2).

He just says "Ruby, thanks for coming to see me, you got 5 out of 7. See you later, goodbye" - and we are on to the next thing. So I can't go back and ask how could I have got 7 out of 7? (Ruby:B2).

However:

Some give really good comments, really constructive ones (Lee:S1).

Luka:S2 described a time when she went to a lecturer with a fellow student, to support her. She had found the student looking at a recently returned essay, saying "*I don't understand, she told me I have to write more - write what?*" When they asked the lecturer about the comments, she just said:

...yes, you definitely need to write more "and xxx said how?" And then the lecturer looked away - and that was it - no other help. I was so angry for her (Luka:S2).

Christina:B2 and Hannah both felt unhappy at what they saw as the lecturers settling for low marks and they both commented on the phrase "*C's get degrees*". Hannah, who complained that an assignment was poorly worded and open to misinterpretation, was told:

Oh, well you could get more marks for that if you got some extra information from here or there, but anyway don't worry because you are going to pass.

This annoyed her:

Because some people don't want to just pass, they want to do as well as they possibly can. It's not fair when they won't take the time out to help.

Christina:B2 had a similar response from a lecturer when she said she wanted to pull out of a paper because of what she saw as poor teaching. She was told “*You don't need to, you only need a C pass*”. She commented:

I think from the employment point of view they should not advise students that at all, and to be frank, for one of the tutors to say that, I was very disappointed. I didn't pay \$400 to come here and get a C pass. If I study or do anything I expect to do it well (Christina:B2).

There were other comments on issues related to assessment, including the importance of good grades, approaches to exams, and scaling of marks. A high point came when the students got good grades:

When I got my first A+ I literally broke down and cried. I didn't expect to do half as well as I did... Getting the first semester results back was really awesome. I have the results pinned on the notice board as a motivator A+, A+. I'm going to print another copy out and frame it! (Hannah).

I loved getting my first assignment back. I got a 19 out of 20 for the very first essay I wrote. I was so excited about that, and yea, just getting assignments back it reassures yourself that, you know, you're at uni. and you can do well, you know, big university student doing well (Kathy:B1).

I've had a few A's on assignments. I have never had a final mark of an A or B before, and I got three of them – it was huge that I managed that. It was a huge highlight, like I wasn't stupid (Luka:S2).

Yep, getting the good marks - and going 'what a relief'! (Bob:B2).

However, for Ruby:B2, getting her marks back was not as positive

Yes, when you got those marks it really bummed you out, whereas if you get a good mark, at least for the assignments where you have put a lot of work into it, it's really good

To the question "So grades are important to you?" Christina:B2 replied:

Um, yes and no. Well I don't want to set it too high but yes, you know, if I study or if I do anything I expect I do it well.

Christina:B2's attitude to grade expectations has already been mentioned above.

Jimmy:B1 seems to be more interested in 'collecting' marks:

...tutorials are pretty good, because you earn marks for attending, like it helps you with your grades - some tutorials count up to ten percent of the final grade just by turning up whether you learn anything or not.

He makes decisions based on this approach.

Most of them you earn marks for turning up, that is why some are compulsory. Like for Communications I ended up with six percent out of the ten percent because I missed out on one of the tutorials - because I didn't want to do this speech or the presentation so I forfeited the four percent but I will make it up with the exam or maybe the assignment - hopefully both (Jimmy:B1).

Kathy:B1's motivation was somewhat different. She was allowed to do a third year paper because of her previous Speech and Drama training:

I just got my last essay back and I got an A+ for it. Which was really... oh it was a such a hard one yeah, and when me and my friend went to talk to the tutor about it he was talking to us like we were dumb. And I said I want to do well to prove that I can do it because he said "All the third year students are probably going to do super well in this, blah blah blah," and I thought I can do better! And I did!

Lee:S1, when asked – "are grades important?" replied:

You mean to mean to me? As long as I get a C I'm happy. Sometimes you're not quite satisfied with a C and you put a lot of effort. A B- or a B+ is wonderful. I've

never got an A of any sort, um... 'Cause sometimes they give you a raw mark and other times they put it into a grade so you don't know quite. But I'd be happy with a B and C's are fine. I mean as long as you get C's everyone keeps saying C's get degrees so (yes) so – it's not important to me I'm not a person who's academic, because I'm not academic I don't strive to be at the top of the class. I put as much work in as I can and whatever I get for that I'm happy with. If I don't pass obviously I'll be disappointed, but I'll try to figure out where I went wrong for the next essay or something (Lee:S1).

Sam:S1 had quite a lot to say about assessment issues. She starts by discussing scaling.

I didn't understand why it had to be that way, I don't agree with it at all, I don't understand why you have to get certain percentages of grades allocated why can't everyone just get what everyone gets. I don't understand that - if you have put the work in and done what they needed, whether it's a D or an A you should be rewarded accordingly, not scaled up or down to fit a system because of a certain academic theory that someone thinks is best for everyone. I think that's trying to fit people into boxes and roles and I don't think it's fair. I find a real problem with that because one of my papers in particular I was getting A's all the way though and it got scaled right down to a B for the final grade because they only gave out a certain percentage of grades in that upper bracket.

And it's unfair because you work so hard - or in some cases it's something you really enjoyed and without too much effort even you can do well, and then you find you are scaled right down - I just don't understand that. I understand why they do it but I don't understand why it has to be that way, I don't know why there can't be another way.

Sam:S1 also touches on issues of fairness in assessment marking:

...honestly I find so much depends on who is marking it – it's unreal, like for a paper this semester, having my tutor saying to me I would have given you a much higher mark, and another tutor marks a different way,. They do say there is a standard marking system, but I don't buy that for a minute because I look at all the

discrepancies between grades, between heaps of us in our class, and then look at how similar a lot of our answers were. Yes, well it depends on who is marking it, if it was consistent, then sure, I'll happily go along with something that is consistent, but for that paper...All the different teachers respond differently to the students and their questions. It can be hell of a hard trying to keep up with. There are certain basics but it really does depend on who's marking it - I don't agree with that.

There were a number of other interesting one-off comments about the whole area of being academically stretched and extended, having one's belief systems challenged and being *broken down to be built up again* (Luka:S2) , and dealing with freedom and autonomy for the first time. A couple of students commented on the difference between doing just enough to pass, and working to learn AND get good grades, and the importance of having a positive attitude to study.

Jane:S1 commented on her whole year's learning experience:

I've actually started to open my eyes up to things that are really going on and the problems we've got in New Zealand. Just that little door opens up just a bit, and then you keep going – that's how I see the learning thing, as the door was shut on me, and just coming to university has opened it up a little bit. And I think every year it is going to open a little wider.

4.2.10 Student Perceptions of Teaching and Academic Staff

Academic staff encountered by these students fall into two basic categories - lecturers and tutors. In some cases the lecturers also ran the tutorials that students attended, so there is an overlap. It became apparent fairly early in the interviews that the ability, passion and commitment of the academic staff had a big impact, both on the students' achievements and their perception of their initial university experiences. I encouraged them to give me examples of what they perceived to be good or effective teaching that they had experienced, wherever it occurred. I acknowledge that there is some overlap with the comments made about their study. Some of the responses follow:

We have a xxx teacher and I haven't seen anyone like her. She is just amazing, She sits there and we go through an example, but she gets everyone involved and everyone sort of speaks up. She's got 400 students and she gets everyone going, I think that's really good. She makes everything relevant and interesting and fun - I think she tries to keep up with things that are modern I guess. She's got everyone behind her every step of the way... She just gets people involved... she challenges you to think (Elizabeth:B1).

There were lecturers who totally made time to see you and help you, and helped you to see where you could improve. And they were the papers I did best in, the ones where I was encouraged and helped - often it wasn't a lot of help, just a few comments here and there. It felt as if somebody cared about how I was getting on (Sam:S1).

Jimmy:B1 described a good lecturer as one who:

... doesn't talk in the same tone throughout the lecture, cracks a few jokes, and keeps your attention... Someone who explains the course material clearly, knows how the test went, prepares you for tests.

Good lecturers don't talk off their notes. We have one who gives his own stories. I enjoy the lectures even though I'm not doing well in the subject (Kathy:B1).

First and foremost they are interesting, they put things in a context which is relevant. If it can be amusing in the first instance it's even better because it gets your attention. And then just people who are organised and give you the subheadings before hand so you know what was going to be talked about. I've had one lecturer who is just brilliant at keeping on track... other people found her a bit abrupt I think, but not for me. And then in tutorials she was excellent and let us go off in tangents and have those discussions that consolidated my learning." (Hannah:S2).

I think a sense of humour and the ability to relate to people. One fabulous lecturer is xxx. He is just absolutely incredible and even though some of his subjects are quite boring, he still managed to make some corny joke that would help you to remember. He also had this concept that you had to say things three times to make a student understand... and you would actually take it in! He had the ability to really relate to the students. Something else that sticks out about him is when we asked him a question and he said, "I don't know" - and he went away and researched it and actually came back with the answer. We were like stunned mullets. But I don't expect them to know everything - but I do think they should have a good grasp of their material. And he does (Bob:B2).

Lecturers and tutors have been very helpful, especially in the subjects where I have had problems, they have been very open, and I've seen my XXX lecturer, just for little things, and he's really open about that. And they have tutors in the hostels – I've never been over there, but I've always thought I'm going to get my assignment done early so that I can take it over. I think they've got lots of support for students, not that I've had to use it (Elizabeth:B1).

Anne:B1 has a different perspective, as her learning experiences in China have led her to expect that lecturers:

Must know their subject very well and give good clear information so that I can make good notes. Then I can learn well. They must not speak so fast -it is hard to understand. Some are very good and speak very clearly

To end this section, a word from Luka:S2:

As far as I'm concerned if they are passionate about their subject so that it comes across in their teaching, they are excited about what they are learning and they want to share it with you. The good lecturer in my eyes is one who's lived the life, they have lived their subject. They share good study tips, have a story to put it in context. It makes it much easier to learn... something you can see and go WOW - I didn't know that (Luka:S2).

Not all of the students' learning experiences were as positive as these however, and some of the negative aspects of the teaching environment certainly had a detrimental effect on their ability to manage their learning. Condensed comments from Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2 (interviewed together) include, in relation to one subject and lecturer:

There is so much to cover in the semester that if you don't get it the first time, tough luck. He goes very quickly - people are afraid to ask questions... he's quite rude "don't be stupid" kind of thing "it's common sense, you should all know this, it's a no-brainer". It feels as if we are really stupid - I think it must be very hard for the international students as well. He says "well if you are not fast enough to write it you'll miss it". It's like there is no back up support. And he does the tutorials. I actually refuse to go and see him, even though it's probably hindering my learning. We try to learn off each other and work things out. There is no peer tutor available and there are no lecture notes in this subject (Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2).

I write down what I think he says and then he twists it and stuff - it's confusing. And the lectures and the tutorials cover different material, and the reading is different again. The exam will be interesting! (Lee:S1).

Christina:B2 went for help:

... I'm going to see the tutor and he said, "why don't you understand? What's wrong with you?" and I'm kind of thinking my God - more like he confirm that I'm stupid kind of thing. Perhaps the way he is asking it - just makes me feel worse about it... I am really independent, I only seek help when I am really stuck. I say if I don't understand I have to help myself first. The lecturers, they are not communicating enough and they're not effective ways at all. In the first few months here, the teaching staff doesn't seem, you know, very helpful... most time he will say I'm not quite sure myself, but I say he should prepare to teach the material better (Christina:B2).

In some of our papers it feels as if the tutors and other people are learning as they go along. I think lecturers who want to help often don't help others very much because they go off at a tangent., so it makes it really hard to take notes. So much of your learning depends on the lecturer, how organised they are, and how good at getting their ideas across. But at the end of the day some of them don't seem to be here to do the job well. For example, in the setting of an assignment, they might say "sorry about that, it's worded quite badly, but don't worry, everyone is disadvantaged in the same way". It makes it so frustrating (Hannah:S2).

Our xxx teacher. I can't learn the way she teaches things. It's always "refer back to the textbook". She never gives definitions in her own words, she never explains what she means. I also had one guy for xxxx who just stood there and read off his notes - that's just a waste of time (Kathy:B1).

Virginia:S2 felt one hard thing for her was that lecturers assumed that the class had prior knowledge:

There are some things I did not know before in my high school days. They will just say "ok, you do this", not asking if anyone has done this before. I think it should be "have you done this before?" They just assume you can do this (Virginia:S2).

Some lecturers are really passionate about what they are talking about, but they don't seem to be very people orientated really... they don't have a clue how to relate to people. No one likes being talked down to, to be made like they know little. I've only had one really bad tutor - she was so bad she would ask you to take over the class. She just read off her notes all the time, she never taught or led the class. She had no ability to get a discussion going (Sam:S1).

Sam:S1 asked to be moved out of this tutorial group, and was moved, but the same tutor still marks her work, which she feels disadvantages her.

4.2.11 Finances and Paid Work

Financial issues are a worry to most of these students. Apart from acknowledging their rising Student Loan debt, many other issues surfaced during our discussions.

Money issues caused some to become quite stressed during the semester, and two students commented that this affected their ability to study. The main outcome of this concern about finances was that many of the students were working part time to supplement their income from the Student Loan or Allowance.

Table 11 outlines the variety of hours of paid work undertaken by the students each week.

Name	Student Loan	Hours paid work per week
Ruby:B2	Yes	5
Elizabeth:B1	Yes	16
Lee:S1	Yes	None. Worked through Christmas holidays Is on a student allowance
Virginia:S2	Yes	None. Works voluntarily for her church
Luka:S2	No	None - is on a benefit
Bob:B2	No	15
Christina:B2	Yes	6
Jimmy:B1	Yes	16
Anne:B1	No	None - has an international Student Visa
Hannah:S2	Yes	20
Sam:S1	Yes	8
Kathy:B1	Yes	12
Jane:S1	No	None - is on a benefit

Table 11. Paid working hours of students on the study

Other comments that were made related to money, costs and finances generally, included *Financially this year has been quite a sacrifice. A four-year degree means that there is no more part time work. This does create financial problems* (Virginia:S2)

It was a struggle in the mid semester break -it came suddenly and there were no jobs on the board. It has stressed me out a lot since I have been here - and I know it has affected a couple of my tests (Ruby:B2)

It's really hard being a student. I have a Student Loan... The cost of books is phenomenal. It was either a car or a computer. I thought a car was more practical. Just living from week to week is very, very difficult (Sam:S1).

I have had a bad time with money. My new landlord made me pay a lot of bond money - I didn't know how it works here. It is hard, we have had to buy things for the flat (Anne:B1).

Money is an issue even though I work and live at home. I make my lunch most days. It costs too much to go to the cafeteria (Jimmy:B1).

I work, and get the living allowances part of the Loan. I'm worried about the summer holidays when the loan payments stop. I manage, but there are certainly no luxuries (Elizabeth:B1).

A number commented that they have always had after-school or holiday jobs. Some of the mature students who gave up work to study are doing some part time work to buffer the sudden, dramatic change in their financial status. Ruby:B2 commented that money worries are *a big burden - the stress is always there*.

Most of the jobs that the students are doing are for income only and bear no direct relationship to the study that they are undertaking. The jobs range widely - childcare, teacher aide, bank call centre, supermarket worker and in a fast food outlet.

Only Christina:B2, who is majoring in accounting, has a study related job - she works one day a week doing the accounts for a small firm. Most of the students work at nights, evenings, or weekends, some working until as late as 12.30am. They all assured me that the work did not interfere with study, that on the whole their employers were flexible around exam time, and that study takes priority. However it is clear that most of them do not spend very much time in and around the university.

It also appears that these students spent the majority of their time studying or working (and of course, socialising, having time with family etc) and chose not to join the numerous clubs and activities available at the university.

4.2.12 Using the available services

As in any university, a range of services is available to students, including Student Association, Health Services, Job Search, Student Learning Support, Counselling, Budget advice and so on. One student felt that she had had plenty of information:

... they had lots of pamphlets coming around, they've still got things up on the wall... and the tutors are always talking about them (available services), they publicise them at lectures (Kathy:B1).

Some students felt that they were well informed about the services that were available, and there were posters around campus as reminders. They remembered being told early on by lecturers what was available:

I mean, they've done pretty much all they can do I reckon. I mean the rest of it is up to the individual to make it work... I think its up to you to go and find out, or talk to someone about what you need help with ... you don't need handholding all the time (Kathy:B1).

Others, who had apparently been in the same lectures, and around the same site, did not feel as well informed - a matter of early information overload perhaps, or not taking in information that was not immediately relevant. Hannah:S2 commented:

The reason I know where to go for information is that I am a bit resourceful and pushy, I call and ask the questions.

Few of the students had used these services. Those that had, made a variety of comments about the level of assistance available for their particular problem, and the approachability (or otherwise) of the personnel. The comments that follow are grouped under the particular service.

4.2.13 Enrolment assistance, phone contact, registry, administration, specific course information.

We didn't know what textbooks to get until we got the printed administration guide, which we couldn't get until lectures started, so we got a bit behind right from the start (Elizabeth:B1).

A couple of Asian student told me they went to the office there, and their attitude is not very friendly. Maybe they have some kind of discrimination agenda... you run the university like you run a business, and then you have to have some kind of good image. Perhaps the students could not express themselves very well, but still... (Christina:B2).

A student that started in my class was mucked up with his enrolment here, so very quickly he went to another university (Virginia:S2)

I hadn't been told whether or not I was actually enrolled. I felt upset. I sat and cried in the toilet for ages (Lee:S1).

I find very bad planning here when I enrol they send me information but didn't send me about orientation day or anything. I was here because I miss some information and I get to the office and they tell me "Oh by the way, orientation's tomorrow". And I say "well, I've got two days Study Skills – how could I fit that in?" but no one ever mentioned anything. There were five of us at the Study skills session and none of us knew anything about it (Christina:B2).

4.2.14 Learning Assistance

Five of the students attended study skills or 'Head Start' programmes prior to the first week of semester, three others commented that they would have gone, but like Ruby:B2 did not know about them, or found out too late. Those that went found them helpful, but

commented that it was hard to know where to concentrate their efforts when there seemed to be so much to take in. Many of the people who attended these programmes have since returned to the Learning Centres for further help.

There was a study skills thing during orientation week but I didn't find them very helpful for when I actually went to classes, they didn't explain sort of – they kind of had a few notes on lectures, but I didn't find them very beneficial (Elizabeth:B1)

Later she says

They did a library tour, which I missed out on, and then somebody showed me, and that just scared me away from the library and I haven't been back since!

No, I went for one thing about how to study, but that wasn't very good. A couple of my friends have been and got advice that was wrong, so I'd rather leave it up to myself (Lee:S1).

but Lee:S1 also says, later on:

The Learning Centre is good for some things like written Communication... so they were really helpful on that because that's what they kind of specialise in... not really so much for Social Sciences – so I just go and see the tutor.

One student ended up doing some informal peer tutoring, which surprised her as she was only a first year student:

I was there one day and two students came in and they didn't have a peer tutor that day. I end up, and I helped them. I didn't expect it, but I know the subject well. So I explain to them I don't give the answers away, but I just go step by step with them (Christina:B2).

Luka:S2 was extremely concerned about the plight of some of her peers:

No, I haven't required help from learning support, although I do help other students. A little while ago I was asked to go to the learning centre with someone. I've done that periodically through the year trying to do something for those who are failing and for whatever reason aren't accessing the services that are

available... I was most upset about this in semester one and it continues in semester two, that people who are residents of this country and who have English as a second language are not entitled to support from the international student service. For someone who doesn't have English as his or her first language that makes the workload huge. If you are a resident, there is nothing, you are just accepted [into university] and you can do a full time workload. Well, I find that workload massive and I seriously struggle to keep on top of it - so I'm not surprised that these people have failed, you know, three out of four subjects. I went to the International support thing and they said no, no if you are a resident you don't get any support. It made me even more angry...they are setting people up to fail. They should not be encouraged to do a full time load (Luka:S2).

Luka:S2's concerns are also raised under issues about Academic advice.

Jane:S1 has had more positive experiences when she has asked for study help:

I went to the Student Learning Centre - we've got one here. Whatever I had for a question I'd go down there. I've been there three or four times, and asked them to help me out. After I'd finished it, I'd ask them to have a look at it for me and check that I had answered the question. [was it helpful?] Yes, I only did it three or four times, early on, when I was finding my feet. I felt I needed that extra tuition and it was one on one - 'cause I hadn't been to school for such a long time (Jane:S1).

I think it was nice, [The study skills programme] I got a background reading and writing and correcting the necessary words, it helps when I started. My daughter enrolled me in it (Virginia:S2).

Later Virginia:S2 says, about the student learning centre.

Really they were hopeless. Not for the essay, but for economics. I went there asking for help, and they did not ring me up. I never heard from them. I wrote my name down, but I never heard from them.

[it appears that that she had mistakenly written her name on a list for a study group that never eventuated. Even later though, the error was not picked up]

...when I went back and complained they said that they haven't much people to do it. So I understand and I just say "never mind".

Hannah:S2 could not get the help that she needed, and is now paying for tutorial help from outside the university:

They kept telling me that they would get someone, but they never came up with anyone, so instead I am paying two tutors which is kind of a hassle. It's a real worry for me and I haven't enjoyed any of those papers.

Sam:S1 got confused. She went to the Learning Centre early on, for help with an assignment.

I did what I thought was right, and what I was supposed to do. I took it to the Learning Centre and said I wasn't confident in the way I was interpreting it. So I said "these are what I think are the key points, is this correct" and she said yes, so I handed it in. Basically I didn't do at all well, as all of his key points were none of my key points, and that how I interpreted it was not what he was looking for.

[So you haven't been back again?]

No, not since then, because of that. Well actually I think relying on my own ability would have been better.

4.2.15 Health Centre and Counselling

(Student names have been removed from these quotations for privacy reasons)

Yes, I used the counselling service, and I went and saw them a couple of times. They were really good, they didn't judge you which was really good. Because when I was really sick I went to the health centre one day, and of course I had to tell them my history, and they just sat there and judged me... I just left there and bawled my eyes out

I haven't used the Counselling Services, but I have used Student Health and they were wonderful.

This student did comment that she found it strange that there was no source of financial help on the spot, when she had to pay for a taxi to the hospital and had no money.

After a sexual harassment incident, which happened in her first week of university, the student was sent to the Counsellor

I did go to the Counsellor – they sent me because I wasn't sleeping at all. The residents committee manager said how useful it would be, but I didn't know how I felt about that, I didn't know whether she understood. The counselling helped a bit, and everyone here was so supportive.

I rang up the Counselling Services once because one of my friends was thinking about dropping out. She got really messed up. They said they were understaffed and would get back to me, but they haven't yet. That was a few weeks ago. The situation was resolved anyway as she ended up leaving.

4.2.16 Student Job Search

I think they are quite good at Student Job Search, quite good with seasonal work, you know, but it would be nice if maybe they could do something earlier in second semester because basically you don't want to have to start looking for jobs 'til after your exams...but once the exams are finished your student allowance stops straight away, so there is no more money (Sam:S1).

4.2.17 Computers

Those without computers and or printers at home, or without Internet facilities, commented on the cost of printing, and of access to the web. Computer accessibility seems to vary between courses and sites. Not all of the students have their own computer and those who do not often have access to computers but do not feel confident using them. Luka:S2, even

by early in Semester Two, was not using the Library data bases, because she did not know how and was not aware that help might be available.

I don't use the computer at home, so I would really like to know how the whole computer system works... and I don't know how to access the Internet. And I don't know who to ask to say can you show me how. I put money on my student ID card, so I can print stuff off, but I don't know how to use anything else, and I didn't know who to ask. And it wasn't particularly clear (Luka:S2).

I should have realised earlier and just invested in a computer before, as the cost of printing pages at 20 cents a sheet... and I feel disadvantaged that I don't have internet at home, because at \$5 an hour I cant justify sitting there and reading and finding different resources on the net (Hannah:S2).

4.2.18 Library

Library skills and the need *not* to feel intimidated by the library featured in a number of responses. One student talked of overcoming a 'library phobia', mentioned earlier (Elizabeth:B1), others said they had to take more than one tour before they started to feel they knew how to access what they needed.

4.2.19 Safety and Individual challenges

In general, both groups felt reasonably safe around the university, even when they were there after dark. The sites were both "reasonably well lit" except right out on the periphery where the car parks were, and most were aware of the presence of security guards. Mostly they students coped by walking in groups or pairs late at night. Many of them have cell phones, and therefore contacting help in a hurry was not considered a problem.

Other personal challenges faced by the group included:

- Anxiety/stress:

Anne:B1: *I find this whole move to New Zealand very stressful.*

Virginia:S2: *Sometimes I find it overwhelming you know, a bit. For the first two months I think oh my god I'd better get out of here before it's too late.*

Lee:S1: *I'm not extremely academic so I was stressed out.*

Sam:S1: *I find it really stressful [money] its probably the biggest burden.. You are trying to do well and everything and you have this added stress. You can't put it anywhere, you can't do anything with it.*

Kathy:B1 *In the middle of last semester I got very stressed out because I was working two jobs, and doing speech and drama...I really couldn't keep up with everything I was trying to do.*

- Sexual harassment:

There was a guy that lived at the other end of the hostel, and he sexually harassed me. I had to take it to management. He would talk about inappropriate issues...he started touching me and I didn't like that. He had to be moved out. I sort of just didn't feel safe here. I'm scared of him, but not angry at him. It affected my study for quite a while

- Being pestered by another student, - unwelcome attention:

Sam:S1: *I had a guy up at the university who pestered me for a while – that was a bit yukky because it wasn't what I wanted. He was a friend, but he wanted more and I wasn't interested. He even turned up at some of my tutorial classes.*

- Loss of a close relative:

- Balancing outside roles with study:

Jane:S1 : *really difficult, and it got out of balance real bad in the first semester. The house was upside down and the bills went into shock – I didn't concentrate on them.*

- A child getting into difficulties at school:

Jane:S1: *my son got into trouble at school - that was the breaking point really. He has got learning difficulties anyway.*

- Relationship/marriage challenges and break up:

Virginia:S2: *he didn't support it, he was against it. He is thinking like, you know, a woman's place should be in the kitchen. We always have a conflict about it.*

Luka:S2: *this semester has been really hard, very challenging - my partner of five years and I have since broken up. [Did your studying contribute to that?] no, not really it*

didn't . But it was still pretty devastating... I got pretty university focused – it was partly a coping thing.

- Having considerable extra help from one particular male lecturer:

Sam:S1: *There was an incident with a lecturer who gave me lots and lots of extra tutoring. The reason I did so well in one of my papers was because of him, but I felt I wasn't sure if there was a conflict there - whether it was ok to be getting that much help from somebody. I'm just not too sure of the boundaries.*

- Personality clashes with hostel or flat mates

Elizabeth:B1: *Well I've just had a row with them actually - they just can't be bothered to be quiet for me any more. Sometimes in the weekend they don't want to know me and I don't want to know them.*

Lee:S1: *Personality clashes were an added burden.*

These have not been explored in any further detail since they were personal to the students concerned.

4.2.20 How has the university experience affected the students

I asked the students if they thought that they had changed in any way since coming to university. All felt that they had - but few specifically mentioned learning or academic growth!

They talked about growing as a person, changing attitudes. Elizabeth:B1 talked about being:

I'm more mellow, and I go with the flow.

She also mentioned that her time management has improved.

Kathy:B1 said she was now *less tolerant of people I don't like.*

Ruby:B2 has gone back to the way she felt she used to be:

Happy, nice, and friendly – I was turning into a horrible person.

A number mentioned feeling more confident:

I've grown up. I'm here because I want to be. I have a purpose to be her.

(Bob:B2).

Jimmy:B1 felt that he was *moving out of my shell - I've always been very quiet.*

Some changes, related to the learning they were doing, were illustrated in comments such as:

I am better at questioning things and not taking everything at face value. I am becoming a more critical thinker (Hannah:S2).

I'm using words I'd never even heard of! (Ruby:B2).

Luka:S2 had earlier talked about being addicted to the brain stretching that she was experiencing, and how much she was growing from the learning, she also said:

It has really helped me to find out who I am. My confidence levels have increased... I really like debate and realising there is more than one way of looking at things (Luka:S2).

It has really challenged me to think about who I am and how I perceive the world around me. I challenge my own views and thoughts on life - I'm a lot more grey - less black and white. I have probably learned more about myself than anything. I'm more tolerant of different attitudes than I used to be (Sam:S1).

I've had to grow up a lot. Issues that I've had, I've had to resolve – personal ones. Conflict with different people (Jane:S1).

4.2.21 Dropping out and 'hanging in there'

All of the students interviewed had survived into the second semester. Many of them commented on the drop-out rate from their classes. Luka:S2's comment is typical:

We have a class photo taken at the beginning of the year. I can look at it now and think 'gone, gone' and I know a few who are going to change their degree at the end of the year (Luka:S2).

Almost all of them had considered dropping a paper, changing their major focus, or leaving completely at some time in their first year.

On a positive note, one student not only stayed, and is achieving, but also has picked up a second major. Jane:S1 has really come to terms with what she can achieve, and is excited by the future possibilities.

My second degree is in Maori Studies. I've decided to do that one as well, I did really well in Maori language - it feels like a good decision.

Others, though, have not had such a positive experience.

I felt like dropping out all the time in the first few months. I didn't understand and I thought I must be stupid (Christina:B2).

Another student, who failed all but one of her papers, was adamant that she had never considered leaving:

... not for a moment - I wanted to study- I will just have to try harder next time (Virginia:S2).

Sam:S1 said very strongly that she had not even contemplated leaving - *not for a second* - but has considered changing her degree focus. Elizabeth:B1 too:

... felt like changing my major, but never thought of pulling out

Hannah:S2 was developing strategies to deal with the difficult times:

No, when I feel like pulling out, I just grit my teeth and push harder. I never really felt like pulling out of the degree, but I did drop a paper (Hannah:S2).

One extreme comment was:

At six weeks I felt like taking a long walk off a short pier - one of my classmates actually did commit suicide (Luka:S2).

Students who needed help, or felt like dropping out, report that they talked to friends and family, they did not ask people at the university for help or advice (apart from Christina:B2, whose comment have already been reported under teaching issues)

4.2.22 Looking forward

By the time they were interviewed in the second semester, most of the group felt that they were over the worst, and starting to look forward. The comments in the section above on how they had changed are relevant here - the degree of confidence that they were starting to feel made coping with other challenges that much more manageable.

It was hard to get them to think beyond the final exams in November, but those that did were starting to contemplate the joys of moving into a flat, or having a year when the family had got used to the changes in routine. They also expressed more confidence about being able to cope with the challenges of the study at a higher and more demanding level, and felt that they now knew where to go for help if they need it.

4.2.23 Advice for the university

The final question that I asked the students was a variation of '*Do you have any advice for the university about how things might be improved for next years first years?*' Considering the number and variety of issues that had been raised in other parts of the interview, this yielded little that was startling or particularly specific. Perhaps they felt that things they had mentioned already did not need to be repeated.

A selection of the responses follows:

What I would like to see is more first year students knowing each other, building up relationships that people will be able to count on I guess... definitely with respect to mature students... there are quite a few people who really struggle, it would be good if there was a bigger support network for these people. But as I say, you can only do so much, people have to want to receive what you are offering. Also, the resources in the library, and photocopiers - things like that, they could be improved.
(Hannah:S2)

It would have to be better advice for older students...those who haven't been at school for a few years - it's a huge issue. Not so much what university will be like, but about [academic] expectations - what they expect as a foundation (Ruby:B2)

I don't think anything socially... we are catered for a lot. But I guess more lecture knowledge, like when you do come here you don't know what to do in a lecture... Prior knowledge about what texts you need - we got a bit behind right from the start, we didn't know which textbooks to get (Elizabeth:B1).

... perhaps the university could get some kind of programmes to aid the mature students, because today a lot of mature students return to university... so perhaps some additional materials for a start you know. If you make a compulsory paper they would know that some subjects are not an easy subject to follow, so perhaps you could suggest that if you are an adult student you look at some of this before you enrol in the course (Christina:B2).

Virginia had very similar comments to Christina:B2's.

Sam suggested

... it would be really cool to have a panel of people that just sat there and answered questions...it wouldn't really matter how silly your question was... but I know at the same time there's lots of people including myself that don't know what questions to

ask. Maybe a manual -post it out as an introductory thing to new students (Sam:S1)

Ask students what their background is - then you could pinpoint the ones who need help. Perhaps it would be better if we took the English paper - written communication. That would help (Jane S:1).

There's no-where private to go and cry your eyes out... I have heard heaps of people say there is no-where to go (Luka:S2).

For subjects that have assignments, they should even them out, not put them all together... and tests and assignments should be marked quickly. They need good lecturers and stuff - not ones who get angry or anything, or ask you a question in front of everyone. Some of them aren't very good lecturers either (Jimmy:B1).

There are some comments here that provide useful feedback, and they are picked up in the recommendations in Chapter Six.

4.3 Conclusion

The students had plenty to say about their experiences, and shared freely the good and the bad. This chapter has given them the opportunity to have their voice heard, and acknowledged in the university context.

The interview transcripts were also examined in groups, by site and by degree programme, and the two sites compared. There seemed to be little point in comparing the two degrees since they are so different. No startling or disquieting discrepancies were found when data from the two sites was compared.

The next step was to compare their experiences with those reported in the literature. The discussion chapter that follows explores whether the New Zealand experience is unique to

this country, or to the students themselves, and draws together all the findings from the study.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.0 Introduction

This study set out to examine the first year experience of a group of students in a New Zealand University. The hope was that by exploring some of the issues and challenges that the students face as they make the transition into undergraduate study, some of the implications for the university might become clearer.

The research question was:

What are students' perceptions of their experience of the first undergraduate year at one university in New Zealand in 2001, and what are the implications of these experiences for the university?

5.1 Propositions

The discussion in this chapter examines some of the issues raised by considering both the stated experience of the students, and the insights from the literature, and is organised using the following propositions:

5.1.1 The first year experience is not uniform. It is a personal journey

- a. Different backgrounds result in different journeys
- b. Different expectations result in different experiences
- c. Learning in a particular academic discipline does not necessarily result in shared experiences

5.1.2 Institutional systems and processes affect the transition journey at all stages of the cycle [using Nicholson's Transition Cycle (1990)]

A. Preparation

- a. Enrolment, advice and information issues

B. *Encounter*

- a. Orientation and the first few weeks
- b. Early study issues
- c. Making friends - the social context

C. *Adjustment*

- a. Teaching and Academic Staff issues
- b. Learning and Assessment
- c. Use of Support Services

D. *Stabilisation*

- a. Dropping out and 'hanging in there'
- b. Looking forward

5.1.3 *The political/economic/social context affects the first year experience*

- a. Employment opportunities affect course choices
- b. Funding issues impact on the need for students to generate income and subsequently on their 'connection' with the university

General Comment

Whilst the results of this study cannot be generalised to the experiences of first year students across the whole of the university, the issues that are raised have implications over and above their impact on this specific group. It is hard to estimate the extent to which the group studied is in any way typical of the university as a whole, but it is reasonable to suppose that their experiences were not entirely unique. However, I argue that in fact all first year experience is personal to the student involved.

One interesting statistic about the students studied is that a high proportion of them (9 of the 13) were the first from their immediate family to enrol at university. Findings from the work by Slee (2002) suggest that this issue may be a significant factor in their ability to adjust to the demands of academic life. How important this issue was in the experience of

the students in this study is hard to estimate, but it may well have impacted on the amount of family support (or lack of it) that students have described during the transition.

Overall, this work can be viewed as a snapshot of a group of students in their first year. The camera does not lie – but it does not always tell the whole truth of the situation. It cannot give us a picture of those who were 'out of the frame' - the students who had already left before the research was conducted, or those who for whatever reason, chose not to participate. It could also be argued that any snapshot is true only at the time it is taken, and student perceptions will change as different experiences are encountered on the journey.

One thing is becoming clear – the experiences of these New Zealand students *do* reflect in many ways the experiences of students in Australia and to a somewhat lesser extent, the USA. I expected that I might find some aspects that were quite dissimilar, defined by the fact that the students were learning in a different national context. However, it would appear that the multiple personal challenges faced by this group closely resemble those of their counterparts in other parts of the world, and this further supports the proposition that the transition is indeed a personal, rather than a group or institutional journey.

5.2 The first year experience is not uniform: it is a personal journey

As described in the literature review, a great deal of the research undertaken in the last fifty years, in the USA, Australia, and New Zealand has been quantitative in nature, and has addressed issues such as retention/attrition, the influence of the college and the university experience. Much of the published literature 'lumps' together the cohorts of freshmen or first year undergraduates. It assumes a homogeneity that may be useful for the statisticians, and enables them to quantify the data, but is less helpful for the students themselves. Other research has not focussed on the student as an individual, nor recognised what Silver and Silver (1997) state quite clearly:

We have stressed the importance of taking account of different categories of students in order to avoid the over-emphasis on students' common roles (1997:114).

In other words, each student is an individual, and makes a personal journey of transition. It is only in relatively recent times that research into first year experience has recognised this, and been approached in a manner that values the individual in the community setting. Writers such as Silver & Silver (1997), Levine & Cureton (1998), Parr (2000), and Light (2001) have described the individual experiences of students, and this study has reached conclusions similar to theirs.

The students in this study described a wide variety of experiences that affected them in a number of different ways. Their approaches to dealing with the challenges that faced them were based on their life experiences, their backgrounds and the level or type of support they had available to them. They were still enrolled and attending classes by the middle of the second semester of their first year, so some of their coping strategies had been effective. Less clear was the level of academic success they were achieving, and students were struggling with different aspects of their study and their courses. No single student experience could have been used as a case study for this thesis, as too many variations would have been omitted.

I acknowledge that since this is a small sample, it is quite possible that some similar trends that may exist within particular student cohorts have not emerged (such as school leavers, mature students, Maori, or young males).

Findings from this study suggest there is no such thing as a first year experience, there are simply as many first year experiences as there are students - no person's set of experiences will be the same as another's. There will be similarities of course, but it is time to stop assuming a high level of uniformity, as implied in some of the earlier writing (Gardner, 1999: McInnis 1995) and many of the studies reviewed by Pascarella & Terenzini (1991). I argue that this does not exist. Kantanis (2002) sums this up:

Recently many Australian institutions have attempted to address the issues of transition to university largely using a 'one size fits all' template. This approach neither recognises nor addresses the needs of sizeable, specific, cohorts of students (2002:1).

a. *Different backgrounds result in different journeys*

The students in the study came from a wide variety of ethnic, school, work, and socio-economic backgrounds. This meant, for example, that three had English as a second or third language, some lived at home, with or without parental/partner support, some had quite extensive work experience prior to enrolling, and some had come straight from school. It seems implausible to think that a small group with this level of diversity could be expected to experience their transition journey in the same way.

This finding echoes what Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) say

Students manifestly differ in their educational and career goals, motivational levels, readiness to learn, prior preparation and developmental status...and in a range of other ways ...How then does one reconcile such student heterogeneity with the homogeneity of most institutions?

...There is little evidence to suggest that the challenge has been taken seriously on more than a handful of campuses. Part of the fault for this lies with the researchers, who with few exceptions have given little attention to the ways in which college's effects might vary for different kinds of students. (1991:645).

The stories described in Chapter Four of this thesis give us clear evidence that the student experiences were indeed very different from each other. The students faced individual and personal challenges, both directly related to their study and in many cases to their 'other lives' outside the university. Christina:B2's and Bob:B2's are examples of entirely different backgrounds that affected the way they approached and experienced the transition.

Christina:B2, at 35, has a wealth of life experience, much of it challenging and difficult, both educationally and personally. She talks of her difficult experiences being bullied at school, and has had to suffer the trauma of refugee camps and family loss and separation. She also has an un-supportive partner. She has relevant work experience, but English is her third language. The story of her transition journey is one of challenge, hard work, social isolation and anxiety.

Bob:B2, on the other hand, is Pakeha, 18, articulate and well educated, born and raised in New Zealand. He was head boy at his local college, and has always achieved well academically. He is confident and motivated and expects to succeed at university. His transition has generally been positive, coping with the study requirements (apart from one paper, discussed at greater length under 'Teaching Issues') and a demanding part-time job, and he had taken the time to work alongside another student, (Ruby:B2), who less able to manage the workload.

These two examples are evidence of some of the differences raised by Silver & Silver (1997).

Race, gender, social class, disability and the infinite combination of personal characteristics - gregariousness or loneliness, religious belief or personal morality, conformism or eagerness to experiment... (or) how they spend their time, in terms of academic work, use of library, association with other students, entertainment, political activity or church attendance (1997:93).

The ways in which others in the study perceived and dealt with the challenges of transition demonstrates their use of the strategies gained from school, work, parenting or other learning experiences.

Time management is one example of this. Some in the group managed their time really well:

I've been really organised, fortunately, I think the reason I've been able to do it as well as I have is because I've worked for three years and I've understood what it is to keep to deadlines... I have a list of things I need to get done the next day, and I tick them off as I go (Hannah:S2, who worked before enrolling at university).

I'm pretty on top of it... I might start a bit late but I'm organised and I work hard when I do get motivated (Kathy:B1, school leaver).

I have a very well planned time for study. I work it out at the beginning and I try hard to do the right amount of work every day (Anne:B1, international student).

Others found it much more difficult

You've got to get really focused and do it yourself, you've got to get yourself in a routine... it was kind of overwhelming, like you have all this spare time (Lee:S1, school leaver).

Having to allocate time and prioritise things for school was a real shock to the system... not quite knowing how to juggle my time, and how to organise my study life (Sam:S1, a mature-age student).

... you know, you've got your timetable, and you've got from 6-10 at night - well, I struggled with that. What paper and how long for, and things like that... virtually I've got it sussed now... but I really found that a struggle (Jane:S1, a mature-age student).

Light (2001) considers time management an important factor in the success of students

The critical word is time. Sophomores who had a great first year ... mentioned time management, and time allocation, and time as a scarce resource. In contrast, those who struggled rarely mentioned time in any way (2001:24).

The students also used learning from their roles as a sibling, parent, administrator or worker to problem-solve and develop strategies for coping. McInnis (1995) comments:

Diversity is commonly taken to refer to age, gender, place of living, ethnicity and socio-economic background...a less visible diversity [is] one which finds its roots in family and educational backgrounds, values, attitudes and expectations... In this context the illusion of a mainstream of students is somewhat illusory. We believe that universities and academics are still coming to terms with the full implications of student diversity in higher education (1995:4).

The themes of individuality, and the challenge for the university of recognising and accommodating these personal journeys, recur throughout the discussion on the findings of this thesis

b. Different expectations result in different experiences

Most of the students in the study did not have any clear expectations of what their experience might be going to be, as they were busy (or in holiday mode?) right up to the first day of orientation and apparently not give it a great deal of thought. Some, though, had expectations that did influence their approach, in both positive and negative ways:

I don't know that I had expectations of what it would be like (Luka:S2).

I was worried about my study ability (Ruby:B2).

I thought it's going to be exciting (Virginia:S2).

Certainly McInnis' study (1995) found significant gaps between student expectations and their actual experiences. In the introduction to the subsequent survey, carried out in 1999, he comments that:

Background characteristics and experiences that the students bring with them to university are likely to influence their behaviour, outlook and expectations of the course and the university they have chosen (2000:4).

This comment gives us an indication that the wide variety of backgrounds that the students have impacts significantly on their expectations and the way they both perceive and experience their first year at university.

Light (2001), when talking about students of different ethnicity, suggests that:

Students from different groups come to college with sharp disagreements about what they expect from the college as an institution (2001:156).

Findings from this study suggest that different expectations are seen not only in *ethnically* diverse students. Three examples serve to illustrate this point:

- Jane:S1, who is 38, had been a solo mother for a number of years, and entered with anxiety about her academic ability, threw herself into study and then faced major problems with her son, and managing her life outside study;
- Virginia:S2 who, at 53, had not studied since she left school and had been working and raising a family, was excited and anticipated that university would be very like school, but then failed all her papers; and
- Jimmy:B1, who at 18, left school and went straight to university, was supremely confident, expecting that he would do well, did not work very hard but was a high achiever.

The examples cited above simply serve to illustrate some of the diverse expectations (or lack of them). As Tinto (1993) reminds us:

Pre-entry expectations generally become the standard against which individuals evaluate their early experiences within the institution (1993:54).

There are few obvious similarities in these three cases, and yet they were all first year undergraduate students. They had very different expectations, and experienced their transition very differently. Clearly they had unique transition journeys.

A question raised by this discussion is why the students (in most cases) had no well-formed expectations, why they were not interested, excited, or anxious enough to be thinking, imagining and planning in the months before they started classes? Could this be linked to the lack of information mentioned by so many of the group? Perhaps many of them really did not know what to expect, with no family role models. They may have, in some way, put what was to come at the back of their mind? This is speculation of course, but is an interesting avenue for possible research.

In his recent wide-ranging studies, McInnis (1995, 2000) asked specific questions about expectations such as:

- the standard of work they thought might be expected
- whether university work would be more or less demanding than school

- the amount and level of new material they might encounter and
- whether they thought there would be assistance available to them if they struggled with the new material.

Those questions have meant that the reports of the 1994 and 1999 Australian studies (reported in McInnis, 1995 and 2000) contain considerably more evidence of *specific* student expectations than was discovered in my study. I did not ask about particular types of expectations, only 'what did you expect?'

In the light of findings that appear to show the important role of expectations in the long term university experience, it seems appropriate to try to find a way of enabling students to articulate their expectations, and to discuss them.

c. Learning in a particular academic discipline does not necessarily result in shared experiences.

The students in the study were enrolled in two quite different degree programmes - in Business Studies, and the Social Sciences. Students who were enrolled in Business Studies at Site One, followed by Social Sciences on the same site, described the most positive experiences. Students enrolled on Site Two had generally less positive experiences, with Business Studies on Site Two the least positive of the four. However, since the numbers are so small this cannot be seen as in any way statistically significant.

A number of possible reasons for the differences in student experiences are discussed in the sections that follow. It is clear from the data that a major contributor to the students' perceptions of their first year was the ability, attitude and approach of both general and academic staff, and this was not discipline or site specific.

Astin (1993) suggests that the influence of curriculum choice on the development of the individual is relatively weak. Other writers suggest that the course, programme or choice of major is less of an influence on the student experience than whether the enrolment is full- or part-time (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Silver 1997).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) discuss the impact of the major field of study on the student's cognitive development:

We found little consistent evidence that one's major has more than a trivial net impact on one's general level of intellectual or cognitive outcomes (1991:614).

They do however make mention in a table summarising 'Estimated *within-college* effects' that the departmental environment may be more important than the actual discipline in influencing student academic self-concept, which may be relevant to student experience (1991:615).

Comments made by students about their experiences of their actual courses were both positive and negative. They included issues such as:

- Discipline specific academic advice.
- Availability of lecture notes and resource material
- Lecture and tutorial experiences
- Specific content challenges
- Assessment timing, clarity and feedback
- Responses to questions

Of these, the challenges of *content* are really the only ones that can be considered to be discipline specific. A variety of comments from the students:

The first semester I found particularly hard - the breaking down process - you are not an individual. One particular paper, about cultures... we're left feeling guilty, as white imperialist New Zealanders... the hurt inflicted by the dominant culture, and so on. About six weeks into the semester I had had enough, I was at breaking point. (Luka:S2, Social Sciences).

Um, it feels like a bit of a waste of time actually, because in the end I'm going to have to go to the study guide - the lectures just skimmed over the surface... and some of the notes they give us are shocking - poor quality (Kathy:B1, Business Studies).

This is basic - I could sit up there and take the lectures if I had the chance
(Elizabeth:B1, Business Studies).

I have found that in a couple of papers I did really well - which was great, I was really happy and confident that I understood (Sam:S1, Social Sciences).

The individual response to the content and process of the learning in these disciplines is evident. However, in-depth reading of the interviews and comparisons between disciplines has not shown any significant patterns of difference or similarity in the experiences. Every student in the study commented in different ways on the issues, such as teaching quality, support and resources, that are raised above. Other concerns, such as Luka:S2's response to teaching about culture and New Zealand society, are particular to the individual.

The correlation between positive academic experiences, excellent learning opportunities and supportive and helpful academic staff is clear in this study. The students who were generally positive are the ones who have had positive learning experiences, whatever discipline they were studying. The social environment and other factors have also impacted on their general perception, but learning/teaching experiences feature more prominently than any other factor in the students' descriptions of their transition. The volume of quotes about this topic in the Findings chapter is testament to this.

However, positive learning experiences do not necessarily equate with academic success. For example, Virginia:S2 thoroughly enjoyed her lectures and tutorials, and rates her transition experience as a positive one, even though she was not ultimately successful when measured by grades, or papers passed. This is one clear demonstration of the powerful impact of a positive learning process, even when the outcome is not what the student had hoped for. Other people in the same discipline as Virginia:S2, like Lee:S1, found the lectures less enjoyable or interesting, but were successful in their study.

What does not appear in the literature is any clear description of the impact of a particular major or programme on the experience of the students in their first year. This may perhaps

be because there are too many unstable variables, likely to change every year as academic staff and curricula change. In this study, the physical location in which the learning took place appears to be more significant than the academic discipline in which the students were enrolled.

These findings reflect Astin's comment:

In short it appears that how student approach general education (and how the faculty actually deliver the curriculum) is far more important than the formal curricular content and structure (1993:425).

5.3 Institutional systems and processes affect the transition journey at all stages of the cycle

Findings from the student interviews indicate that transition is an individual experience, and that there is a myriad of factors affecting student success or failure. However, the institutional effects can be isolated as an area for investigation, since there is considerable potential for change in the way the university 'does business'. At first glance, some of the categories mentioned below might appear not to be institutional issues, but the links are explained. Astin argues that:

... most effects of institutional type are indirect; that is they are mediated by faculty, peer group and involvement variables.

The institutional structure, as such, is not the key ingredient [to student success] rather it is the kind of peer groups and faculty environments that tend to emerge in these environments. (1993:413).

The next section of this chapter, exploring the student experience in relation to institutional systems and processes, is structured using Nicholson's (1990). Transition Cycle model as a framework. This model is described in detail in Appendix 2.

Each of the four Phases of the cycle is discussed, with examples from student experiences and the literature:

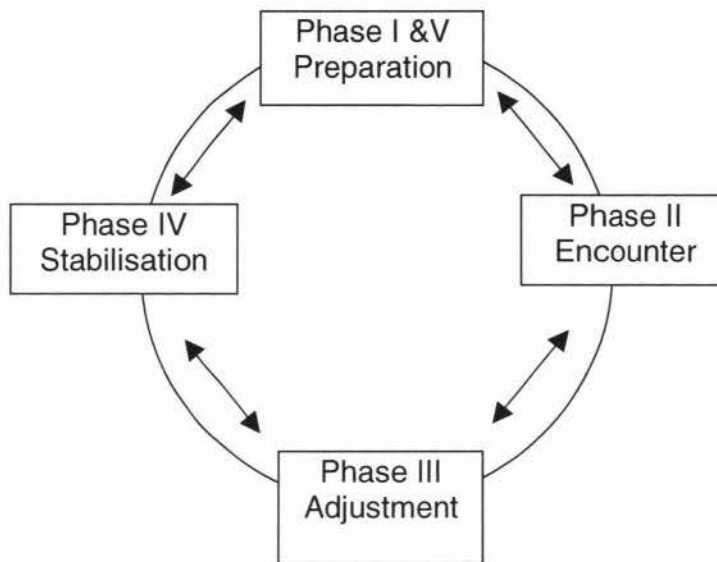


Figure 1. Nicholson's transition Cycle (1990)

Nicholson describes a number of cycles around the Transition Model. The first two cycles - Tasks & Goals and Pitfalls & Problems - were most useful to examine and group the findings and to provide a scaffold for discussing the progress of students. They offer a systematic general framework to assist in the interpretation of the findings, and ways of describing the influences at work as the transition unfolds.

One other cycle, The Role of Management Systems, is used to structure the recommendations in Chapter Six.

A. Phase One: Preparation

Expectations and motives rule the preparation stage, and achieving a state of readiness lies at the core of the tasks and goals for this phase:

If one knows a change is imminent, it is helpful to have clear and realistic expectations about what is to come, to be positively motivated towards the change, and to be aware of one's feelings about it.

However there are potential pitfalls/problems too:

People may feel fearful, unready and reluctant to change... one is equally ill equipped in the opposite condition: when change is anticipated with exaggerated optimism and starry eyed idealism (Nicholson, 1990:89).

a. *Enrolment, Advice and Information Issues*

Many of the students in this study have made decisions about a number of aspects of their futures without sufficient information. These include the courses they enrol in, the degree options available to them, and the university they attend. This finding echoes comments from McInnis (2000) who cites James et al. (1999).

Some students lack enough information or accurate information on which to make informed choices (2000:14).

These problems persist despite the university having a substantial body of printed literature available, liaison persons in every area of New Zealand, a colourful and inviting web site, 0800 phone contact number and school liaison visits.

McInnis et al. describe students in their studies who felt a high degree of alienation caused by:

Being burnt out by the effort to get into their institution (2000b:20).

Comments about the confusing nature of published material and the lack of clarity of information received from contact centre staff (mentioned by Jane:S1, Sam:S1, Bob:B2 & Ruby:B2) alert us to other possible problem areas. Tinto (1993) recognises these:

... but even when individuals do seek out information, it is frequently the case that those data are either inappropriate to the important issues of choice or misleading in character (1993:52).

The following comments from Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2 encapsulate many of the students' concerns in this area:

Well, from my point of view, it would have been great to have more advice for older students, not so much about studying, but about making decisions and other helpful things to know (Ruby:B2).

I found it very vague coming here - someone came to school, and it was supposed to be an information session but it was just about filling in the application forms. I found out my information from friends (Bob:B2).

This comment confirms work by Slee (2002). In her study nearly 60% of students obtained their information from friends and family rather than the university (even though many of those consulted had not actually been to university. In this area, Slee agrees with Tinto (1993):

Often [students are] informed by the least accurate and reliable of information (1993:52).

Hannah:S2 also felt that the competitive nature of the tertiary sector meant that she was not given advice that would have helped her make a better decision for her future. (She might for example have been better to enrol in a Te Reo Maori paper in another institution where she could have studied as an internal student, and cross-credit her course). The discussion earlier in this work about the changes in the education sector show some of the reasons why this competition between universities exists, but it is of no consolation for this student, who along with Virginia:S2 found learning another language extramurally almost impossible.

Jane:S1, Hannah:S2, Ruby:B2 and Sam:S1, like many mature students described in the literature, made the decision to come into university at a particular stage in their lives, or for a variety of reasons. These include unexpected redundancy, children leaving home, or a desire for life style change (Miller, 1993; Tindle and Lincoln, 2000; Morris-Matthews et al, 2000). They do not make these changes lightly, and when they start the process of considering education options open to them, it is sometimes hard for them to find the information they most need.

Perhaps there are assumptions that those who have been in the workforce, or who have life skills, will know how to navigate systems to discover the information they need, or perhaps mature students do not consider these aspects prior to enrolling (Kantanis, 2002). This does not take into account time constraints, lack of computer literacy, or fear of large institutions (Tindle and Lincoln, 2000; Morris-Matthews et al, 2000; Kantanis, 2002). The

unique needs of the mature age student have not been well addressed in relation to accessing clear advice, or assisting with the transfer to university (see Ruby:B2's comment on the previous page).

Students coming straight to university from secondary school are probably better served in this regard. School leavers are the recipients of advice from career advisors, and visits from the various local universities in the months leading up to the end of their school career, although Bob:B2 (see above) did not find these visits helpful. Many, although certainly not all, are computer literate and can access the information available on the Internet.

Another issue in relation to the advice (or lack of it) before enrolling, is the amount of prior knowledge and learning in the subject that is assumed - even at first year level. Bob:B2 reflects the comments of a number of other students, when he says:

... what they say is 'the course assumes no prior knowledge' - but it does.

This is clearly a major worry for the mature students who have not been in school for a while, as they enrol for courses thinking that they will be taught all that they need to know - and then find that this just doesn't happen. Ruby:B2, Virginia:S2, Christina:B2 all expressed these concerns. Eagle and McDonald (1998) comment that institutions have a considerable responsibility to assist mature students with advice and guidance to help them navigate their way through the initial critical few weeks of university life, but may not in fact realise what assistance is actually required to support them.

Information in the prescription statements of university calendars and booklets often does not give students sufficient information to decide on course choices, and many, particularly mature-entry students, would benefit from the opportunity to speak to an academic staff member at some point in the enrolment process.

This is an area where the university could play a more effective role, assisting students towards informed decision making, because as Tinto says:

Poor choices, and the expectations upon which such choices are made, can have immediate and lasting effects on institutional participation... (1993:54).

It is important to acknowledge that the intention to be helpful appears to be relatively consistent throughout the university – it is the application of that good intent that seems to be ineffective or lacking. The advice is not reaching its target.

B. Phase Two: Encounter

For the purpose of this discussion, the Encounter is considered to be the first four weeks, including orientation week.

The Encounter, the actual move into the university system, will always bring new and unexpected changes, no matter how well the student believes they have prepared themselves - and as described above, many were not prepared. Nicholson describes the tasks of Encounter as being:

...developing a sense of one's competence to cope, and enjoyment in the challenge of sense making and exploration.

However there are always potential problems:

...the reality shock of encounter may be hard to handle. The stress of early experience can occasion bitter regret and a variety of defensive-coping strategies. Indeed when transitions are excessively painful in their early stages, quitting is a rational response (1990:89).

Translated into the university setting, the tasks and goals are settling into new accommodation (for some), feeling familiar with the physical environment of the university, starting to make friends and develop social networks, and coping with first lectures and tutorials.

A number of themes from the analysis of the interviews are relevant in the encounter section:

a. Orientation and the first few weeks

First encounters of any kind can be fraught with difficulty. If they go well, the decision to make a move is rewarded in a positive way. If they do not go well, it can be a major blow to a fragile ego. For the students in the study who had decided for a wide variety of reasons to enrol at the university and attend on-campus classes, the first few weeks were a very mixed bag.

Many of the students mentioned the need to 'learn the ropes'. Finding their way physically around campus was also a critical skill to be mastered - the shame of having to look at a map is not to be contemplated! The first encounter with the university, either at orientation day or at a study skills programme, has left a lasting memory for some. Sam:S1, who had thought the three orientation days meant that there would be a familiarisation programme, (even though she had done the Head Start programme) was left feeling:

Oh my gosh I'm going into it blind - and its quite overwhelming and so huge, so many people everywhere (Sam:S1).

Other comments about those first weeks:

Because I didn't know I just followed along with what everyone else did (Elizabeth:B1).

I was fortunate, the International office helped me. But still I was very lost. The campus here is much smaller than at home, but everything is so different (Anne:B1).

The whole first semester I was an absolute mess- crying and crying (Lee:S1).

It was very confusing at first, I felt lost, but we have a common room here and we go there and chat. That helped. I think Maori students are pretty well supported here (Jane:S1).

Again, these comments reinforce the very personal nature of this process, and how vivid the initial memories are. Others also talked about how helpful it was to find a small group or a couple of others to learn and explore with in the first few days and weeks.

Little asked graduates about their memories of their university experiences - and found that the results often 'cluster' around the first few weeks of college:

It is clear that the first few days and weeks on any campus are for many a 'big deal'
(Light 2001:206).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) write strongly that orientation is a crucial part of the whole university transition process, and Upcroft and Gardner (1989) echo their comments. Tinto (1993) and Gardner (1999) both describe how orientation in the USA has been extended to form whole courses, often referred to as 'University 101'. These courses take different forms but the key issue is that the provision of a good grounding into the university culture is seen to be a critical challenge for the university. McInnis ties initial experiences with expectations and academic achievement, in his 2000 work.

Another issue raised by Slee 2002, which was surfaced in my research, is that many students experience difficulties during the transition to tertiary studies because of lack of family involvement or support in the process.

He actually don't want me to go to university, because its long... and means no more part-time work - for financial problems and all that (Virginia:S2).

People like Virginia:S2 and Christina:B2, mature students with husbands, found the lack of support from home added one more stressor to be dealt with, right from the start of their university experience.

The findings from this study reinforce the literature, much of which clearly supports a focus on ensuring that the first few weeks are positive and useful, and are structured in a way that enables students to look forward with confidence to the rest of their year.

b. Early study issues

Nicholson's (1990) description of having a '*sense of one's competence to cope*' is relevant here. The school leavers (Jimmy:B1, Bob:B2, Lee:S1, Kathy:B1) felt that the study skills they had acquired in school would mostly be sufficient, but it was different for the mature students. Jane:S1 commented:

Not being at school for a very, very long time and having to learn how to write academically... that was a real challenge to learn to write, to study - it was a barrier for quite a while - in some ways it still is, but it's a learning curve (Jane:S1).

Some of the group, as already mentioned, did attend study skills programmes to try to ensure that they had the basic skills they needed. Still others, because of poor communication, missed out, not finding out about the courses in sufficient time to attend.

This critical element - the learning of study skills, and the academic expectations of the university, is commented on by Pitkethly & Prosser (2001):

The results showed strong support for the academic orientation process. Students value explanations of expectations, and explanations of the different teaching and learning methods of the university. They seek purposes and direction for their subjects and courses, valuing clear course aims and objectives. They emphasise the need for on-going academic skills support throughout their first year (2001: 190).

Satisfaction with what was offered in the courses was mixed, and considering that this is probably the students' first encounter with the academic side of the university, this was a disappointing finding. A couple of comments serve to illustrate this point:

Most of it was useful but some parts were irrelevant (Christina:B2).

There was a study skills thing in orientation week, but I didn't find them very helpful for when I actually went to class (Elizabeth:B1).

It was helpful, I'm so glad I went... but it still didn't tell you everything - not at all...a lot of the university terminology was really hard... and it was hard to ask questions (Sam:S1).

Although these courses clearly did serve a purpose, if only to provide a 'crutch ' for those with study anxiety, Tinto suggests that perhaps study skills are best embedded in the discipline specific sessions, in individual faculties:

Evidence suggests that skills are most effectively learned in a context that gives meaning to those skills as they might be required in a course situation (Tinto,1993:183).

Expectations also played a part here - a number of the students were unconcerned initially about study issues, and did struggle - perhaps because they did not realise how different study demands would be. Others, like Ruby:B2 and Sam:S1 who *were* concerned, found the initial note taking and reading easier than expected. A number of different study support options were offered during the year, and most of the students used at least one of these. Access to on-going support is discussed later.

Understanding the requirements for first assignments was also a big challenge for some in the first few weeks:

I wasn't sure I was confident in the way I was interpreting it (Sam:S1).

Referencing and stuff like that is the big one I had to learn, also picking up the way they want their essays written (Kathy:B1).

Lee:S1 felt that she understood:

They give you pretty good guidelines of what you need to do.

The thrill of a good first mark was a real boost and reinforced that Kathy:B1 had understood requirements:

I got 19/20 for the very first essay I wrote - I was so excited about that!

Eagle & McDonald (2000), reporting on mature students in a Business studies programme, confirm much of what the students in this study experienced:

There appears to be a correlation between students who indicate relatively high levels of dissatisfaction, and those who admit to lacking confidence and being unable to determine clear expectations of what was required for initial assessment. [This] suggests that teaching/learning and assessment expectations should be made extremely explicit in the first lectures (2000:5)

c. Making friends - the social context

The opportunity to make friends, develop social networks, and feel 'at home' on the campus appears to have been significantly influenced by accommodation issues, reflecting McInnis' findings:

Tinto's notion of social integration and its impact on student persistence has achieved wide spread currency in the literature on student attrition. It has been found to... operate differently for residential than 'commuter' populations. (Mcinnis et al 2000b:30).

Students like Elizabeth:B1 and Lee:S1, who lived in a university residence, found that the communal living experience gave them 'instant friends' even though at times it was frustrating:

It got to the stage after a couple of weeks that everyone knew everyone, which could be a little bit crowding, but for the first few weeks it was quite good.

Later she said

Well, I have just had an argument with them... its very hard especially when they have been drinking... because I'm working and I need my sleep. Sometime in the weekends I don't want to know them (Elizabeth:B1).

Both of them had other friends, from home, who were also at the university - this too had its positive and negative side:

My best friend is two doors down - she included me in a lot of things (Elizabeth:B1).

I consider myself kinda a social person, but some of my friends who came with me aren't, so it was kinda hard for me to branch out (Lee:S1).

Lee:S1 and Elizabeth:B1 had similar issues, but it appears that on balance they both felt that the hostel experience, in terms of the social aspects of university life, was positive.

For the rest of the students, all of whom lived off campus, it could be lonely.

Found it lonely the whole year actually... quite hard developing friendships with people (Sam:S1).

It was hard to make friends with Kiwi students - they didn't really want to know me (Anne:B1).

For Jane:S1, a key factor in feeling that she belonged was finding that there was a whanau room on campus, and meeting other mature Maori women there. This group provided her with the social contacts and friendships that she needed, and was also a group that could answer some of her study questions, even though they were in different courses.

Chickering's article (in Jacoby 2000) makes the point about commuter students:

They seldom have time to invest in extracurricular activities and social events that help them build friendships... yet we know that close working relationships with other students not only provide emotional support, but also powerfully strengthen educational gains (2000:23).

The difference in the development of effective social networks between those who live on campus and those who do not, is consistent with comments from Hemmings:

Good personal relationships are required to cope with the process of adjusting to everyday life... on campus students feel more at ease and more confident... when they have made friendships with other students. In contrast, off-campus (commuter) students felt it was important to have an outside support network (1995:3).

Krause and Duchesne (2000) make similar links, and explore the role of the university in assisting with the social aspect of transition. They link the effectiveness of social interaction with the sense of belonging to the university.

The influence of the peer group has been widely discussed in the literature as being a significant developmental influence (Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Astin 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991.). Astin explores the way in which the peer group is influential in his 1993 work, and asserts that:

The peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during undergraduate years (1993:398).

(The majority of students in Astin's four-year study were school leavers when they entered as 'freshmen' - but not all).

When one considers this link between friendship, socialisation, the peer group and academic success, the findings of writers like McInnis (1995, 2000) that there is an increasing lack of engagement with the university, become a matter of major concern.

C. Phase Three: Adjustment

The Adjustment phase of the FYE is influenced greatly by the phases that preceded it. If things do not go well at the Encounter phase and the initial few weeks are too stressful or confusing, the student may not even get to this phase of the cycle. They may 'adjust' their connection with the university by leaving.

Nicholson describes the tasks and goals of the Adjustment phase as being personal change, role development, and relationship building.

The central task of the Adjustment Phase is to achieve a consonant relationship between self and environment through self-development (personal change) and

effective innovations (role development) which improve the quality of one's work (1990:89).

In student terms, I suggest this translates to adapting to university requirements, developing a new role as a student, learning to cope with living away from home, or in changed financial circumstances, and feeling comfortable in the university environment.

The key academic tasks and goals for the student in the adjustment phase are to learn new knowledge, to come to terms with the requirements of their particular discipline, and to utilise effective study strategies. The maintenance of social networks is also important.

Unsatisfactory adjustment occurs where the only adaptation the individual is willing or able to make results in person-environment misfitting (1990:89).

In university transition, this 'misfit' would perhaps result in a student being extremely unhappy, possibly failing courses, or dropping out. A significant number of students are reported in the literature as deciding to withdraw prior to the 'Withdraw without Penalty' date - or its local equivalent (Mcinnis, 2000a; Silver & Silver, 1997; Tinto, 1993). A variety of reasons are offered for this, such as a belief that their decision to come to university was mistaken, it just had not matched up to their expectations, or that they did not feel that they 'fitted'. These factors are described as being primarily associated with the course, institution or academic preparedness (McInnis 2000b: 20).

a. *Teaching and Academic Staff Issues.*

All of the students in the study had comments to make about the way they were being taught, the resources available to them, and the interaction they had (or in some cases did not have) with the academic staff - including both lecturers and tutors.

A number of trends emerged in the interviews. Some were extremely positive, like those students who really enjoyed the opportunity for exploring new ideas, being stretched and challenged to think differently, and who found the lecture situation a good place to learn.

The same students also made the most of opportunities to talk to their lecturers about areas of uncertainty (although the reluctance to ask questions in a lecture was just about universal) and they made good use of the notes that were made available on the web, or in the library. Positive comments included:

She gets everyone involved and everyone speaks up... She's got everyone behind her every step of the way...I have really admired her as a teacher... She challenges you to think (Elizabeth:B1).

The good teacher puts it all in perspective - all the examples - this is what they mean, this is how they fit together (Lee:S1).

Sadly, negative or critical comments were more plentiful. The ones below are fairly typical:

... the course, I don't think, was very well organised and I don't think anyone really knew what they were doing... I didn't get much out of the lectures, they just kinda skimmed over the surface. (Kathy:B1).

Kathy: B1 had a number of other critical comments about the lecturers that she had encountered, but was doing well in her assignments. She commented that she was learning *in spite of everything*.

Others said:

The lecturer sucks. He goes too fast, corrects his overheads all the time, talks to himself. He's not approachable, he doesn't know what he's talking about... he doesn't have people skills really (Lee:S1).

Some of the lecturers were good at explaining things, but that was a minority... I think a lot of people were too scared to ask questions...because they didn't want to feel dumb (Sam:S1).

Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2 discussed their learning challenges with one particular lecturer at some length. This paper was a challenge for Bob:B2, but Ruby:B2 was totally out of her

depth. They suggested in the discussion that the majority of students were floundering in this particular class. Unfortunately for them, the lecturer also ran the tutorials, so they had no other source of help to enable more understanding. In addition to the fact that the content was particularly challenging, they thought the attitude of the lecturer left much to be desired, as described in detail in Chapter Four.

McInnis (1995). recognises the comments of such students and suggests:

The lack of enthusiasm of staff for teaching perceived by students is not simply a problem of individual academics: it must be countered by institutional policies including staff deployment strategies, programmes for professional development and efforts to raise the status given to leadership of teaching and learning at the first year level (1995: Sec 11:2).

Much of the literature on student persistence (Tinto, 1997; Astin,1991; Pascarella et al. 1991; McInnis 2000a, 2000b) reinforces how critical it is to have expert teachers/lecturers teaching first year students. Hargreaves et al(1998) agree and state:

It is also imperative that students experience the very best teachers in the first few weeks (1998:2).

There is ample evidence in the literature that issues such as the quality of teaching, course organisation, access to resources, and the level of difficulty of the course are closely linked to student persistence and perceptions of their initial experience. (Parkyn,1959; Jenkins, 1998; Hinton & Tickner, 2000 ; McInnis et al 2001b).

What actually constitutes 'effective' or 'quality' teaching has been the subject of discussion in academic circles for many years, and is not the brief of this study. In this particular study it is the student's *perception* of the quality of teaching that is important, and clearly it is not, for the most part, very positive. Analysis of the interview transcripts reveals that ten of the thirteen students made specific critical comments about the quality of the teaching of one or more of their lecturers. Their comments (which have been reported in the Findings chapter) are varied:

People are afraid to ask questions, I feel, in that particular subject, simply because it's like - he's very rude – “don't be stupid” kind of thing. “It's common sense”. Well, what is common sense to him isn't necessarily common sense to us. You know, like we are really stupid, or it's really easy and we should get it (Comments from both Bob:B2 and Ruby:B2).

I write down what I think he says and then he twists it and stuff - It's confusing. And the lectures and the tutorials cover different material, and the reading is different again. The exam will be interesting! (Lee:S1).

The lecturers, they are not communicating enough and they're not effective ways at all. In the first few months here, the teaching staff doesn't seem, you know, very helpful... most time he will say I'm not quite sure myself, but I say he should prepare to teach the material better (Christina:B2).

These are issues that any university has the power to change.

McInnis et al (2000b) reflect on Pascarella and Terenzini's (1980) findings that:

The degree of contact between students and faculty members, and the quality of that contact, is a strong contributor to academic and social integration and to student persistence. (McInnis et al. 2000b:30).

Sam:S1's comment reinforces this:

... they were the papers I did best in, the ones I was encouraged and helped in, and often it wasn't a lot of help... the fact that someone cared how I was getting on.

There is a good relationship between the students and the lecturers - I think it's important to have that (Jane:S1).

This need (particularly for the mature students) to form some kind of relationship with their lecturers and tutors is a recurring theme in the literature. Pitkethly & Prosser (2001) provide an example of this when they comment on the recent implementation of a First Year Experience Project at La Trobe University.

Of particular importance is the support of lecturers, tutors and other students...[there is now] extended interaction between first year students, lecturers, tutors and experienced students (2001: 190).

There was considerable positive comment from the students (in the La Trobe project) on the level of staff/student contact, and the quality of teaching. Weaknesses commented on related to lack of enrolment advice, reducing staff/student contact and lack of resources (2001:189).

Staff/student relationships are an important issue that the university cannot afford to leave to chance. Astin summarises:

These research findings suggest that curricular planning efforts will reap much greater payoffs in terms of student outcomes if we focus less on formal structure and content, and place much more emphasis on pedagogy and other features of the delivery system as well as on the broader interpersonal and institutional context in which learning takes place (1993:427).

McInnis et al.(2000b:32) suggest that the quality of instruction is more important for students in sectors of tertiary education such as the vocational area (equivalent to the Polytechnic system in New Zealand) than in the university. The findings of this study suggest otherwise – that the quality of teaching experienced by these students had a *major* impact on both their learning and their perceptions of the transition experience.

Do differences in teaching behaviour systematically influence the acquisition of subject matter knowledge by student? The answer to this question appears to be yes; and it is based on a substantial body of evidence (Pascarella 1991:94).

b. Learning issues and Assessment

Issues of learning and assessment are closely linked to the previous section.

Luka:S2 was passionate about her learning, even though she felt as though she had been on an emotional roller coaster ride. Her comments about 'mind stretching' are reported in

Chapter Four. Jane:S1 and Virginia:S2 also made very positive comments about their learning and new found knowledge.

I was enjoying it. Even though I didn't do well, I'm glad I got something in my brain. I learned a lot from the lecturers. The knowledge you know... it's really good the stuff I have learned from all the subjects (Virginia:S2).

It's actually started to open my eyes to things that were really going on, and the problems we've got in New Zealand. Just that little door opens up - just a bit - and then you keep going. I sort of see the learning thing as a door being shut on me, and then coming here...has opened it up a little bit, and I think every year its going to open a little wider (Jane:S1).

Most of the students in this study did not talk very much about the learning process, their approaches to learning, or what they had actually learned since they began their university career. These findings are similar to those of Johnston (2001) who suggests that students in their first year at university are tempted by their new found freedom and the time available to socialise or to work in paid employment. This may result in surface learning - just sufficient to pass, but not to extend them. Students in the study like Jimmy:B1 fall into this category. Elizabeth:B1 and Kathy:B1 found the demands of their subject less than they had expected, and applied their energies to other things. Johnston's comments are not relevant for most of the mature students in this study however. They worked very hard to try to meet the requirements of their courses, and understand and process their learning, despite outside distractions over which they had little control.

The students did discuss assessment, the impact of grades, the challenges of first assignments and the varying quality of the feedback they received on their assignments. One or two also had some very strong views about their discovery that the university scales marks to maintain a Bell curve of results. A number of them felt that grades were very important and they were less than satisfied with the message 'C's get degrees' that seemed to be coming from some lecturers. Others were just interested in passing, rather than failing, and that was enough for them. Response to grades is discussed in Chapter Four.

The key message from the students in relation to assessment was that there was insufficient guidance given early in the first semester, about the assignment requirements and expectations from many lecturers. Many also found it difficult to have to remember which lecturer wanted a certain assignment style, and which another. They talked about learning to play the academic games. A number bemoaned the fact that so many of the assessment events seemed to come on top of each other, making time management difficult.

Marking and feedback from the lecturers came in for considerable criticism, mainly in relation to the lack of a clear understanding about how they might have achieved a higher grade for a piece of work. A couple of students in particular (Ruby:B2 and Virginia:S2) received a very poor response when they tried to get an explanation from their lecturers about how their assignment might be improved.

These comments from the students echo the findings of Johnston (2001):

Such uncertainty is indicated in the perceived lack of clear guidelines that students report in relation to the education context. Care needs to be taken that first year students are given clear guidelines, are informed of expectations, and are provided with detailed information about examination and assessment procedures in the faculty (2001:180).

c. Use of Support services

In their 1998 article, Lee, Gelonisi, Jolly & Kench found, as McInnis had done in 1995, that students in the first semester of their course have a low usage rate of available support services. There are two important questions related to this.

- One, do students know about the available services? (are they marketed well enough?)
- Two, if they do know, why are they not using them?

Comments from some of the students in this study give us some clues to the answers. It appears that most of them knew about the availability of services, although this information

did not always reach the student in time for it to be useful (as in the case of the pre-semester study skills courses). Kathy:B1 commented that the students are:

all adults and if they need information or help, they should have sufficient initiative to find out.

What is of more concern is that some students who did use the services (in particular the health centre and the student learning centre) found them 'unhelpful', 'condescending' and 'not useful'.

When I was really sick I went to the health centre one day and of course I had to tell them my history, and they just sat there and judged me. I just got out of there. It was like they just looked down on you (name withheld).

I have rung up the counselling service once (a few weeks ago) because one of my friends... she got really messed up... they said they were understaffed but they would get back to me... but they haven't. She ended up dropping out (name withheld).

Really they were hopeless [student learning centre] I went for help and wrote my name down but I never heard from them (Virginia:S2).

I went for help for xx, but to speak frank I am not satisfied about it (Christina:B2).

I did what I thought was right and what I was supposed to do, and took it to the learning centre... but I got it back and I didn't do well. So that was confusing, because I so thought I'd done a good job. Actually relying on my own ability would have been better - I haven't been back. (Sam:S1).

Some students certainly found these same services to be excellent, helpful and worthwhile:

Peer tutors yeah, actually they were pretty good, they helped with what you needed (Kathy:B1).

The learning centre - yes I have been there a couple of times actually... they were really helpful... but only for some subjects - I had to pay for private help for two of my courses (Hannah:S2).

Perception of service is a very individual issue, but bad news travels fast, and if some students are not receiving the help they need, the word gets around very quickly. For example, Elizabeth:B1 commented that she had not used the learning centre, partly because her friend had been for help and found what was on offer 'too easy' and not at all what he needed. She did not feel they would be able to help her with her problems.

In particular, when many new undergraduate students are struggling to come to terms with academic life and the demands of university study, it seems self evident that learning centres have a major role to play, and they must play it as well as they possibly can. It would appear that the learning centres in this study are not always able to meet the needs of the students (even when those requests fall within the normal brief of the centre). If funding for support services is inadequate, this is again an issue that is within the power of the university to rectify.

D. Phase Four: Stabilisation

The goals and tasks of this phase in the cycle, as described by Nicholson, are:

... personal and organisational effectiveness... sustained commitment and effectiveness with tasks and people... to realise the potential in their roles (1990:89).

At this stage the student might be expected to be making plans for the second year - looking for accommodation, enrolling in papers, and securing their employment.

Nicholson suggests that *under achievement and failure* are the most obvious signs of problems at this stage.

It is tempting to argue that in fact reaching the point of stabilisation is unlikely in the first year. Other than the instrumental evidence of reasonable grades, what else might lead us to consider the student has reached the point of *effectiveness with tasks and people*?

How many of the students put study ahead of family, so that the family and home suffered (like Jane:S1, Vanessa and Christina:B2); put social aspects of their lives first, like Jimmy:B1; or found that work took up too much valuable study time, like Lee:S1? Should we expect that these students will reach 'personal and organisational effectiveness' (or its equivalent in the educational environment of balance between life, work and study) in first year?

I suggest it is possible that there is a Stabilisation phase in first year that has slightly different characteristics from those described by Nicholson. It could be suggested that students who have managed the transitions most successfully will feel settled and happy in their new environment during this phase, be able to juggle paid work, study and a social life effectively, and pass all of their papers.

This is an area of the transition to university study that would benefit from further research. Many of the writers cited in this study have discussed unsuccessful transitions and attrition at some length. There appears to have been little research regarding the key components of successful transitions.

a. *Dropping out and 'hanging in there'*

Despite the setbacks and challenges that many of the study group had faced during the year, they were all still attending class at the time they were interviewed in the middle of the second semester. They reported though, that a number of their classmates had withdrawn, changed courses, or simply disappeared.

As described in the Findings chapter, many of them had felt like dropping out at some stage during the year, but for a variety of reasons they had decided to stay. Two of the three

students who did not have English as their first language had certainly struggled academically. Virginia:S2 had failed all her papers, and Anne:B1 had failed two of the four. However, neither of them had any intention of pulling out. This persistence would not have surprised McInnis:

Students from non-English speaking backgrounds experienced below average success but low attrition rates, indicating... a high motivation to stay enrolled. (McInnis et al 2000b: 21).

There is a plethora of material that investigates retention and attrition during university study, and some of the major works in this area have been referred to numerous times in this discussion. (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1991; McInnis, 2001a). I acknowledge that there is much to learn in this area of investigation, but it is not discussed in any further depth in this study.

b. Looking Forward

I believe that it is important to help students who have 'survived' the first year to recognise and value the strategies that they have developed. They have certainly achieved in some measure in the academic sense, but have also learned to learn, and learned to cope with all the changes and wide variety of situations that they have had to face. Perhaps these strategies can be adapted to the challenges they face as they make the next transition - into second year and be harnessed to assist the next group of first years that will follow them into university life.

The final question that I asked each of them was *'what advice do you have for the university, to help the next group of students who will follow you?'*

Some of the answers to this are to be found in Chapter Four, and have been discussed in the final chapter, Conclusions and Recommendations.

5.3 The political/economic/social context affects the first year experience

The political changes described in Chapter Two have impacted in a number of ways on the tertiary education system.

I have repeated below the summary from La Roque (2000) that is to be found in the Literature review. Now that many of the issues for the students have been described, it is interesting to review this list and see how these changes have impacted directly on the students' experience.

[Comments on La Rocque's list are interspersed throughout, and are not in italics].

- *An entrenched position that Education is a privilege not a right, and has a cost which should be born substantially by the individual, not the State*

Nine of the thirteen students in this study have Student Loans, most have part time jobs to pay for their fees and living expenses as described below. *74% of full time students borrowed through the Student Loan Scheme in 1999 (Anderson 2001a).*

- *Increased competition from a large number of alternative tertiary education providers*
- *This competitive approach persists despite the current Labour Government urging tertiary providers to embrace a co-operative approach.*

The lack of co-operation between tertiary institutions, and the competition for student fees, meant that the students did not always receive the most helpful academic advice (see notes about Virginia:S2 and Hannah:S2).

- *Increased access to tertiary education made possible by changes in government funding. (More places are now funded, although at a lower dollar level per Equivalent Full Time Student- EFTS. Between 1980 and 1999 Dollars per EFTS fell by an annual rate of 2.3% or by 36% in total*

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of participation in tertiary education among OECD countries. In 1999, 32% of school leavers from low decile (1-2) schools went on to tertiary education (Anderson 2001a). Clearly not all of those students came to university, but it is likely that some of those who did are not as well prepared academically as the university lecturers might wish (and expect).

- *Internationalisation of the student body*

Large numbers of international student are coming to New Zealand tertiary institutions, and many institutions are not yet ready to cope with the demands that this new group of students place on them.

- *Increasing numbers of mature students commencing university studies*

As stated earlier in this work, more than half of the total number of students enrolling in the university in this study in 2001 were mature-age students (and 8 of the 13 students interviewed in this study). This mature-age group has different needs from the school leavers, they are usually 'commuter' students, and education is only one part of their multi-faceted lives.

- *Growing expectations of research 'outputs' from academic staff. Teaching in the university sector does not have high status*

Issues discussed above about 'who teaches the first years' are very relevant here. If teaching is indeed not seen as having high status, then the most experienced lecturers are more likely to be seen teaching at the senior levels of the university, and to be involved in funded research. This will impact directly on the quality of teaching experienced by first year undergraduate students

- *Increased societal expectation of the need for tertiary qualifications*

Students enter tertiary education for many reasons, but increasingly it appears that they are focussed on outcomes, and job prospects, rather than in depth exploration of the learning opportunities available to them

- *An increased expectation on the universities to provide 'value for money' and to be accountable for the quality of their academic programmes*

Students in this study who complained about the quality of the teaching they received, or the feedback on their assignments, or the support that they felt they needed but did not get, may be indicative of this expectation to receive value for money. However 'value for money' was not specifically mentioned by any of them.

- *An awareness that, as participation becomes more universal, issues of quality assurance become greater.*

All of these changes have been shown by the preceding discussion to affect, in some cases quite directly, the experiences of the students in this study. These concerns are echoed by James:

The student population is not only more diverse following the massification of higher education, but also more consumer minded. Students have their own preferences for content, scheduling and assessment. Their expectations of university life and study are changing and these in turn are helping shape the day-to-day responses of universities and academics. (James, 2001:102).

a. *Employment opportunities affect course choices*

The economic environment certainly has an impact on the courses that students choose to enrol in. The likely availability of jobs in a particular sector will influence student choice. However, the reasons that students make the course choices that they do are far more complex than simply the state of the economy. It is an interesting area for study but was not the focus of this research.

Most of the students in this study chose their courses because they felt that either directly or indirectly they would have much better job prospects at the end. At least one, Elizabeth:B1, was quite open about the fact that she did not pursue her real interest - History - but instead went into Business Studies because she felt the job prospects were so much better.

Decisions about course choices are also influenced by academic advice available at the time of enrolment, and this too has been shown in this study and others (Tinto, 1993; McInnis, 2000) to be inadequate at times.

c. Funding issues impact on the need for students to generate income, and impacts on their 'connection' with the university

Despite re-reading the interview transcripts a number of times, and actively looking for clues, I found little evidence that the students in this study felt part of, or integrated with, the university. This question was not asked specifically in the interview. However by the time that these interviews were conducted, one might have expected to find some indications that the experiences of the past few months had left the students with a feeling of belonging to the university, or at the very least, the college in which they were studying.

They were certainly feeling more comfortable, understood more about academic conventions, and what was required of them, but that appeared to be the limit of their connection. Perhaps this real connection does not occur until the students are in their second or later year? This suggestion would not surprise McInnis:

In Australia the number of full time students undertaking part-time work is on the rise, and the number of hours they work is growing. (McInnis, James et al. 2000). Engagement with the university has become a matter for negotiation for many students. (James, 2001: 102).

The need to have paid work is one factor that leads to lack of 'connection' with the university

There is concern about the significant proportion of students whose connection with university is limited by the amount of time they spend in part-time employment in order to support themselves through university (McInnis & James, 1995).

It is not the only factor that leads to a lack of connection. The fact that the students in this study were almost all 'commuter' students (only two lived in hostels on site) may also be

significant. They are attending university in their hometown, many of them, and have lives, friends and family outside the university walls. This is an issue that concerns McInnis in his 2000 report - something he describes in the conclusion:

A growing number of students are becoming increasingly disengaged from the university experience and expecting it to fit into their lives rather than vice-versa. (2000:62).

Certainly there is evidence in the literature (Silver & Silver, 1997; McInnis, 1995, 2000) that the university as a community is changing, both for academics and students, along with the changes in the economy and society in general.

5.4 Conclusion

A number of questions arise from this discussion of the findings in this study. Some of the most important of these are

- if these experiences - many of which are not positive for the students - are pretty well universal, why are they still happening? Academics have been writing about these challenges for years, and still the issues are not resolved
- Are the challenges insurmountable?
- Has this particular university been less than enthusiastic in its approaches to the FYE? (If so, it is not alone)
- Clearly for some the transition is a huge stumbling block, whilst for others, it is relatively smooth sailing - how can a 'good' transition be achieved?
- What can the university do to address these issues?
- What is the university's role in assisting this transition and how much is up to the student?

The proposition was made at the beginning of this chapter that the transition experience is a personal one, therefore not all of the remedies for the challenges of transition can be laid at the door of the university. Individuals planning to enrol in university also have to take some responsibility for their transition. However, they will not know what they need to know unless someone takes the opportunity to help them identify the questions, and the challenges, that they might be addressing before they arrive at the university on day one, and during the encounter phase.

Some recommendations and suggestions in relation to the specific findings and issues raised by this study are made in the final chapter.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations

6.0 Introduction

In a paper delivered at the FYE Conference in Christchurch in July 2002, I discussed the possible use of Nicholson's (1990) Transition Cycle Model to provide a framework for the findings from the research (mentioned in Chapter 3). The abstract to that paper contained these lines:

From the excitement of 'mind stretching' challenges, to the depths of feeling stupid, out of place and inept; from failing all but one paper, to the excitement of the first 'A', and beyond, these students have had quite a year (Purnell, 2002)

Now, as the end of this project is in sight, these words still ring true.

Bob:B2's comment, mentioned in the introduction, that:

You feel like you're calm and composed on the surface but paddling like hell underneath...

could be applied to most of the students in this study. However, they all survived to the end of the year, and most of them achieved academic success. The Discussion Chapter has explored areas where the findings from the student interviews reflected the writings from overseas, or in some cases contradicted it. Mostly it would appear that, as I have argued, the student's experience of transition is an individual one, and no major course or site similarities have been detected in the study.

The role of the university in the transition is crucial, and the section that follows offers some recommendations that may help to ensure that the university studied in this thesis has the opportunity to improve the first year experience for its students.

The university is not the only 'player' in this process, and I have demonstrated that government legislative changes also play a part. These factors however, are not within the control of the individual, or the students. The responsibility of the individual student in the

process cannot be overlooked either, and more research is indicated, particularly in the area of assisting mature-age and international students to make the transition more smoothly. Strategies to help the individuals who form these broader groupings will be welcomed by many.

The title for this thesis comes from Nicholson (1990). He suggests that in the Encounter stage:

... the individual needs a map, a bicycle, and good weather. 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).

The information gathered in this study suggests that the first year students at the university have reasonably good access to bicycles, but the weather is unpredictable and variable, and accurate and well-defined maps are sometimes lacking.

Nicholson does not clearly define what he means by 'maps'. I suggest that maps can mean a number of different things in this context. They include:

- Advice in a variety of contexts: academic, personal and financial; as well as assessment guidelines, study skills assistance, resources
- Guidelines for navigation: people in roles of support for students such as Student Associations and Student Services
- 'Tour guides': mentors, students and staff both general and academic, who have information about 'how things work around here'

6.1 Conclusions

A number of conclusions may be drawn from the work in the preceding chapter, and they reflect the propositions made. The main conclusions that could be addressed by the university 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.

What can the university do about this?

6.2 Recommendations: To be addressed by the University

The work of Nicholson (1990) suggests that there is at least one more step. His Transition Cycle Model (Appendix 2) has two more cycles around the four Phases - Strategies and Remedies, and The Role of Management Systems. I have taken the liberty of condensing these to one cycle, which I will use in the following recommendations, to examine the possible role of the university at each phase.

These recommendations come only from the information described in this study, and already discussed in the previous chapter. There is as much international literature about possible strategies and the role of university in the transition period, as there is about attrition, retention, and the effect of the university on the student.

The literature that informs this final part of the thesis comes mainly from Australia and New Zealand, (apart from Silver & Silver, and Nicholson’s work, which are both from the

United Kingdom). I have not used the American literature for the recommendations, since, as I have already discussed, their tertiary education system is so different from that of New Zealand.

The model of the Transition Cycle (Fig 2) suggests some of the key roles that might be played by the university at each phase of the cycle. Other relevant strategies can be found in the literature – these are suggestions that are also supported by the findings in this thesis.

The role of the university in relation to the Transition Cycle

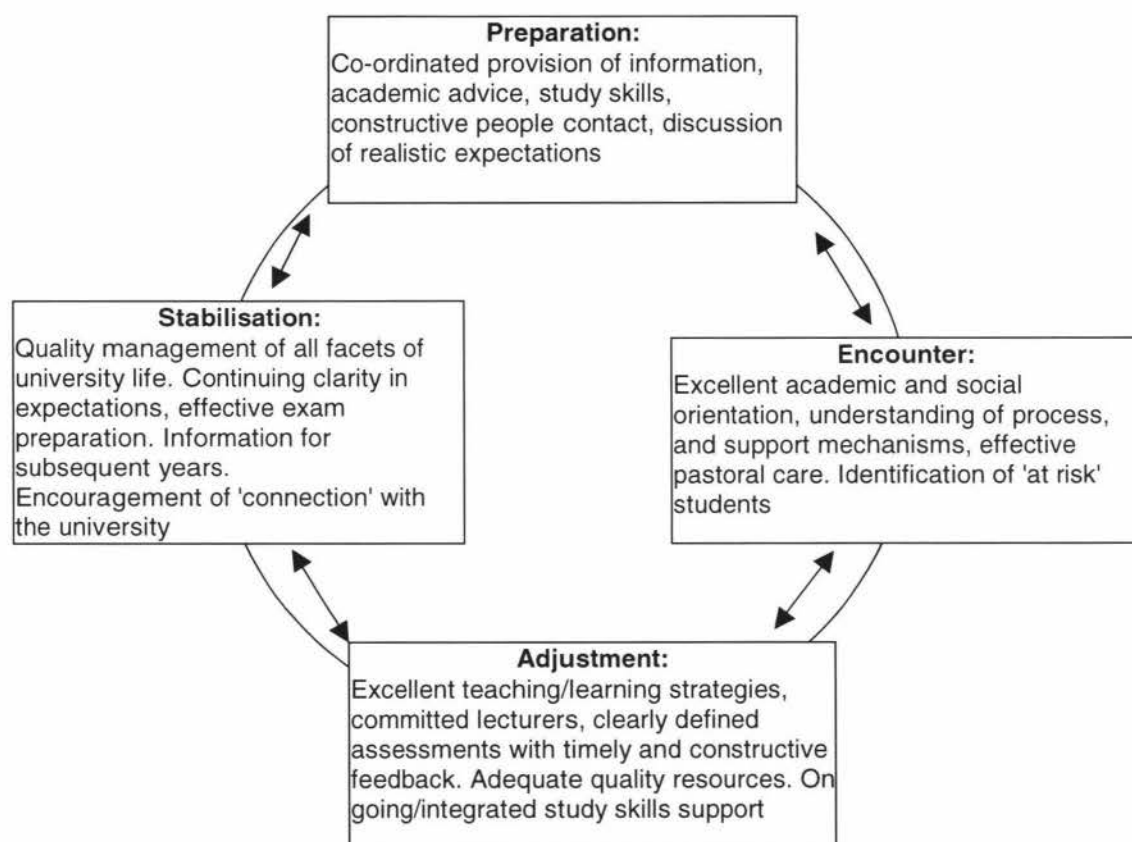


Figure 2. The Role of management systems around the transition cycle [adapted from Nicholson (1990)]

All of the suggestions made below are offered on the assumption that research is used to underpin all new strategies. The volume of research-based literature that is available

should mean that the university does not have to completely 're-invent the wheel'. It is however critical that the university also undertakes its own funded research, both specifically targeted on groups such as mature-age or international students, as well as broader based longitudinal studies.

It is also important to state that in some areas of the university, moves have already been made to implement some of the recommendations made but without the overall co-ordination and sharing of best practice between departments, colleges or sites, that is critical for wider success

6.1.1 Phase One: Preparation

The role of the university in this phase is concerned with information giving, accurate paper descriptions, and assistance with enrolment, study skills and orientation.

Recommendations:

- Simplify written enrolment information, ensure all contact staff have adequate information to guide students, refer queries to appropriate staff, and are customer focused
- Identify academic staff in all disciplines willing to provide academic advice to mature age and other students
- Make available information about university life, not just courses and career options
- Co-ordinate academic and social orientation planning, involve multidisciplinary teams
- Continue to provide, and advertise more widely, study skills and 'university survival' programmes to give first year students the best opportunity to succeed early in their university experience

6.1.2 Phase Two: Encounter

The first few weeks of university life, when the Encounter phase takes place, are probably the most crucial time for influencing the students' perception of the transition. Because it is such a vital time, there is huge potential for the University to find out what would make a substantial difference, and enable students to have real confidence in their ability to cope. Many of our first year students are coming from the workforce, or from managing a home, they are used to change, multi-tasking, decision making and the like. How do we help them to put these skills to good use in a different environment?

Recommendations

- Ensure students are aware of on-going support services, and that the services are user friendly
- Establish a system that identifies and assists 'at risk' students. For example, the one used at Monash University, described in detail on their website at:
<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/transition/program/faculty-packages.html>
- Ensure that there is adequate support for mature-age, international and other identified groups such as Maori students
- Encourage student study groups (encouraged by academics, formed and maintained by the students)
- Provide positive initial learning environments
- Support and value the academic staff who teach in first year classes and provide appropriate staff development for them

6.1.3 Phase Three: Adjustment

At this stage the university must be seen to deliver on promises of a high quality education, and a positive learning environment. This will rely on the skills and abilities of every staff member, as well as all of the systems that it has in place for quality assurance and assessment.

Recommendations

- Provide excellent teaching for first year classes and integrate study advice and strategies into all teaching at first year.
- Ensure adequate resources are available. Continue to offer staff development opportunities particularly for those teaching at first year
- Provide clear, unambiguous assignment/assessment requirements and constructive feedback
- Encourage student participation in non-academic university activities (acknowledging that for part time and /or ‘commuter’ students this may not be possible)

6.1.4 Phase Four Stabilisation

The specific role of the University in this Phase is unclear, since it has yet to be determined whether or not this phase generally occurs in first year. However, continued support, high quality teaching and learning, appropriate feedback, and co-ordinated student services are clearly critical at all stages.

Recommendations

- Maintain quality teaching/learning environment
- Provide on going study support towards exam technique within the discipline areas
- Provide information, advice and guidance for enrolment in subsequent years study

6.2 Suggestions for further research

This study had constraints of time, funding and scope (only two sites and two colleges were involved) that were imposed by a Masters thesis, and there were low final participant numbers. Acknowledging these constraints, the question now is - what further research is needed in this area?

There is scope for further institution-based research in the first year experience/transition area in the university studied here.

Some suggested areas for further exploration are:

- A longitudinal study of a cohort of students through all three (or four) years of a degree programme to ascertain the effects of the first year experience on subsequent years of study
- Research into the balance of individual and 'course cohort specific' experiences
- The effect/impact of the university experience for different kinds/groups of students
- The impact of pre-university expectations on subsequent undergraduate experience
- The components of successful transition - how will we know success when we see it? Is successful completion of a course of study the best or only measure?
- The impact of the economic/social environment on the academic advice given to students, and student decision making
- Classroom based research on teaching excellence - what do the best lecturers do?
- Perceptions and expectations of academic staff, regarding their role/s with first year students (for example, how might they respond to the suggestion of implementing a mentor scheme, linking one staff member with a small number of students?)
- Would a staff/student mentor scheme be appropriate for this university? How might it be developed supported and evaluated?
- To what extent do departments see themselves as teaching communities, rather than or as well as, disciplinary communities?

6.3 Conclusion

This study has explored the experience of a small group of students as they made the transition to university in 2001. The findings suggest that although the university is doing a reasonable job, there is plenty of room for improvement. There is a real need for better weather (a climate of psychological safety and support) and a much-improved map (guidance, advice, clarity of explanations). Further research and some targeted change strategies have been suggested that may well be able to provide both.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Ethics Application³

XXX UNIVERSITY HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF PROPOSED TEACHING/RESEARCH
PROCEDURES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

APPLICANT: Sue Purnell. [REDACTED]
Department: Social and Policy Studies in Education
College of Education
Status: Lecturer and Masterate Student
Name of Employer: XXX University

PROJECT:
Title: But what is it really like? An exploration of the experiences of
First Year Students in a New Zealand University
Status: For Masterate thesis
Funding Source Student Support
Clinical Trial? NO

ATTACHMENTS: Contact memo, Information sheets, Consent forms,
Questionnaires, Confidentiality agreement (transcriber)

SUPERVISORS: Alison Viskovic: MUCE, Department of Social and Policy Studies
in Education, Wellington Campus
Graham Collins: MUCE, Department of Social and Policy
Studies in Education Hokowhitu Campus

SIGNATURES:
Applicant _____
Supervisors _____

Date _____

³ Throughout this Ethics application a number of details have been removed to protect the anonymity of the university

But what is it *really* like? - an exploration of the experiences of First Year students in a New Zealand university

Student Researcher - Sue Purnell
[REDACTED]

DESCRIPTION

Justification

For many students the transition to University is a major period of change in their lives. Students entering tertiary study for the first time appear to have concerns which range from study and academic skills to financial pressures, family and community demands, peer pressure to socialise, and coping with living away from home. Clearly they all experience and deal with them in quite different ways.

The purpose of this study is to try to understand the myriad of things that happen to students and the ways in which they respond and cope with them as they undertake their first year of tertiary education. Once data has been analysed and themes emerge, it is hoped to develop a model for the First Year Experience, relevant to New Zealand, which can be trialled at XXX University at the beginning of 2004

Objectives

To analyse:

1. How students describe their first year experiences as students at XXX University.
2. The events that students experience in their first year at University that they consider to be significant.
3. The support networks and services that are available for students (eg Student Associations, Learning centres, Lecturer assistance etc).

Beginning Questions

- What were students' expectations of the university, and university study?
- What financial/social/academic pressures impact on the first year experience?
- What support services are available, and were they utilised?
- What factors do the students perceive to be most significant in their decision to continue study, or to leave after the first year?

Procedures for Recruiting Participants and Obtaining Informed Consent

This study will examine the experiences of first year students in degree programmes at two Sites of XXX University, and will also investigate the support mechanisms and services available on each campus.

Students

An approach will be made to the Pro Vice Chancellors of two Colleges at XXX University, requesting permission to study the experiences of the students for whom they are responsible. I will request permission to survey and interview students in the Two degrees - Business and Social Sciences. [These two degrees are suggested because they are a) very different from each other, and b) offered on both campuses. A final decision has yet to be made].

At the end of the first semester, first year students in both degrees on both campuses will be sent an initial invitation explaining the study, and its purpose, and asking them to indicate interest in participating.

The initial form will ask for details of

- Age,
- Gender
- Address/contact details
- Living at home/flatting/hostel
- Highest school qualification
- Previous university study (this would exclude them from the study)
-

Once these have been received, 12 -15 students will be selected from each course, and each site to be part of the study. (This allows for some attrition, a minimum of 10 per course/per campus is desirable). If a large number offer, the participants will be chosen to try to get representation from a varied group - age, gender, living on campus, at home or in a flat.

Staff

Lecturing and administration staff, student support services and students association representatives will be approached directly, by mail. They will be selected by virtue of the position they hold on campus. They will be invited to participate, sent an information sheet and to complete a consent form. The information sheet has a selection of questions that they will be asked, about the services they offer to incoming students, and also what they believe to be significant factors in the first year experience of students at XX university
[Researchers note: This stage of the research was not utilised in this study.]

Procedures in which Research Participants will be involved

STUDENTS

Students will be requested to participate, and asked to complete the questionnaire on the invitation form.

Those who agree and are selected will then be sent
a detailed information sheet and
a consent form

Students will not be surveyed until the second semester to give them time to settle in

The 40 students who are selected will have seen on the information sheet a selection of questions to get them thinking about the issues that I would like to discuss in the focus groups.

Focus group interviews (about 5 students in each) will be the primary method of talking with students, in the hope that the process will stimulate memories and ideas

The interviews will be tape-recorded (with signed permission), and will use semi-structured questions. Questions are likely to start with:

- Can you remember the beginning of the year? How were you feeling?
- What did you think the year might hold for you?
- What kind of support did you think you might need?
- How did you find out about what would be provided to help you
- Can you describe some of your key events of the year so far?
- What were the highs and lows, or any major issues for you?

Although a list of issues to be covered will be prepared before the interview, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) suggests that it is better to follow the line the interview is taking, and bring in questions as they become appropriate, rather than following a predetermined sequence. The suggested headings for discussion are

- Social & Relationships
- Family
- Academic skills
- Teaching and learning events
- Financial
- Workload
- Physical environment

NB If students drop out during the year, and I am informed, I will interview them to try to ascertain the key incidents and their experiences of those incidents, which have lead to them leaving, since this is highly relevant to the study.

Once material from the focus group interviews is analysed it is likely that some areas will need expansion or clarification. Students from the original groups will be re-contacted (only if they have indicated their willingness to continue their involvement) and asked (either in a questionnaire or short face to face interviews) a further set of clarifying questions which will have emerged from the data.

Allied and Academic staff

The key focus of this study is the students. However, background information is critical to developing the larger picture.

Administration, student services and students association staff, as well as lecturing staff who teach first year papers will be sent information sheets and asked to sign a consent

form. *[Researchers note: This stage of the research was not utilised in this study.]* Later in the second semester, they will be sent a questionnaire asking them to describe briefly their role in relation to support for first year students, and any suggestions they might have for improving the transition from work or school to university. They can either fill in the questionnaire or ask to discuss their responses with the researcher

They will also be given the opportunity to participate in the development of the model if they wish, and to comment on the model once it has been developed

Procedures for handling information and material produced in the course of the research including raw data and final research report(s)

- All records relevant to the study will be kept away from the University locked in a filing cabinet in the researcher's home.
- If it becomes necessary to employ a person to transcribe the interview tapes, or notes, that person will be required to sign confidentiality form prior to commencing the transcribing. Once tapes are transcribed they will be locked away in the same way as any other documentation
- No original documents will be accessible to anyone other than the researcher or her supervisors without the written consent and express permission of the student or students involved
- Email contact will be to the researcher's home email contact address, to minimise any possible interception or accidental viewing by staff or interested parties.
- The only contact between the researcher and the staff in the School/Department will be at the initial stages of the project, gaining access permission, other than those who choose to complete a questionnaire.
- Only the researcher and her two Supervisors will have access to any of the unpublished material (other than individual tape transcripts)

Procedures for sharing information with Research Participants

- Tapes transcriptions will be shown to the participants concerned, to ensure that they are an accurate record of the discussion
- Participants will be consulted, if they wish, at the final stage in the development of the model for improving the experience of the first year students
- A summary of the findings will be sent to participants
- The final report will be made available to the participants to read, and will be lodged in the Massey University Library.

Arrangements for storage and security, return, disposal or destruction of data

- All documents will be held securely at the home of the researcher, and destroyed three years after completion of the final report.
- Documents will be shredded and tapes destroyed or returned to the student concerned.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Access to Participants

- The initial approach to students has been through the Pro Vice Chancellors. They have given their consent in principle, and have identified appropriate people who will help to make contact with students. The researcher will have no direct access to the students at this stage, and will receive details only from those people who wish to participate in the project. The students will therefore self select initially, and be voluntary participants.
- Non-student participants will be selected by virtue of their position, approached directly, by mail, and invited to participate.

Informed Consent

- At the time of the initial contact all potential participants will be informed of the reasons for the study and the likely impact for them in terms of time commitments.
- Participants will be given detailed information sheets and asked to read them before signing the consent form. There is a statement in all of the consent documentation that a participant may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- The format for the gaining of informed consent is included.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

- Confidentiality at all stages will be assured to the best of the researchers ability, and strategies for managing all of the documentation will be explained in detail to those who choose to participate.
- All participants will be allocated a research study number, and/or a pseudonym, which will be used throughout the study. These pseudonyms will be used when the report is written, whenever the participants' comments are referred to, and the only person to hold a list of the real names and pseudonyms will be the researcher. They will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.
- Tapes and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet away from the University.
- If it becomes necessary to employ a person to transcribe the interview tapes, or notes, that person will be required to sign confidentiality form prior to commencing the transcribing.
- Confidentiality statements will be included on all documents received by the participants.
- **Potential Harm to Participants**
I do not believe that there is any potential harm to the student participants as long as confidentiality is maintained.
- Where non-student participants are involved, they may be identifiable by the information they provide. However, the majority of what they will be asked to share will be publicly available material anyway, and anything else will be their opinions,

which they are aware may be published in the study. I do not see cause for concern here.

Potential Harm to Researcher(s)

- There is no potential for harm to the researcher

Potential Harm to the University

- There is minimal potential for harm to the University. In fact I am hopeful that the results of the study will be interesting and useful, and lead to positive outcomes for first year students at XXX University in the future

Participant's Right to Decline to Take Part

- All students receive, as part of the information at the beginning of the study, a clear statement that participation is entirely voluntary and that they may leave the study at any time.
- They also have to right to decline to take part, and self select at the very beginning.
- Participants may ask for the tape to be turned off at any point in the interview, or decline to ask individual questions
- The information sheet and consent form carry the statement "*I am aware that I may contact Sue or her supervisors, at any time if I have concerns about any part of the project. I may withdraw, without penalty, at any time should I wish to do so. I am also aware that, due to the nature of the project, if I leave the course before the end of the year, Sue would like to interview me. I know that I am not obliged to participate in this interview unless I wish to do so.*"

Uses of the Information

- Transcripts of interviews will be sent back to the interviewees to check for accuracy, and to ensure that the participants feel that they have been represented correctly.
- The questionnaires will involve repeated readings of questionnaires and transcripts from each participant or focus group, and also comparable sections from all the students. Clear themes should emerge. They are likely to be a mix of some from the original questions, as well as those generated by the students.
- Once the themes are decided, sections of all the data can be allocated to those themes
- Analysis of all the material allocated to any theme can then be made, in order to identify concepts and categories, which are in turn, used to describe the main aspects reported by the students
- Material gained from allied and academic staff will be used to background and complement other information.
- The categories allow the differences and similarities between students to be examined and described
- The report is likely to contain numerous examples of student comments and perceptions, reported verbatim, and although to a certain extent the reader will be left to draw their own inferences, there will be a comprehensive concluding section developed by the researcher.

- The main work in analysis is to define the concepts and categories that appear to have the greatest bearing on the students' perception of their first year.
- A model, outlining
 - possible protocols to be considered when decisions are made and
 - An outline of suggestions for services will be included in the final thesis report. It is hoped that this model will be utilised in a trial in either on of the University sites or in one College, in early 2003.

Conflict of Interest/Conflict of Roles

As a lecturer in Adult Education, I work with the lecturers who are responsible for the teaching of our students.

This relationship between the work that I do and the study that I wish to undertake has some potential for conflict in terms of power balance. If, for example, the students raise serious concerns about the conduct, ability or interpersonal skills of a lecturer with whom I am working, this may create a difficult situation, since I have some power to act to change things.

However, I believe that my role as a researcher in the situation requires that I counsel the student or students to approach the lecturer directly. I must endeavour to maintain a professional approach and distance between my distinct roles of *lecturer in education*, and *student/researcher*.

Other Ethical Concerns

I do not believe that there are any other issues that have ethical implications

Legislation

Privacy Act 1997

I believe that this is the only legislation that is pertinent to this study

It is dealt with anywhere that rights of the participants and confidentiality are mentioned

Intellectual Property legislation

e.g. Copyright Act 1994

Anywhere that material from another source is used, full acknowledgement will be given

Human Rights Act 1993

As far as I can ascertain, there are no areas in this study which are likely to infringe this legislation

Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992

There are no Health or Safety issues in this study

Accident Rehabilitation Compensation Insurance Act 1992

As far as I can ascertain, there are no areas in this study which are likely to infringe this legislation

Employment Relations Act 2000

As far as I can ascertain, there are no areas in this study which are likely to infringe this legislation

CULTURAL CONCERNS

At this stage in the study, I am not aware of any specific area that might give rise to concern in the cultural area. Since students will self-select, and the questions will be open-ended to allow maximum personal discretion, I do not anticipate problems. However, Mana Cracknell, who works in the Department of Social and Policy Studies of Massey University College of Education, has agreed to assist me if Maori cultural issues do arise. If concerns arise from people of other cultures I will ask my Supervisors to suggest appropriate approaches.

List of Appendices

Appendix 1.1	Invitation to Students to participate
Appendix 1.2	Participant Information sheet
Appendix 1.3	Student Consent form
Appendix 1.4	Transcriber confidentiality agreement
Appendix 1.5	Letter to College Pro Vice Chancellors
Appendix 1.6	Request for Letters

NB Some of the documents prepared for the Ethics Committee approval have been removed, as they referred to a second phase of the study which did not take place because of time constraints.

Appendix1.1: Invitation to Participate

An invitation to participate in a study of Student First Year Experiences at XXX University

My name is Sue Purnell, I am one of the XXX University College of Education staff based in XXX. I am completing a Masters Degree in Education (Adult Education) and am doing this study for my Thesis. My thesis work will study the experiences of first year students at XXX university, on two Sites.

I am looking for degree students in their first year to participate in a study of student experiences in the first year of tertiary education. The aim of the study is to try to find out

- what students experience in their first year, both inside and outside of the classroom
- what challenges they faced, what strategies they used to cope
- what, if any, formal support services they used.

All details will be strictly confidential, reporting will be anonymous, and you would be free to withdraw from the study at any time

If you would be interested in participating in the project, or want to learn more about it, please complete the attached slip and return it by internal mail (take to any Department office and put it in their 'out' box) **BY FRI JULY 27th PLEASE**

To Sue Purnell,
College of Education
XXX University

or contact Sue by email [REDACTED] with your details.

✂ -----Name
Age ____ M / F
Address _____
Degree _____
programme _____ Campus _____
Are you living in: Hostels/ a Flat/ /at Home? Other? _____
Contact Details; Phone _____ Mobile _____
Email address _____
Highest School Qualification _____
Previous University/Polytechnic study Yes _____ No _____
I understand that indicating my interest in this study does not *commit* me to taking part, however I
would like to Find out more about it _____ Participate in the study _____
Signed _____
©Thank you for expressing an interest in the study. I will contact you shortly.

Appendix 1.2: Participant Information Sheet

Research project
**But what is it *really* like? An exploration of the experiences of first year students at a
New Zealand University**
Researcher - Sue Purnell

Participant Information Sheet -please keep this

Introduction

My name is Sue Purnell and I am completing my Masterate in Education (Adult Education) at Massey University in Wellington. The research I am about to undertake will complete my study and result in a Thesis document, which will be available to participants and be housed in the Mssey University Library. I am a lecturer in the College of Education, based in XXX. During the study I will maintain confidentiality at all times. Information gathered from interviews and questionnaires will only be available to me and my two supervisors, Alison Viskovic and Graham Collins. No information will be passed on to staff in your area of study or made available to them in any way.

The Study - what is involved?

If you choose to participate this study will involve you in the following ways:

- Please complete an informed consent form - attached to this information sheet.
- You will be asked to write an email or a letter, as if writing to a friend, telling them all about your first semester at XXX (this could be a poem if you wish!)
- You will be asked to join a small group of people (about 5) in a focus group interview in August/September that will last between an hour, and an hour and a half. [You may be interviewed individually if you wish]. A short list of questions on page 2 of this sheet may get you thinking about your experiences this year, in preparation for this
- With your permission, the interview/s will be tape-recorded (you can ask for the tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.) A transcript of the tape will be made available to you to check for accuracy
- You will be asked if you would *like* to:
 - Be available for a follow up interview should one be necessary
 - Be part of a process of developing a model for the first year experience. This would occur later in 2002. **Neither of these extras are compulsory.**
- This is all the involvement that is required.
- At the completion of the project, the researcher will use the material to write a Master's Thesis. The material may also be used to write articles or book chapters for publication and/ or for conference papers. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

Your rights as part of the study group

- This study has been approved by the XXX University Human Research and Ethics Committee, and you may access the Chairperson of the Committee, XXX at anytime if you have concerns.

- You may contact me, or either of my Supervisors at anytime if you have concerns about any part of the project
- You may withdraw, without penalty, at anytime during the study if you wish to do so. If you leave the University during the study I should like to interview you, but you are not obliged to participate in that interview unless you choose to.
- If you wish to have whanau support at the interview, you are welcome to do so
- Your comments may be quoted in full in the report, but your confidentiality will be maintained by the allocation of a study number and/or pseudonym.
- Any information you supply will kept away from University premises, in a locked cabinet, and be available only to the researcher and her 2 supervisors.
- At the end of the study, you may request to have any individual recording either returned or destroyed.
- Material gathered for the purposes of this study will be destroyed at the end of the project.
- You will be provided with feedback on the outcome of the research at its conclusion, and the final report will be housed in the Massey University Library.

Privacy Act 1993:

Under the Privacy Act 1993 the researcher undertakes that the information supplied by the participants will be held securely, and that the participant can arrange to see and check details held about them. Information about individuals will be confidential to the staff involved in the research project.

Researcher: Sue Purnell XXX University College of Education,


Supervisors

Alison Viskovic Massey University College of Education, Wellington Campus.

Phone 04 8012794 ext 6713 Email A.R.Vickovic@massey.ac.nz

Graham Collins Massey University College of Education , Hokowhitu Campus.

Phone 06 3505 799ext 8851 Email G.J.Collins@massey.ac.nz

Appendix 1.3: Consent Forms

<p style="text-align: center;">Research project</p> <p>But what is it really like? Experiences of first year Students in a NZ University (XXX University)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Researcher -Sue Purnell</p> <p>Consent Form</p>

I, _____ student at XXX University, have been given information from Sue Purnell, MEd student at Massey University College of Education, Wellington, regarding what my involvement would be in the research project about the First Year Experience, and I understand it.

- I am aware that I may contact Sue or her supervisors, Alison Viskovic or Graham Collins at any time if I have concerns about any part of the project
- I may withdraw, without penalty, at any time should I wish to do so.
- I am aware that if I leave the University before the end of the year, Sue would like to interview me. I know that I am not obliged to participate in this interview unless I wish to do so.
- I understand that, although my comments may be quoted in full, I will not be identified in the report.
- I am aware that Sue would like to record the interviews, but that this will only be done with my permission. I may ask for the recorder to be turned off at any stage during any interview.
- My tapes will be returned to me at the completion of the study, or destroyed by Sue
- Any information that I supply will be treated as confidential. I will be allocated a research number or pseudonym.
- I will be given access to information provided by me to check its validity.
- I am aware that I will be provided with feedback on the outcome of the research at its conclusion, and that the final report will be housed in the Library at Massey University, Wellington.
- The findings of this study may be also be used for the purposes of Academic publication or conference presentation

Please complete the consent form over the page and return it to Sue via the Internal mail

<p>Research project</p> <p>But what is it really like? Experiences of first year Students in a NZ University (XXX University)</p> <p>Researcher -Sue Purnell</p> <p>Consent Form</p>

I, _____, student in _____ Degree at XXX University _____ Campus, have been given information from Sue Purnell, MEd student at Massey University College of Education, Wellington, regarding what my involvement would be in the research project about the First Year Experience, and I understand it.

I agree to participate in the research project

I DO / DO NOT give consent to a tape recorder being used to record any interviews with me.

Signature _____ **Date** _____

Address for contact. Please tick your preferred mode of contact

Home Address _____ ☐

Phone _____ ☐

Mobile _____ ☐

Email _____ ☐

Privacy Act 1993:

Under the Privacy Act 1993 the researcher undertakes that the information supplied by the participants will be held securely, and that the participant can arrange to see and check details held about them. Information about individuals will be confidential to the staff involved in the research project.

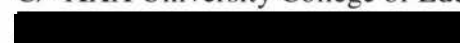
I have provided the participant with details of the research project, and a contact phone number should the participant require further information.

Signed _____ *Date* _____

Sue Purnell

Contact details:

C/- XXX University College of Education,



STUDENT COPY

Consent Form - Undergraduate research project Experiences of first year Students in a NZ University (XXX University)

I, _____ student at XXX University, have been given information from Sue Purnell, MEd student at Massey University College of Education, Wellington, regarding what my involvement would be in the research project about the First Year Experience, and I understand it.

- I am aware that I may contact Sue or her supervisors, Alison Viskovic or Graham Collins, at any time if I have concerns about any part of the project
- I may withdraw, without penalty, at any time should I wish to do so.
- I am aware that if I leave the University before the end of the year, Sue would like to interview me. I know that I am not obliged to participate in this interview unless I wish to do so.
- I understand that, although my comments may be quoted in full, I will not be identified in the report.
- I am aware that Sue would like to record the interviews, but that this will only be done with my permission. I may ask for the recorder to be turned off at any stage during any interview.
- My tapes will be returned to me at the completion of the study, or destroyed by Sue
- Any information that I supply will be treated as confidential. I will be allocated a research number or pseudonym..
- I will be given access to information provided by me to check its validity.
- I am aware that I will be provided with feedback on the outcome of the research at its conclusion, and that the final report will be housed in the Library at Massey University, Wellington.
- The findings of this study may be also be used for the purposes of Academic publication or conference presentations.

I have provided the participant with details of the research project, and a contact phone number should the participant require further information.

Signed _____ Date _____

Researchers Name: Sue Purnell. MEd student, XXX University

Contact details:

C/- XXX University College of Education

Appendix 1.4: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Research project
But what is it <i>really</i> like? An exploration of the experiences of first year students at a
New Zealand University
Researcher - Sue Purnell

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT - Transcriber

Name	_____
Address	_____

Phone	_____

Terms of the Agreement

I understand that any information that comes to me during my work transcribing interview tapes for Sue Purnell is **confidential**.

I understand that the tapes must be transcribed in full.

I will transcribe in an environment where the tape cannot be overheard, and the screen is not visible to others.

I am aware that participants will be identified only by a pseudonym or allocated research number

Tapes and the transcription will be treated as confidential at all times, and will be returned to Sue as soon as the transcription is complete.

Signed	_____
Date	_____

Appendix 1.5: Letter to Pro-Vice Chancellors

15th March 2001

Dear

My name is Sue Purnell. I am a lecturer in the College of Education, at the XXX University, and I am a part time student, at Massey University completing my Master of Education (Adult Education).

I am about to embark on my thesis, which will hopefully be completed by the end of next year.

The focus of my research is the experience of first year students at XXX University. I intend to work with groups of students at both site one and site two and also to interview support staff and lecturers who have contact with, and provide a service for, these students

I have enclosed my research proposal for your information.

I am writing to request your permission to interview staff and students from your college, based at both sites. I am suggesting that I work with students enrolled in the first year of the XXX degree, but I am happy to be guided by you in this matter.

Should you give your consent, I would be grateful if you would advise me about the appropriate person to contact on each campus to take this study to the next level.

I am aware that I need permission from the XXX University Human Ethics Committee and my application is ready to go to the committee as soon as I receive your approval in principle.

I look forward to hearing from you in the near future. If you require any further information, I can be contacted by [REDACTED]

Thank you for giving this your consideration.

Appendix 1.6: Request for letters

First Year Experience Research

Thanks for sending back your consent forms. Time to get down to business.

The first thing I would like you do to, as I mentioned in the consent form, is to write an email or letter, as if to a friend, telling them about last semester - your first introduction to University study. If you prefer, this could be a poem, or a series of cartoons, or you could talk into a tape (standard size not mini tapes please!) I'm not looking for something beautiful, just real life.

The key thing is that you tell this friend in a fairly open and honest way, how it was for you last semester. You might want to mention the amount and quality of assignments that you had to do, the quality of your learning, and the teaching, whether or not it was what you expected, how you got on socially, whether you needed study support, and so on. I really don't want to lead you on this, I want it to be your perceptions/ feelings/ experiences of how it was for you. Good, bad or indifferent, I want to know.

When you have done this, by hand or word processed or on tape, please either email it to me at [REDACTED] or send it through the internal mail, just in an envelope with my name on, XXX Campus will find me. You can take the envelope to any college/school office, they will put it in the internal mail for you. Please can you try to do this by the end of August at the latest, thank you

The only other thing will be getting some of you together for a group interview. I will contact you individually about this, probably by phone. I am hoping to do both the Site one and Site two interviews in mid-late September, straight after the mid semester break.

Once again, thanks for taking part - I hope that you will enjoy the process, and you will certainly be contributing to the experience of first year students in the years to come.

All the best for your own study this semester, too!

Sue Purnell

Appendix 2: Nicholson's Transition Cycle

A Brief Description of Nicholson's Transition Cycle

Nicholson developed the Transition Cycle model used in this research over ten years of studying work role transitions in Britain. Nicholson had been trying:

to develop theoretical frameworks of three kinds to help us understand what happens to people who experience job mobility and transitions. (Nicholson 1990).

The three kinds of frameworks are Predictive, Process and Taxonomic

1. Predictive – *from available knowledge about individual behaviour and organisations, it has been possible to propose predictive theory about how the outcomes of transitions depend on certain prior influences*
2. Process – *the model does not prescribe that certain experiences will or will not occur. It aims to be a systematic general framework, allowing for the full range of extremely different experiences we know people encounter in transition to be interpolated and interpreted.*
3. Taxonomic – *this is a nine dimensional system through which it is proposed any single instance of transition can be comprehensively and precisely profiled. The nine dimensions are Speed, Amplitude, Symmetry, Continuity, Discretion, complexity, Propulsion, Facilitation and Significance.*

The analysis of student experiences utilises predominantly the Process model. The phases of the **Transition Cycle Model** are described in the diagram below. They are:

- **Phase I and Phase V** Preparation -getting ready to change
- **Phase II** Encounter - the first experiences
- **Phase III** Adjustment - learning the ropes, starting to feel comfortable
- **Phase IV** Stabilisation - functioning well, contributing, happy in their social environment. But also ready to move again to Preparation (which is then Phase V). Nicholson comments

Even the most stabilised conditions contain the possibility of future change, and therefore embody varying states of readiness for the onset of a new cycle. For this reason, Stage I is also Stage V. (Nicholson, 1990:87).

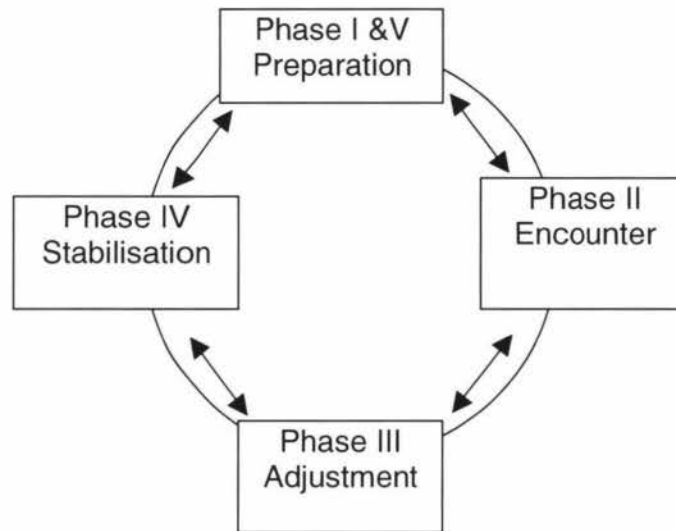


Figure 3. The Transition cycle. Nicholson (1990:86).

Each stage has distinctive qualities, but equally all the stages are also interdependent. *What happens at one stage exerts a powerful influence over what happens at the next* (ibid:88).

The model has a number of **cycles**, which explore

- The tasks and goals through the transition cycle
- Pitfalls and problems in the transition cycle
- Strategies and remedies for the transition cycle
- The role of management systems around the transition cycle.

These cycles incorporate each of the four Phases each time.

It is important to mention also that there are also nine dimensions (The Taxonomic framework) that grow out of the Transition Cycle, and clearly affect the experience of transition. Nicholson likens these dimensions to the turning of a wheel. The motion of a wheel may be characterised by:

- how fast it is turning (speed)
- its size and shape (amplitude and symmetry)
- how smooth is its action (continuity and complexity)
- how it is set in motion (propulsion)
- what helps or hinders its movement (discretion and facilitation)
- where it is going (significance).

These are discussed below with particular reference to this study:

1. Speed

Students are expected to make the transition to university quickly, to settle to their studies and to achieve acceptable grades. They are also making mini-transitions all the time, as they move from subject to subject, meeting the requirements of one lecturer then the next, and moving from one learning mode to another. Comments from the students about '*learning the academic game*' and adjusting to different lecturing and teaching styles attest to this. In their 'real lives' they also make role transitions from student to worker, mother/father, sports team member and so on. The required speed of these transitions can be bewildering, and people may find themselves moving on before they have had time to adjust. Conversely they may also get stuck at some point, if they are too slow at coping with the transition.

2. Amplitude

Clearly the specific demands of any stage in the change cycle will vary, and the contrasts between the old and the new roles will determine the students ability to cope. The students' levels of self-confidence, ability and support largely determine the extent to which this may, or may not become a problem. The major role change of moving to university, if handled well, may make other smaller changes seem relatively insignificant.

3. Symmetry

The 'shape' of the cycle relates to the length of time spent at each stage. Some students spend a great deal of time in preparation for their move to university, move through the encounter stage quite smoothly, and get stuck later on. Others move quickly into the

university, ill prepared, and flounder at the initial stage. Nicholson suggests that the outcome depends on how the process is managed, and how much the person is able to schedule the pace of the change (1990:100). Clearly for many students once they are at university they have to 'jump on the train, and keep going', otherwise they will get left behind. This produces its own stresses.

4. Continuity

Continuity denotes how transition cycles succeed one another – whether they follow a logical orderly or cumulative sequence, vs. an arbitrary or incoherent pattern (1990:99).

Larger cycles in the university environment – from one course to the next, one semester to the next and so on, are relatively predictable, and therefore become easier to cope with once the initial transition has been accomplished. However the initial move into the university, and the multiple smaller transitions made in a day or a week may well prove unpredictable and therefore challenging for the student.

5. Discretion

Discretion to determine the content and timing through the stages of the cycle is really only available to those students who choose to either study part-time, or who drop out, however temporarily, at some stage in the year. Otherwise the timing of courses, assignments and exams is beyond their control. They do however, have some choice in the manner in which they approach this particular challenge, such as the utilisation of time management and study skills, and again are likely to require appropriate support.

6. Complexity

Complexity means not just the sophistication of task requirements but more broadly, the range of demands made upon the life-space and psyche of the individual (ibid:101).

The demands on many of the students in this study – in particular those mature age students with families, are multiple and complex. The shift to university and full (or even part-time) study brings a range of challenges in relation to role, ability, status,

financial issues, relationships etc. Complex transitions are wheels within wheels, and each turn of the wheel affects all the components of the cycle.

To cope with complex transitions one needs long enough to be allowed for Preparation, for Encounter shock to be minimal, for discretion to be moderate and for supports or resources to aid the adjustment process (1990:101).

7. Propulsion

Propulsion refers to who or what determines the onset of a transition cycle. Clearly all of these students had an element of choice about whether or not they enrolled for university, even when or if they were under pressure from parents, or were facing redundancy or restructuring. Nicholson writes:

Even if we are heavily constrained, still to have had the possibility of saying no is crucial, and even a slight measure of self-determination...helps to engender commitment, effort and positive developmental outcomes (1990:102).

8. Facilitation

Help in dealing with the tasks of transition may come from many sources, both formal and informal...Novices and newcomers are more likely to depend upon informal sources of peer support, while more familiar...movers make more use of impersonal systems and resources (1990:102).

This statement from Nicholson is certainly borne out in the findings from this study - few of the students interviewed had sought help from the formal support systems and agencies established to assist them, preferring instead to ask their friends or classmates. The use of the available support networks appears to be dependent at least in part, on the individuals self-determination, confidence, or the magnitude of the challenge they are facing.

9. Significance

This dimension points us to the significance of the transition success or failure in relation to the future of the student in the organisation. This dimension depends on all the others. If the students manage other dimensions and phases of the cycle, then the transition will have a positive significance for the future.

Comment

This model has proved to be a useful vehicle for the interpretation of findings, even though not all of Nicholson's comments and suggestions were relevant to this particular setting of the transition to university undergraduate study.