“All Work and No Play?”
The Transition to University

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts
At the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

April, 2010
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Harlene Hayne, for her support and guidance throughout this research. Thank you Harlene, you have inspired me greatly throughout my time at university.

I would also like to express my thanks to Julien Gross, thank you Jules for all your help; your contribution has been invaluable.

I would like to thank Hannah Gordon and Marea Colombo for their assistance in collecting data.

I would like to thank Studholme College and (Ziggy), thank you all for your help in recruiting participants and allowing me to use your facilities.

Lastly, I would like to extend thanks to my friends and family, thank you for your continuing support and all your help.
Abstract

In New Zealand, University completion rates do not compare well with those in other OECD countries. For example, the New Zealand completion rate for tertiary students in 2008 was 58% in comparison to Australia whose rate was 72% and the United Kingdom whose rate was 79% (OECD, 2008). The recent Minister of Tertiary Education, the Honourable Anne Tolley, has signalled increased completion rates as an important target for New Zealand universities. For many students beginning university for the first time, their expectations of tertiary study do not match their actual experiences. This mismatch between expectation and experience can lead to stress, anxiety, and, under some conditions, failure in academic study. The first step in bridging the gap between student expectation and the realities of tertiary study is to understand students’ expectations about the transition to university. In the past, researchers interested in understanding students’ expectations of university life have used self-completed questionnaires or face-to-face interviews. Surprisingly, these two different ways of collecting information are typically used independently and the relative efficacy of each has never been compared. With this in mind, the goals of this thesis were two-fold. First, I examined first-year students’ expectations about their transition to university and how their expectations may or may not match their experience. Second, I compared the quantity and quality of information reported by students via questionnaires or face-to-face interviews. I found that participants provided significantly more information and information of higher quality during a face-to-face interview relative to a self-completed questionnaire. Furthermore, participants expressed common expectations, concerns, and hopes for university.
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Precis

In New Zealand, approximately 48% of full-time students fail to complete their degree after five years; a quarter of these students withdraw from study in their first year (Scott, 2009). Given the large amounts of money that is invested in higher education, non-completion is a significant economic problem. “Education is too important to us to allow large numbers of young people to wander aimlessly around the system using up resources and putting themselves into debt, and having no completed qualification to show for it” (Michael Cullen, 2004). Why then do so many first-year students withdraw from study? It is possible that some students lack the academic ability to withstand the pressures of a university course, but even those students with sufficient academic preparation may arrive at university emotionally or socially incapable of succeeding.

Academic Preparation

Given New Zealand’s relatively open-entry university policy, some students lack the basic skills that are necessary to complete a degree. In New Zealand, University entrance can be achieved by people over the age of 16 who gain their National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) with a minimum of 42 credits at Level Three or higher on the National Qualification Framework. The 42 credits must be made up of 14 credits from two approved subjects and two additional subjects. A minimum of 14 numeracy credits at Level One or higher and eight literacy credits at Level Two or higher are also required. These credits can be accumulated over more than one year and can be passed with a standard of achieved, merit, or excellence (NZQA, 2009). University entrance is not dependent on the standard of achievement. In addition, people over 20 years of age qualify for university entrance automatically, irrespective of their prior academic track record.
In comparison, entrants to American universities must take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or its equivalent and achieve acceptable scores. Students must also show a degree of extracurricular involvement, and leadership potential. American universities also rely on personal essays written by the applicant and letters of recommendation (The College Board, 2010). Australian university-entry requirements are similar to American entry requirements; students must take their High School Certificate (HSC) and receive acceptable pass rates. Entry into many courses of study (not just medicine or law) are highly restricted and are based on prior academic performance.

Given that the New Zealand retention rate is somewhat lower in comparison to that of other countries, an important factor influencing this retention rate may be our entry requirements. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has examined students’ secondary-school academic achievement in relation to their academic achievement in their first year of university (Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2008). An expected percentile measure was calculated for each achievement standard based on the distribution of results (achieved, merit, excellence); this value was then averaged across standards using these data. Mills, Heyworth, Rosewax, Carr, & Rosenberg (2009) found a relation between school achievement and first-year University pass rates. Those students with University Entrance, but not Level Three NCEA, were less likely to pass all of their courses and stay at university than were those students with University Entrance and Level Three NCEA. Mills et al. (2009) found that the strongest predictor of first-year university student retention was high academic performance. The authors conclude that “if entry requirements are set too low, the institution may be setting students up for poor performance in first year” (Mills et al., 2009, p. 213). These data underscore the importance of academic preparation for success at University. It appears that
students, who do the bare minimum to pass at secondary school, may struggle with the transition to tertiary study. In contrast, students who try their best and strive for excellence while doing NCEA are better prepared for the pressures of tertiary study. Thus, one obvious way to increase completion rates in New Zealand is to ensure that students are intellectually prepared for university study.

Social and Emotional Preparation

Although attending university is generally viewed as a positive experience, it sometimes involves a stressful period of adaptation and poor coping. Leaving family, establishing new living arrangements and a new way of learning, coupled with a host of other new responsibilities may contribute to the onset of psychological problems (Bouteyre, Maurek, & Bernaud, 2007). In particular, the onset of anxiety and depression, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs are important issues facing transitioning students.

Anxiety and Depression. Anxiety and depression are pervasive problems on university campuses. Some statistics suggest that depression is the top presenting problem for student counselling services, and anxiety ranks third (McCarthy, Fouladi, Juncker, & Matheny, 2006). In fact, it has been estimated that over 30% of university new-entrants feel overwhelmed by the transition and that their psychological distress may result in anxiety and depressive symptoms. In a recent study on student mental health, Wong, Cheung, Chan, Ma, and Tang (2006) investigated the prevalence of mood and emotional disturbances for Hong Kong tertiary students using a web-based survey. A total of 7,915 students completed the survey in which they provided demographic details and completed a number of measures of anxiety and depression. Wong et al. (2006) found that 20.9% of their participants reported depression, 41.2% reported anxiety, and 26.5% reported stress symptoms.
The stress that occurs when dealing with the transition to university is often exacerbated by other pressures related to university life. Academic adjustment in conjunction with the pressure to make friends also creates high levels of stress and can adversely affect psychological wellbeing (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Research suggests that how well a student copes with the changes associated with the transition to university influences their subsequent psychological well-being. For example, problem-centred coping, rather than emotion-centred coping appears to be associated with better mental health outcomes. Problem-centred coping involves using strategies that attempt to alleviate or eliminate stressful situations through taking control (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). For example, a student may study for a test in order to eliminate the stress caused by their lack of course knowledge. Emotion-centred coping, on the other hand, involves using strategies that attempt to regulate the emotional distress of the situation without actually addressing the origin of that stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). For example, a student may talk to their friend about the stress caused by their course load.

In one study, Bouteyre and colleagues (2007) examined the relation between coping strategies, social support, and depressive symptoms in a sample of French university students. A total of 233 first-year students completed a questionnaire that was designed to evaluate their level of depression, social support, coping strategies, and typical daily hassles. Overall, 41% of students reported depressive symptoms. Importantly, Bouteyre et al. (2007) found that emotion-centred coping prolonged and exacerbated the effects of the stressful situation, whereas problem-centred coping was more beneficial to students because it lead them to seek additional help.
In a similar study on coping strategies and depression, Dyson and Renk (2006) examined the relation between college freshmen’s coping strategies and their level of depressive symptomatology. In their study, 74 college freshman (equivalent to New Zealand first-year students) completed measures of life stressors, gender role, coping strategies, and depression. In general, male and female participants showed similar levels of stress, coping, and depressive symptomatology. However, masculinity was positively related to the use of problem-centred and emotion-centred coping strategies, whereas femininity was positively related to emotion-centred and avoidant coping strategies. In addition, higher levels of depressive symptomatology were associated with the use of avoidant coping strategies. The authors concluded that gender roles may be closely related to the use of different coping strategies and the level of depressive symptomatology experienced by freshman college students. Therefore, understanding the relationship between gender roles, stress, and depressive symptomatology exhibited by freshman students may be important in facilitating the transition to college.

McCarthy and colleagues (2006) also examined the joint contribution of coping resources, appraisal of life events, gender, and personality factors to anxiety and depression in a university sample. In their study, a total of 308 students completed measures of self-mastery, generalised efficacy, life orientation, life experiences, coping for stress, anxiety, and Beck’s depression inventory. McCarthy et al. (2006) found that the effects of negative life events and coping resources on depression and anxiety were mediated by subjective distress. That is, personality factors such as self-efficacy, social interest, and life orientation affected anxiety but not depression. There was a statistically significant relation between scores on the trait anxiety inventory and on Beck’s depression inventory, suggesting that anxiety
contributes to the manifestation of depression. On the basis of these data, the authors concluded that anxiety may be an important precursor to depression. Therefore, acknowledging this anxiety and helping students to develop appropriate coping methods (cf., Bouteyre et al., 2007; Dyson & Renk, 2006) may reduce the likelihood that depression will develop.

Taken together, the findings described above illustrate the prevalence of depression and anxiety in university new-entrants. They also demonstrate that emotion-centred coping is relatively ineffective when dealing with depression that is associated with daily hassles such as juggling university with paid work, friends, and finances (Bouteyre et al., 2007). Prolonged, untreated depression and anxiety among university students will ultimately impact on their ability to meet the academic challenges of their course of study (Wong et al., 2006) and, in extreme conditions, may lead to withdrawal from university.

**Drug and Alcohol Use.** In addition to anxiety and depression, experimentation with smoking, drinking, and drug taking is also common among university students and, in some cases, may be problematic. There are a number of reasons why the transition to university may coincide with a period of drug and alcohol abuse. During this period of development, the human brain is biologically primed for the reinforcing effects of alcohol and other drugs. During the teens and early 20’s, the pre-frontal cortex is undergoing significant maturation, and adolescents and young adults often exhibit behaviours related to this maturation. For example, adolescents and young adults seek out biologically-reinforcing stimuli, such as drugs and alcohol, and there is an increase in peer-directed social interactions, sensation seeking, and risk taking (Spear, 2000). In addition to being biologically primed to seek out drugs and alcohol, university students are also attracted to these substances because they help
them adapt to ever-changing environments (Santrock, 2008). Drugs provide pleasure, reduce tension and social pressures, relieve boredom and fatigue, and allow adolescents to escape the realities of their world.

Finally, students may also indulge in drugs and alcohol because they believe that university represents a “now or never” stage of life, in which students engage in ‘risky’ behaviours in anticipation of losing the chance to do so in later life. For example, in a study conducted by Ravert (2009), 76.6% of students reported that they currently engaged in at least one “now or never” behaviour including experimentation with drugs and alcohol. Approximately 30% of students reported engaging in these activities “often” or “all of the time.”

Although experimentation with drugs and alcohol (and other risky behaviours) is a normal part of university life, students often cross the boundary between experimentation and abuse. For example, Kypri, Langley, McGee, Saunders, and Williams (2002) examined the prevalence of binge drinking among New Zealand tertiary students at the University of Otago and found that the majority of both male (60%) and female (58.2%) drinkers exceeded reasonable upper limits for safe drinking, more than twice a week. The Kypri et al. (2002) study also showed that over one-third of students reported ‘black-outs’ after drinking, and a significant number of students reported difficulty concentrating.

In a follow-up study, Kypri et al. (2009) examined the drinking behaviours and alcohol-related harm across New Zealand universities, including the University of Otago. Students participated in a web-based survey concerning personal alcohol use and alcohol-related problems such as hangovers, blackouts, aggression, drink driving, sexual acts, crime, and regret. The results again showed that binge drinking and the associated health, social, and
legal problems are pervasive among New Zealand tertiary students. Overall, 68% of the students surveyed achieved high scores on the hazardous drinking scale, suggesting that alcohol abuse is an integral part of the university experience for many students. The most prevalent alcohol-related problems included suffering from a hangover, blacking out, and vomiting. Students who lived in a hall of residence were more than twice as likely to have two or more episodes of binge drinking during the week, compared to those who lived at home.

A number of other risky behaviours commonly co-vary with alcohol use. For example, Neal and Fromme (2007) examined the association between alcohol use and behavioural risks. Risks included: drinking and driving, using illicit drugs, sexual behaviour, perpetrating sexual coercion, being the victim of sexual coercion, aggressive behaviour, gambling, theft, and vandalism. University students logged onto a website and recorded their alcohol use and their level of engagement in behavioural risks. A total of 1,113 participants provided 30,224 usable days of data. The results indicated that alcohol use was related to nine of the ten behavioural risks. Of the ten, only theft did not co-vary with alcohol intoxication at the global or event level. Intoxication levels above and beyond the average were associated with greater chance of unsafe sex, sexual victimisation, sexual perpetration, aggressive behaviour, and vandalism. Unfortunately, university students are also at elevated risk of neurodegeneration as a result of alcohol abuse, particularly in areas of the cortex related to learning and memory (Zeigler et al., 2005).

**Institutional Factors associated with University Success**

Given that not all students face problems with the transition to university, what factors influence a student’s ability to make a successful transition to university? In a review of the
literature, Prebble et al. (2005) identified a number of institutional factors that were associated with university student retention in New Zealand. They found that student outcomes are likely to be enhanced when institutional behaviours, environments, and processes are welcoming and efficient. It is important that students have the opportunity to get involved in peer tutoring and mentoring. Academic counselling and pre-enrolment advice need to be readily available to ensure appropriate course enrolment. In conjunction, orientation programmes should facilitate social and academic integration. Student outcomes will also be enhanced when lecturers and tutors are approachable and available for discussions. Students should experience quality teaching and manageable workloads, and be provided with a comprehensive range of services and institutional facilities. In order for positive student adaptation, an absence of discrimination on campus is necessary, including a feeling of value, fair treatment, and safety. Diverse cultures and learning preferences should be catered for and welcomed. When first-year students do not feel like these conditions are being fulfilled, then outcomes are generally poorer.

Another institutional factor which is associated with positive adjustment to university includes a sense of belonging to the university. This sense of belonging is usually coupled with high self-esteem and quality friendships. A sense of university belonging goes beyond an individual’s perception of fitting in; it includes a sense of commitment to the institution, a dedication to work, and a belief that one’s abilities are being recognised (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Pittman and Richmond (2008) examined measures of university belonging, relationships with friends, self competence, and problem behaviours in 79 American freshman college students. These measures were taken at two time points, in first and second semester. The results of this study underscored the finding that a sense of
university belonging is linked to students’ positive self-perceptions, social acceptance, and scholastic competence. Across the two semesters, students who had positive changes in their sense of belonging and who made quality friendships had decreasing levels of internalising problem behaviours over time. A perceived sense of belonging was also associated with perceived professor caring and involvement in university organisations.

**Social Support**

In addition to institutional support, students also thrive when they develop strong social relationships. Friedlander et al. (2007) examined the effects of self-esteem, social support, and stress on adjustment to university. In their study, first-year undergraduate students completed a questionnaire pack at the beginning of the first semester and again in the second semester. The questionnaire pack included scales of perceived social support, stress, self perception, depression, and student adaptation. In general, low levels of stress, higher levels of social support, and higher self-esteem were related to better adjustment to university. Specifically, the results showed that increased social support from friends, not family, predicted better overall adjustment and ability to tackle the academic demands of university study.

Support from friends, over support from family, seems to be a consistent predictor of positive adjustment to university life. For example, Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) examined the sources of support that students received and how this support influenced student withdrawal. Participants took part in a qualitative interview. In this interview, participants were questioned about orientation week, learning expectancies, support and guidance, tutoring, services, and social networks at university and at home. The interviews were analysed using grounded theory, in which prominent themes were explored within the
data. Wilcox et al. (2005) found that the most significant factor in the first-year university experience was that of social integration and support. Support at the beginning of the transition was required from family and friends to buffer home-sickness and loneliness. As students made new friendships, however, reliance on support from family diminished. Students who lived in halls of residence found it much easier to form new friendships, in comparison to those students living at home. Students who failed to make friends, or continued to spend too much time with former friends or partners were far more likely to become socially isolated at university. Friendships within a student’s course of study were an important predictor of success in academic work. Support from academic staff was also important for successful integration into the course, but was not as significant as social integration with peers when predicting adjustment to university. Wilcox et al. (2005) concluded that students have to negotiate between the life that they left behind and the life that they have ahead of them. Students who do not adjust well in their first year of university study are more likely to withdraw. Overall, the presence of social-support networks and supportive interactions with academic staff is a major factor for student retention.

**Expectations versus Experiences**

*Disparity between student and staff expectations*

Adjustment to university can be greatly influenced by how well students’ expectations match their actual experiences. Crisp et al. (2009) have highlighted a number of areas in which student expectations may not necessarily align with actual university life. They conducted a survey of both students and staff to 1) examine students’ perceptions of study and to 2) examine staff’s reaction to the students’ perceptions. According to staff, some of the students’ expectations about university were accurate. For example, the majority of students
acknowledged that attending classes was important for successful performance at university. Students also acknowledged that they would be required to balance their time between study and outside work successfully. Some of the students’ expectations, however, were unrealistic. For example, many students expected that drafts of their work would be read and feedback would be given, marking of reports would have a quick turn around, and students would have ready access to staff at any time. These unrealistic expectations were a chief concern for staff during the focus group discussion. Staff were also concerned that, although students recognised that they would need to strike a balance between University and outside commitments (e.g., work, family, and friends), this balance is generally hard to attain.

Even when students do expect that the academic work at university will be different from the work in high school, they may not understand the extent of the change. For example, Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, and Nordström (2009) surveyed students and lecturers about their expectations for study, lectures, extra-curricular activities, and workload. Students acknowledged and expected university study to be a change from high school study, but they underestimated the extent of this change. As in previous research by Crisp et al. (2009), students believed that their work would be returned quickly, that they would receive clear feedback on all drafts, and that university teachers would be highly accessible. Issues relating to feedback are consistently linked to discrepancies between students and staff. In Brinkworth et al. (2009), for example, lecturers indicated that they rarely expected to give feedback on assignments.

Misunderstandings between students and staff can create unnecessary stress during the transition process. A number of professors highlight the wide gap between how students are expected to learn at university and how they are taught in secondary school (Leamnson,
“Most first years are ill-prepared for the expectations of the average college professor. And if it is the case of inappropriate habits of mind, those particular synapses can be hard-wired and remarkably stable. It might take exceptional effort on their part, and ours, to bypass these established circuits and make progress” (Leamnson, 1999, p. 36). In one study, Baer (2008) interviewed staff and students about class behaviour. Staff criticised students for their lack of commitment, for not attending class, for not reading sufficiently, and for not thinking critically. Staff indicated that students expected to be spoon-fed information and failed to develop self-disciplined work patterns. Student reactions to these staff responses indicated that students felt that staff lacked understanding of the challenges that students faced. One student remarked that it was ‘ridiculous’ to expect all students to start at the same baseline of knowledge and critical thinking. Students repeatedly mentioned that they did not realise until later the difference between learning at school and at university. Notably, students talked about the difficulty of liberating themselves from the approaches of learning which were useful at school. Furthermore, Baer (2008) found a contradiction between students’ desires to be independent and their need for guidance and support. Overall, the dialogue between students and staff illustrated that the two groups have very different perspectives. For staff, there were concerns about student immaturity and declining standards. For students, there were concerns about dealing with the change successfully and leaving behind the past.

Adjustment to a New Way of Learning

Clearly, the transition to university involves not only a move to a new and strange environment; it also involves a radically different approach to learning. Students find themselves in an academic environment in which independent, self-directed learning is
emphasised, relative to the more teacher-directed approaches experienced in secondary school (Harley, Winn, Pemberton, & Wilcox, 2007). Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber (2007) have argued that this move to self-directed learning often contributes to transition difficulties. For example, because students rely on their past and naive experiences in secondary school, they are not prepared for the different learning context encountered in university. In secondary school, many students describe teacher communication as ‘spoon feeding,’ but at university, this is not the case. Because lecturers sometimes forget the difference between secondary school and university, it is possible that lecturers may inadequately communicate their expectations to first-year students (Scanlon et al., 2007), leaving students confused about what they need to do. Generally, students’ expectations of the workload, structure of each course, and teacher guidance are unreasonable. Cook and Leckey (1999) examined first-year students’ expectations of tertiary study compared with their actual experiences. They found that students failed to plan ahead and studied less than they had expected. Students also misjudged the workload expected of them; approximately 75% of them underestimated the amount of work that would be required. Furthermore, students underestimated the number of people in their classes and, in many instances, found the number of students attending a given class overwhelming. Cook and Leckey (1999) also found that up to 30% of students were affected more than they had expected by non-academic problems, including spending too much money, bad time management, and domestic adjustments.

In a study designed to directly assess the relation between students’ expectations and university success, Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, and Hunsberger (2000) asked students, prior to entering university, about their expectations about university academic and social life. Student adjustment was then measured over the students’ four years of university attendance.
Four distinct expectation types were identified: optimistic, prepared, fearful, and complacent. Students with ‘fearful’ expectations of university experienced poorer adjustment to study, social life, and in the overall university experience, they also were more likely to withdraw from study. Students with ‘prepared’ expectations had the most successful adjustment, and were unlikely to withdraw. Interestingly, students whose expectations were ‘optimistic’ or ‘complacent’ did not consistently stand out as better or more poorly adjusted. Therefore, being prepared for university is a good predictor of successful adjustment; understanding the course structure, living arrangements, teaching style, and social life in university contributed to being prepared.

**Interviewing University Students**

In order to discover the key factors involved in the transition to university, it is important to ask university entrants about the joys and pitfalls of their transition. Unfortunately, we do not know the best way to extract information from this participant population. To date, most research in this area has utilised self-completed questionnaires, but some studies have used face-to-face interviews; rarely are the two methods compared. In the present experiment, we will compare the quantity and quality of information reported in response to self-completed questionnaires and face-to-face interviews on questions relating to the transition to university from secondary school.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

Self-completed questionnaires have a number of advantages in research. They are cheap to administer and can be completed efficiently with very large samples. It has been argued that questionnaires, if designed correctly, can elicit sensitive and honest information from participants, because respondents are more likely to feel anonymous and are, therefore,
comfortable with revealing personal information (Bowling, 2005; Brennan, 1987; Schwarz, Strack, Hippler, & Bishop, 1991). However, self-completed questionnaires have their disadvantages as well. When participants do not take a questionnaire seriously, they can write very short or one-word answers, and may misunderstand the questions entirely (Bowling, 2005). Moreover, on self-completed questionnaires, there is no way of probing for additional elaboration (Brace, 2004).

The other common way that researchers have interviewed university students is through face-to-face interviews. In a face-to-face interview, the interviewer has a chance to help the participant elaborate on what they are saying (Opdenakker, 2006). This allows participants to give answers in more depth. An interviewer has the ability to build a rapport with a participant and this rapport can lead to more open answers and greater analysis of each question (Bowling, 2005). In face-to-face interviews, social cues can be utilised to the interviewer’s strength, if they pick up on body language and intonation, they may be able to make the participant feel more comfortable or secure (Opdenakker, 2006). Another main advantage of face-to-face interviews is the ability to explain questions if participants need help (Schwarz et al., 1991).

Again, however, face-to-face interviews have their disadvantages as well. First, they can be more costly and time consuming than expected (Brace, 2004; Opdenakker, 2006). For example, the interview may take several hours, the distance someone has to travel to complete the interview may create higher monetary costs for the study, and the time spent transcribing the interviews themselves can also be costly. The most significant disadvantage of face-to-face interviews is that participants may respond with socially desirable answers thinking that this will please the interviewer (Bowling, 2005; Schwarz et al., 1991). Moreover,
interviewers themselves can become caught up in their own research questions and may bias the participant’s responses with their own theories or ideas (Bowling, 2005).

For the most part, research examining the benefits and shortcomings of these two specific interview techniques are rare, and at present, evidence supporting either interview method is varied.

**Empirical Studies of Questionnaire and Interview Methods**

Of late, little research has been done explicitly comparing face-to-face interviews and self-completed questionnaires so much of the research reviewed here is old. In most cases, data comparing these two methods has been mixed, and the subject areas that participants have been interviewed about have been varied.

**Socially desirable responses.** Ellis (1947) examined whether questionnaire or interview methods would be better for gathering data in studies of sex, love, and marriage. Participants were interviewed about their relationships in a structured, direct manner. One year later, the original participants were sent a questionnaire which included many of the same questions that had been asked in the original face-to-face interview. Participants gave less favourable or more incriminating responses to the questions presented on the questionnaire than they did when interviewed face-to-face. Ellis (1947) concluded that, for studying college students’ relationships, the questionnaire method of gathering data is just as beneficial as the interview technique. In fact, on the basis of his data, Ellis argued that students may give more open and reliable answers to sensitive questions asked on a questionnaire than asked in a face-to-face interview.

Consistent with Ellis’ finding, Brennan (1987) examined whether responses to personal and social issues would differ according to the interview technique used, and
whether differences, if they existed, were consistent with the construct of social desirability. In the Brennan (1987) study, participants were randomly assigned to a face-to-face interview group or to a self-completed paper questionnaire group. Although very few differences between face-to-face interview and self-completed questionnaire groups were statistically significant, those that were significant were consistent with the view that respondents were more likely to express socially unacceptable opinions on a self-completed questionnaire than in a face-to-face interview.

**Effort.** What happens when the questions are difficult and require cognitive effort? In one study that was designed to answer this question, Heerwegh and Loosveldt (2008) hypothesised that participants completing a web survey would be more likely to take cognitive shortcuts to reduce effort when answering questions, relative to participants in a face-to-face interview condition. In their study, college freshman were asked to answer questions about their attitudes towards immigrants and asylum seekers. In line with their hypothesis, Heerwegh and Loosveldt (2008) found that the web survey elicited more non-responses and ‘don’t know’ responses, and less use of all of the response options in comparison to the face-to-face interviews. Heerwegh and Loosveldt (2008) argued that participants may use less effort to answer questions when they are interviewed using a self-completed questionnaire (the web survey), because there is not an interviewer present to prompt them for a better response, or a response at all.

**Health research.** A direct comparison between face-to-face interviews and self-completed questionnaires has been conducted more often in health research. Various topics have been explored using these two interview methods, including surgery care, and negative health behaviours such as smoking, physical activity, and understanding disease information.
For example, Bauer, Böhrer, Aichele, Bach, and Martin (2001) examined patient satisfaction with anaesthesia by comparing questionnaire and interview data. Patients were randomly assigned to a questionnaire or to an interview group. Patients in both groups were asked the same questions regarding their discomfort level and the degree of satisfaction of care, pre-and post-surgery. There were significant differences between the two forms of questioning. Bauer et al. (2001) found that patients in the interview group provided more critical appraisals of their surgical care than did patients in the questionnaire group. Based on this result, Bauer et al. (2001) concluded that interviewing is better suited for detecting problems with the quality of anaesthesia care than are written questionnaires.

It is sometimes argued that when the area of questioning is sensitive, it may not always be preferable to use face-to-face interviews. For example, Kaplan, Hilton, Park-Tanjasiri, and Pérez-Stable (2001) examined the effect of data collection method on smoking behaviours and attitudes toward smoking in adolescent females. Participants were randomly assigned to a face-to-face interview group or to a self-completed questionnaire group. Kaplan et al. (2001) found that participants in the self-completed questionnaire group were less likely to complete the study in comparison to participants in the face-to-face interview group. Given this, Kaplan et al. (2001) concluded that face-to-face interviews allowed for greater concern in communicating questions and that the interviewer was able to keep the participants better engaged. However, the authors also concluded that the participants in the self-completed questionnaire group appeared to be more comfortable answering questions about their attitude and behaviour because of their perceived anonymity and also provided more candid answers to the questions. This suggests that participants in the face-to-face interview may have given answers that they considered to be generally more socially acceptable.
Overall, Kaplan et al. (2001) concluded that both methods of data collection have their advantages in certain circumstances.

In another study designed to compare these two interview methods, Vuillemin et al. (2000) assessed past-year physical activity using a within-subjects design. Approximately half of the participants were interviewed face-to-face first and then completed the self-administered questionnaire; the remaining participants completed the questionnaire first and then were interviewed face-to-face. The delay between the two interviews was eight days. Although the concordance between the two interview conditions was high for hours spent watching television, past-leisure, occupational and total activity indicators, overall, higher levels of physical activity were reported in the interview than on the self-completed questionnaire. This finding suggests that participants are more likely to provide socially-desirable responses (e.g., “I do a lot of physical activity”) in face-to-face interviews; however, because the authors did not assess the accuracy of participants’ responses, we have no way of knowing which interview method provides the most accurate responses.

Another critical factor in determining the usefulness of various interview techniques is assessing whether participants provide a complete response to the questions. For example, Bergmann, Jacobs, Hoffman, and Boeing (2004) examined the consistency of patients’ self-reported medical histories in response to face-to-face interviews and self-completed questionnaires. Participants first completed a face-to-face, computer-guided, personal interview by a trained interviewer. An average of 2.2 years later, a follow-up questionnaire was mailed to the participants; the questionnaire included questions relating to those questions that were asked in the initial personal interview. For serious diseases, there was good concordance between the information being provided during the interview and the
information that was subsequently provided in the questionnaire. For less well-defined
diseases, on the other hand, participants were less likely to report information on the
questionnaire. This experiment underscores the potential limitations of self-completed
questionnaires, particularly when participants are being asked to provide information that they
may not think is important. Bergmann et al. (2004) concluded that, in this case, face-to-face
interviews provide a clearer, more complete set of data than do the self-completed
questionnaires.

**The Present Thesis**

In summary, the studies reviewed here provide varying accounts on the quality of
information obtained using both self-completed questionnaires and face-to-face interview
methods. There seem to be several mediating factors that influence the validity of each
interview method; these include anonymity and social desirability (Brennan, 1987; Ellis,
1947; Schwarz et al. 1991), clarification (Bergman et al., 2004; Bowling, 2005), elaboration
(Brace, 2004; Opdenakker, 2006), and cost efficiency (Brace, 2004; Kaplan et al., 2001;
Opdenakker, 2006). The purpose of the present experiment was to examine the effect of
interview method on the quality and quantity of information that students report about their
transition from secondary school to university.
Method

Participants

A total of 181 (64 males, 117 females) first-year students from the University of Otago took part in this experiment. They either satisfied a small portion of course assessment by completing a worksheet based on the experiment or were paid $10 for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 20 years (mean age = 18.57 years, $SD = 0.48$).

Procedure

Participants were assigned either to a questionnaire (n = 122; 45 males, 77 females) or to a verbal interview group (n = 59; 19 males, 40 females). All participants were initially asked to read an information sheet and sign a consent form.

Questionnaire Group. Participants in the questionnaire group completed the questionnaire in groups of 1 to 10. Each participant was issued an eight-page questionnaire. On the first page, participants were asked to provide their name, age, gender, ethnicity, the university subjects that they were taking, home town, and current living situation. At the top of the second to eighth pages of the questionnaire, a question was presented along with a brief instruction; participants were instructed to read each question and then to write down their answer in as much detail as possible, taking as much time as they needed. Participants were also told that their answers would be completely confidential. The seven questions were:

1. Why did you choose to attend the University of Otago?
2. What do you think the purpose of a University education is?
3. What aspects of beginning University are you most concerned about?
4. What aspects of beginning University are you most looking forward to?
5. How do you expect tertiary study to differ from study in secondary school?
6. Do you think that NCEA prepared you for coming to University?

7. Do you think that you understand the academic demands of your course?

Verbal Interview Group. Participants in the verbal interview group were interviewed individually by one of two female interviewers. Each face-to-face interview was completed in a private room and was audio-recorded. First, participants were asked to provide their name, age, gender, ethnicity, the university subjects that they were taking, home town, and current living situation. The interviewer then read out, one at a time, the same seven questions that had been provided to participants in the questionnaire group. The participant was encouraged to respond to each question in as much detail as he or she could. To keep the conversation going, the interviewer said things like ‘mhmm,’ ‘yes,’ uh huh,’ and ‘good.’ If the interviewer thought that the participant could provide more detail, she asked him or her to elaborate on why he or she had answered in that way.

Coding

All of the verbal interviews were transcribed verbatim. We then coded participants’ response to each question on the questionnaire or the interview for the quantity and quality of information reported. To assess the quantity of information reported, we counted the words reported in each response. To assess the quality of information reported, we adapted a coding scheme that was originally developed by Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, and Alisat (2000). In this coding scheme, each question response is coded for its integrative complexity, defined in terms of two cognitive structural variables: differentiation and/or integration in the response. Differentiation refers to the degree to which different perspectives are considered or how well
the dimensions of an issue are attended to. Integration refers to the extent to which conceptual connections are developed among the different perspectives or dimensions in the response.

Using this coding scheme, each response could be assigned a score from 1 to 7 (see Table 1 for examples of responses coded as 1-7 on integrative complexity). A score of 1 indicated that the response demonstrated neither differentiation nor integration. A score of 3 indicated that the response demonstrated differentiation, but not integration (to receive a score of 3, the response must contain at least two relevant perspectives and the qualification of these perspectives). A score of 5 indicated that the response demonstrated both differentiation and integration. Types of integration could include mutual influence, in which each perspective affects and is affected by the other; negotiations; and reasoning including causal attributions. A score of 7 indicated that the response demonstrated a high level of differentiation and integration. To achieve a score of 7, the response had to contain a detailed discussion of the issue, the alternatives given must be dynamic, and the discussion must analyse the validity and reasonability of the perspectives given. Scores of 2, 4, and 6 represented levels of differentiation and integration at transitional points between the anchored scores. One coder coded all of the responses and a second coder coded 25 percent of the responses. Inter-rater reliability was $r = .90, p < .01$. 
Table 1.

Examples of Responses Coded as 1-7 on Integrative Complexity (Quality of Information Reported). The Examples are taken directly from Transcripts obtained in the Present Experiment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Score</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Making friends”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Environment of learning, teaching style (will it be different from what I have learned), and social life”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Not at the moment, but I probably will when my first set of results come in, I haven’t had such a large demanding workload like this ever and it is taking awhile to grasp it all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I’m concerned I won’t work hard enough with all the distractions like drinking and sports and interesting people. I’m concerned I won’t do well enough and then waste more money on student loans trying to repeat papers. I’m concerned the loan I will gain will be too much for my wages after uni to pay it off. I’m concerned I’ll become unmotivated and waste my time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“I think exams probably like the toughest thing because whereas at school you get constantly nagged and their like do your homework do this do that umm you have to be independent you have to do it yourself and umm yeah that’s the main thing, exams and sitting down to study myself it’s like self motivating you don’t have other people to be Sharon do this Sharon do that…..umm just because I do lots of sports in school and now I have just completely dropped them, like everything and this is all because I’m doing like university study, I wouldn’t have done that in school I still kept up with my sporting as well as academic, whereas now it’s just no sports in my life like whatsoever, I still go out and do social activities but it’s not sport, whereas in school I used to be doing hockey first eleven, like here I haven’t even like trialled or anything like that…..it was like a major part of my life I started when I was like seven years old like I guess just dropping it completely is like unreal, I can’t even come to terms with it.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Not fully, but I don’t wanna be the person that blames it, maybe NCEA doesn’t do the best job but, not everyone’s going to Uni so shouldn’t be just about preparing you for Uni, ya know it should be preparing you up to this level and then from there if you want to go to Uni you choose to go to Uni so you need to be able to cope with it and if it’s hard to do the references, you just do it and you get over it ya know you get used to it so ummm you can’t really say oh yip NCEA should prepare you so your perfectly fine, Uni is supposed to be hard…..it was good because I was able to do correspondence Spanish, which was NCEA level 1 but I got to do it in third form, umm it was a lot more organised than the old stuff had been and a lot more instead of being good at English and maths and science and stuff it has a lot wider range of subjects which is good, it catered for all types ummm also I think it’s all standardised which maybe the standard isn’t that great but at least it’s all the same….roughly, umm I did kind of enjoy that you could just get achieved, merit or excellence ya know there’s no, you know what you had to do to get excellence and you would do that and you would get excellence and you were fine and there’s not many ones where everyone got excellence in every standard in the year, so it was like who was better, it was usually pretty clear still, maybe at really hard out schools which are ya know really focus on academics and not actually having a life they ya know the whole class would get excellence in everything but it doesn’t really turn out like that for normal people so it’s so much of the I got an A- well I got an A+, that’s umm, like I’m not worried about that, some people say its reducing competitiveness, so it’s kind of cool. Yea but NCEA was alright it got a lot of crap but it was actually not too bad, umm not that I knew the one before it well.”

No response in the present sample received a score of 7.
Results

Table 2 provides a summary of the demographic information that participants provided as a function of their interview group. There were no differences in participants’ ethnicity, prior living situation, current living situation in Dunedin, or course of study as a function of interview group.

Table 2.

A Demographic Description of the Participants by Interview Group. The Numbers shown are Proportions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-to-Face (n = 59)</th>
<th>Questionnaire (n = 122)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealander</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maori</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Specified</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior Living Situation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home outside Dunedin</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home in Dunedin</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boarding School</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Situation in Dunedin</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Residence</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flatting</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home in Dunedin</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We analysed the interview data in three parts: the quantity of information reported, the quality of information reported, and the content of information reported.

**Quantity of Information Reported**

In the first part of the analysis, we examined whether the quantity of information that participants reported about their transition to university differed as a function of the method that we used to interview them. Figure 1 shows the mean word count reported for each question as a function of interview group. To examine whether there were any differences in the amount of information reported, we conducted a series of $t$-tests ($p < .05$) between the groups for each question separately. As shown in Figure 1, the face-to-face interview method yielded more information than the questionnaire method for all 7 questions (smallest $t(179) = 3.13$, $p < .01$, $d = .50$).
Figure 1. The mean word count (+1SE) reported by participants as a function of interview group and interview question. An asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference between the interview groups.

Quality of Information Reported

In the second part of the analysis, we examined whether the quality of information that participants reported about their transition to university differed as a function of the method that we used to interview them. Recall that quality was defined as the integrative complexity of each response in terms of both differentiation and integration. As shown in Figure 2, irrespective of interview method, the quality of information reported never reached the maximum possible; no response to any question in the sample achieved a score of 7. To examine whether there were any differences in the quality of information that participants provided in response to the two interview methods, we again conducted a series of t-tests ($p < .05$) between the interview groups for each question separately. The face-to-face interview method yielded higher quality scores for 5 of the 7 questions [Questions 1 and 3–6 (smallest $t(179) = 2.18, p < .05, d = .35$)]. Similar quality scores were obtained in each interview group for Questions 2 and 7 (largest $t(179) = 1.19, p = .23, d = .19$).
Figure 2. Quality scores (+1SE) of participants as a function of interview group and interview question. An asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference between the interview groups.

Content of Information Reported

In the third part of the analysis, we examined the content of the information that participants reported about their transition to university. To do this, participants’ responses to each question were collated and tallied. Because the number of participants in each interview group differed, the tallies were then converted to proportions. The most common responses to each question are shown in each table; less common responses were collapsed into an “Other” category. Participants’ answers could contribute to more than one response category.
Question 1: Why did you choose to attend the University of Otago?

The University of Otago is renowned within New Zealand for its residential lifestyle and this lifestyle is often used as a marketing tool to attract prospective students to Dunedin. Although it is commonly assumed that this message has an important impact on student choice, was the residential lifestyle one of the primary reasons that the students in the current sample actually chose to attend the University of Otago? As shown in Table 3, lifestyle was the most common answer to Question 1. Overall, 41% of the participants mentioned that the student lifestyle was their primary reason for selecting the University of Otago. In addition to lifestyle, the availability of a particular course and the University’s reputation were also important factors in students’ decision. In the Face-to-Face Interview condition, these reasons were given equal weight with lifestyle, but in the Questionnaire condition, lifestyle was the most popular response. “Other” responses to this question included, “cheaper,” and “cool television ad.”

Table 3.
Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question One as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close proximity to home</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer course</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good reputation</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past student opinions</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater independence</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 2: What do you think the purpose of a University education is?

First-year students often believe that the purpose of university is to gain a qualification in order to get a good job. Their opinions, however, often lack insight into the university experience as a whole. In the present sample, when asked what they thought the purpose of university was, 70% of participants said that the purpose of university was to gain skills for life and their future career (see Table 4). Consistent with prior research (Watkins, 1982), participants often gave responses that reflected an increase in education, skills, or social life, but that did not yield much evidence for a clear insight into University life. Participants rarely mentioned the purpose of a university education was to enhance their critical thinking skills or to foster independence. “Other” responses included, “making contacts,” “extending ones’ self,” and “excelling in an area.”

Table 4.

Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question Two as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skills for life and career</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further education</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain a qualification</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning for interest</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult transition</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better social life</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater independence</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 3: What aspects of beginning University are you most concerned about?

For most students, the transition to university is a positive experience, but for others, it is a time of great change and worry. Often students’ expectations of university life and their actual experiences are not aligned making it important to assess some of their specific concerns. As shown in Table 5, 45% of participants reported that a greater workload was a major concern and 40% of participants reported that exams and failing, and fitting in or making friends were also major concerns. “Other” responses included, “putting on weight,” and “food.”

Table 5.
Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question Three as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater workload</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exams/failing</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitting in/making friends</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference in learning</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harder work</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 4: What aspects of beginning University are you most looking forward to?

In addition to gauging their concerns, participants were also asked about what they were looking forward to at the beginning of their transition to university. As shown in Table 6, over 65% of participants mentioned that meeting new people was an exciting prospect, and approximately 45% of participants mentioned that learning for interest was appealing. “Other” responses included, “getting a grade back,” “playing sport,” and “using the central library.”

Table 6.
Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question Four as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New friends</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning for interest</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better social life</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Succeeding</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent learning</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 5: How do you expect tertiary study to differ from study in secondary school?

There is a major difference between the teaching and learning styles of secondary and tertiary study. Students’ ability to recognise this difference is an important factor in their academic preparation for University. As shown in Table 7, over 75% of participants expected that there would be greater responsibility in learning at university compared to secondary school. In addition, over 30% of participants expected that they would be less spoon-fed by university staff and that the work would be harder. “Other” responses included, “group work,” “treated as adults,” and “students are more mature.”

Table 7.

Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question Five as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility in learning</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less spoon-feeding</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is harder</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different hours of study</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More depth in learning</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 6: Do you think NCEA prepared you for coming to University?

When a student is academically prepared for tertiary study, they find it easier to achieve success. Given recent changes to the secondary school system in New Zealand, we asked students whether they thought that the standards-based system (NCEA) implemented in secondary schools prepared them for university study. When asked Question 6, participants could initially respond in one of 4 ways; “Yes,” “No,” “To some extent,” or “N/A.” For participants in the face-to-face interview group, 42% said “No,” 32% said “Yes,” and 18% said “To some extent.” For participants in the questionnaire group, 45% said “No,” 19% said “Yes,” and 29% said “To some extent.” Participants were then asked to elaborate on their initial answer. Participants provided a range of different responses to Question 6, but the majority felt that they were unprepared for tertiary study. As shown in Table 8, 30% of participants indicated that they thought that the NCEA system was too easy in comparison to tertiary learning, and 27% of participants indicated that NCEA promoted under-achievement and gave little reward for excelling.

Table 8.
Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question Six as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No, too easy</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, promotes underachievement</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, grading too different</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, content is similar</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, promotes bad habits</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, system is similar</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, motivates me</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question 7: Do you think that you understand the academic demands of your course?

The way in which students assess their level of competence and understanding of their course is also an important factor in their academic success. When asked Question 7, participants could also initially respond in one of 4 ways; “Yes,” “No,” “To some extent,” and “N/A.” For participants in the face-to-face interview group, 54% said “Yes,” 31% said “No,” and 14% said “To some extent.” For participants in the questionnaire group, 61% said “Yes,” 21% said “No,” and 18% said “To some extent.” “Other” responses included, “yes,” “no,” and “some subjects demand more than others.” Again, participants were then asked to elaborate on their initial answer. As shown in Table 9, approximately 30% of participants mentioned that, yes, they did understand the academic demands of their course and that it would be hard. When they didn’t think that they fully understood the academic demands, it was because they were still getting used to the system, or needed more feedback, or didn’t realise the detail expected in tertiary study.

Table 9.
Proportion of Participants’ Responses to Question Seven as a Function of Interview Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face-To-Face</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, but will be hard</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, need feedback/new system</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, study whole course</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, need better time management</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, study throughout year</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, objectives given at start</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the final part of the content analysis, we used thematic analysis to identify patterns or themes within the data. Thematic analysis is a flexible coding scheme which yields a detailed account of participants’ responses. We followed the thematic coding scheme proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarizing yourself with the data, 2) generating codes systematically, 3) creating potential codes from code collation, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming the themes, and 6) producing compelling extract examples from the data.

A number of themes were repeated throughout the both interview conditions. In particular, 7 core themes were identified across the data set. These themes included the lifestyle at the University of Otago, the acquisition of skills, change, friendship, learning for interest, NCEA, and belief in ability.

The lifestyle at the University of Otago

Many participants mentioned that their choice of attending Otago was linked to what they perceived the lifestyle to be; one student, for example, referred to Otago as “unlike anywhere else in New Zealand.” The University of Otago and Dunedin were referred to as friendly and student-focused. Dunedin was quoted as being a ‘student city’ in which students have many advantages and are catered to across the region:

I chose to attend Otago because I thought that it had the best university lifestyle. The town itself is based around the uni, there are good student deals, everything is close at hand….I just think that living here is more of an experience. This is a university city rather than a city that just happens to have a university.

As discussed above, many participants chose to attend the University of Otago because of the student-focused lifestyle. This lifestyle includes students living closely together, in

\[1\] Note that examples of participants’ responses have not been edited for grammar or spelling.
flats or halls of residence; and the social culture of partying and the ‘scarfie’ lifestyle which students reflected on as being a core part of student life: “Otago University appealed to me because of its friendly, welcoming and party atmosphere.”

*The acquisition of skills*

When asked what they thought the purpose of university was, participants often mentioned the acquisition of skills, “…to educate you, to give you extra learning, to give you skills for later on in life.” Participants also referred to university as a time to gain skills for life, allowing them to broaden their social networks. The majority of participants associated these skills with a higher paid job and higher standard of living, “I believe a university education is the gateway to getting a good well paid job that you are interested in.” Many students also associated university with the promotion of skills designed to achieve their desired career:

To increase your knowledge, to enhance your ability to be in the workforce and contribute to society and that kind of thing….to gain skills that will help you in life like not necessarily learning facts but gaining skills that will stay with you for the rest of your life, like work ethic.

*Change*

Change was another prominent theme that emerged across responses. The difference between learning styles at secondary school and at university was a frequent concern for many participants. Participants’ concerns included having a much larger workload, harder concepts to learn, more specialised learning, and longer hours of study:

I am concerned about the workload and that I have to self study most of the material. I don’t always feel confident that I will be able to achieve all of my academic goals, or even pass at all. Time management is definitely a huge
issue for me.

Many participants mentioned that, at University, they would no longer have a relationship with their teachers, “...it won’t be so guided.” At secondary school, they would ask questions in class and could access one-on-one help from the teacher. Many participants noted that, at university, they would no longer be able to have this same relationship with their lecturers. Students also mentioned that they would no longer be ‘spoon fed’ by their teachers, “won’t be handed all the information we need to know.” For many, ‘spoon fed’ meant that deadlines were pushed back, assignments were completed over and over again until correct, and that teachers gave tutoring on subjects that students struggled to master. On the other hand, however, many participants welcomed the chance to gain responsibility for their own learning. One participant was looking forward to “...studying toward a future potential job, studying for a purpose instead of because we’re obliged to – like at high school. Also being independent and having more responsibility for your own well being – instead of relying on others. You make decisions for yourself and you are in control of your own learning.” This also included getting to lectures on time, going to all tutorials, labs, and lectures, independent study, and meeting deadlines for assignments:

Well it’s far more independently directed so I won’t have teachers hounding me for what not, what I have found so far with a school day in secondary education it begins and ends apart from like an extra hour of homework at night it begins and ends within the day and it ends 5 days of the week and you get your weekend off, whereas in university it all kind of merges. Tertiary there is no real end to a day, you might get time off throughout and in the weekend you might go out on the Saturday or Friday but other than that it’s like any other day of the week, it all kind of merges so you get kind of more you’re more able to delegate your time you choose to do your studies and what not but yea I quite like having cut off points, work play work play, which is harder.
Friendship

The social side of beginning University can be very daunting for many students, so it is notable that one of the major themes that emerged throughout the data was friendship. A number of participants were concerned about making new friends and being able to ‘fit in’ with others. One participant was “…concerned about making friends… I am naturally quite outgoing but when I meet new groups I become uncharacteristically quiet and withdrawn… I don’t doubt that I will make good friends, it’s just a bit scary for now.” Another participant was concerned about “meeting new faces and getting used to living and working with people from all over the country.” Equally, participants were looking forward to meeting new people, forming new relationships, and enhancing their social life. One participant was looking forward to “…meeting people, I love like socialising and all that kind of stuff, I’m not a party girl though but I love having people over at my flat and just see people around me so, that’s probably what I’m most excited about.”

Learning for Interest

An advantage to gaining a higher education is that you can choose fields that interest you. For many participants in the current experiment, that reality was mentioned fondly. One participant was looking forward to “…learning a really interesting course, actually taking courses for my future, unlike the boring classes you took at school.” Many participants referred to the vast number of subject choices and the variety of subject areas, they also compared this with the secondary school subjects that they were forced to take. In addition, participants expressed their pleasure in being able to study toward a career which they were interested in:

To further enrich your knowledge about a subject you’re deeply interested in, so you can get a job you want or be led to whatever goals you want to achieve, or just to give you information in a field of interest.
Participants were asked whether they thought NCEA prepared them for university. Many participants had a lot to say about the secondary school qualification and what they said was not overly positive. NCEA is included as a theme because it seemed to spark similar comments across participants’ responses. Many students argued that it was too easy, and hindered their preparation for university, especially when it came to study habits, “dumbed everyone down, made it way too easy to pass. NCEA was easy, yes, but that’s not the real world and it didn’t prepare me at all for university.” The structure itself was mentioned as being too different from tertiary study and confusing for those transitioning from secondary school to university. Notably, participants argued that, if anything, NCEA promoted underachieving and did not at any stage provide any reward for excelling. Participants reflected on the credit system as allowing too many chances to pass, and being unequal across subjects:

No, I was not motivated to go for high grades because I would get the same credits for doing very little work.

There’s no pushing yourself, achieved is a pass, so is excellence. And there’s not a lot of work involved, and a lot of re-sitting and second chances which isn’t in university.

In contrast, however, some participants taking health sciences at university remarked that they had been taught the basics of their course in their last year of secondary school and that learning was helpful to them now, “it covered much of the early material that we have done so far,” “gave me the base information.” In addition, participants reported that the internal/external framework was helpful in preparing them for exams at the end of the
semester as it was a similar structure. One participant expressed her feelings towards the NCEA structure and how it prepared her:

I think that the entry requirements are really easy ones personally, yea I think they sort of did. The tests and that are a lot different here like the marking criteria, like we use percentages and different grading system than NCEA. Um I think it’s a lot more challenging at Uni than NCEA system because you had like not achieved, achieved, merit, excellence and you had a way more chance of passing compared to here. In your, during the year you can make all your credits up with internals and stuff, whereas here there are little tests that make up percentages where your main one at the end makes up most of it, whereas that’s quite different from NCEA. Yea and then you have really easy standards as well, all your internals and stuff some of those were just pathetically easy, it wasn’t funny. Whereas here they are not, they do not compare aye.

Another participant said,

Sort of not really it’s kind of pointless, excellences mean nothing who cares if you got top of it, it’s what you do when you get up here, like you can either dumb yourself down or pick yourself up …..I don’t dislike it but there’s lots of stupid things like keeping re-sitting internals, when you’re up here you only have one chance and they have internals that are sort of pointless in NCEA I guess. Like they are not similar, when mum was back at school she would say how they got a B average, with NCEA it’s like merit excellence or achieved no one knows what that means. When you get to Uni it all like how much you pass with like a percentage.

And yet another commented,

No, I believe that the way NCEA is set up promotes a ‘just go for the minimum’ attitude in a lot of students. There are no incentives to go for excellence other than a certificate and maybe a feeling of personal satisfaction, but no extra credits or anything, which makes a lot of people think it is not worth the effort, especially since I doubt a lot of people will care what I got in
level 3 when I have a degree at university. At university, there is an incentive to give it everything you have, for example scholarships and offers to graduate with honours, which will not happen if you go through Uni with the same attitude a lot of people had towards NCEA.

*Belief in Ability*

Participants were asked if they understood the academic demands of their course. Many participants had a high belief in their ability and mentioned that they understood the demands of a university degree and knew it would be ‘hard.’ One student remarked, “...yes, I think so. I think at Uni you are required to know as much as possible to the greatest depth possible and this is what is expected of you.” Some participants remarked that it was only a matter of studying their course fully throughout the semester, or following the guidelines set out at the start of the semester by the lecturer, “I feel that I understand the academic demands of my course but I also feel that they are scary. I understand that studying full time requires intense hours of effective study and successful time management.” For others, their belief in their ability to deal with the demands of their chosen course was much lower. These participants admitted that the realisation of these demands had not hit or that they needed more feedback before they could reach them:

Probably not, ignorance is bliss, I think, I don’t really want to overwhelm myself because I’m still really get used to being here and it’s a new town and I don’t know many people and stuff I don’t really want to think completely about how hard out everything is going to be but I’m just trying to slowly ease myself into it I suppose. I’m hoping it’s going to be not as bad as I think, I know it’s a university college level degree I know I’m going to have to work really hard for it.

I believe I understand the academic demands of my course, but of course, it is possible that I overestimate them and worry too much about them. It is not
possible, however that I underestimate them, as I am very well aware of the fact that university is not all fun and games like what high school seemed to me. Some of the papers I am doing this year are first year health science papers as well, which is a very challenging course, I know that I will have to work hard to achieve with as much success as I possibly can.
Discussion

Summary

The transition to university is a time of considerable change as students deal with a multitude of new experiences. How a student copes with these new experiences can have a significant impact on their academic success. The overarching goals of the present research were to examine the expectations of first-year students at the beginning of their transition to university at the University of Otago and to compare two different interview methods to determine which one yielded a higher quantity and quality of information.

Overall, participants had a number of expectations about their transition to university. The most common expectations included the student lifestyle of Otago University; this was a major attraction for many participants. Participants also expected that a university education would provide them with life skills, and the chance to make new friends. In addition, participants expected that tertiary study would be more difficult and more self-directed than secondary school study. Finally, participants expected that, although the academic demands of university would be hard, they would be able to meet them.

In terms of the two interview conditions, overall, participants provided more information and information of higher quality during a face-to-face interview relative to a self-completed questionnaire. In fact, participants in the face-to-face interview group reported twice as much information as did participants in the self-completed questionnaire group. The face-to-face interview method yielded more information in response to all seven questions. Furthermore, participants in the face-to-face interview group provided responses that contained a significantly higher quality of information than did participants in the self-completed questionnaire group.
Face-to-Face Interviews

In the present research, face-to-face interviews were superior to self-completed questionnaires in terms of both the quantity of information provided and the quality of that information. Why might this be this case? In the face-to-face condition, interviewers had the ability to ask participants for further elaboration on their initial response. In contrast, participants in the self-completed questionnaire condition often failed to answer a question or provided a simple yes/no answer to the questions. These kinds of responses are obviously less informative because they provide little detail and lack any critical evaluation (Bowling, 2005; Heerwegh & Loosveldt, 2008; Opdenakker, 2006; Vuillemin et al., 2000). Furthermore, the face-to-face interview provided participants with the opportunity to seek additional clarification if they were unsure of a particular question. Consistent with previous research, this additional clarification increased the probability that participants had a greater understanding of each question and consequently could provide more critical responses (Bauer et al., 2001; Kaplan et al., 2001; Vuillemin et al., 2000).

In addition to the opportunity for clarification, interviewers in the face-to-face condition had the opportunity to build a relationship with the participant that was not possible in the questionnaire condition. Building rapport has been shown to be an important factor when interviewing participants (Bowling, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2001; Opdenakker, 2006). In the present research, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee in the face-to-face interview condition may have led to more open and candid responses and may have encouraged participants to answer the questions more fully.

Although the face-to-face interview condition clearly had some advantages in terms of the quantity and the quality of the information reported, it is possible that there may also be a down-side to face-to-face interviews. In prior research, participants who have been asked to respond to sensitive questions sometimes provide more socially desirable responses in face-
to-face interviews than do participants who complete questionnaires (Brennan, 1987; Ellis, 1947). Face-to-face interviews involve social interaction with another person, and to present themselves in the best light, participants sometimes take social norms into account when responding to a particular question. What about the participants in the present experiment? Did they filter their answers through the lens of social acceptability? One way to answer this question is to examine the proportion of answers to a particular question that might be unflattering to the participant or to present them in a less than positive light. For example, the proportion of participants who candidly reported that the social student lifestyle (as opposed to academic opportunities) was the major contributor to their decision to come to the University of Otago was similar across both the interview groups. For example, one participant in the face-to-face interview group reported:

The drinking thing again yea probably a bit of a problem, I’m not too stressed like there’s people who say oh stupid young fresher’s getting drunk all the time but then there’s people who say I don’t care, you know? Ah well I’m kind of in-between I don’t like the kind of snobby attitudes of some people who think people just come down here to use the city to get pissed and drunk and all this and it’s a bit annoying, but at the same time I am looking forward to it, but I can’t really say that I love having us in the headlines and all that, you know?

In comparison, one student in the self-completed questionnaire group reported:

I wanted to come to the University of Otago because Dunedin is a student town, so there are always lots of things for students to do and there are always lots of parties on and social events which is good because I like to socialise.
Furthermore, when participants were asked what they were looking forward to at university, 40% of participants in the self-completed questionnaire group mentioned the social life, for example:

Meeting new people, getting to know others through my course who are interested in the same things as me.... partying and trying new things.

Similarly, social life was mentioned by 32% of participants in the face-to-face interview group, for example:

Meeting new people from different places and like experiencing uni life that everyone says is so great.... it’s actually only the social life that’s so great, at uni the classes are hard, no-one tells you when you come that you actually have to do work...

In addition, a similar proportion of participants across both interview groups reported their concern about the transition to university. For example, 20% of participants in both interview groups reported their concern about maintaining a balance between academic work and social outings. Also, just over 30% of participants in the self-completed questionnaire group reported their concern about fitting in and making friends, for example:

I’ve had the same group of friends since I was 11 and haven’t needed to be incredibly social with people. Now only knowing my boyfriend means there is a lot of social pressure. I’m naturally quite outgoing but when I meet new groups I become uncharacteristically quiet and withdrawn. I also arrived late so everyone in my hall already had their little cliques. I don’t doubt that I’ll make good friends, it’s just a bit scary.

In comparison, 50% of participants in the face-to-face interview group reported this same concern, for example:
I was worried about coming into a hall that was really, really nerve-wracking, it was kind of the end of being a kid if you know what I mean. You’re not going to be home again your mum is not going to be like washing your clothes again...being alone and being alone without knowing anybody....

Taken together, these examples suggest that participants provided the same socially desirable (and socially undesirable) responses irrespective of the interview condition. Another possible downside of face-to-face interviews is that they are perceived as being less time efficient and more costly (Brace, 2005; Opdenakker, 2006). However, in the present experiment, face-to-face interviews took approximately 10 minutes to complete; in contrast, the self-completed questionnaires took approximately 35 minutes to complete. Given that the quantity and quality of the information reported was higher in the interview condition, and the time burden on participants was actually lower, the efficiency of the face-to-face interviews in this study was actually higher than the efficiency of the questionnaire.

Common Themes

By far, the richest data in this experiment came from examining the content of participants’ responses more closely. To do this, we used thematic analysis to establish seven common themes. These themes are discussed below in terms of their relevance to the transition to university and student adjustment.

*The Lifestyle at the University of Otago.* The choice to go to university is a major decision and should not be based on incomplete, subjective information. McInnis and James (1995) found that, in hindsight, one-third of first-year students believed that, during their last year of secondary school, they were not ready to choose a university. Consistent with a lack of proper preparation, over one-third of the participants in the present experiment reported that they chose to attend the University of Otago for its student lifestyle. Many participants said that they came to the University of Otago because they expected that the lifestyle here would be friendly, welcoming, and sociable. Furthermore, many participants indicated that
they were excited about the drinking culture at the university and that Otago would provide them with opportunities to party.

For many tertiary institutions around the world, drinking is an integral part of the student milieu. Alcohol forms a large component of fitting in with peers. For many students, a thriving social life is often a defining feature of university life, over academic work itself. In New Zealand, however, the problems associated with student drinking and other antisocial behaviours have become a major public health concern. In comparison to their non-student peers, university students have an elevated risk of harmful binge drinking (Kypri, 2003). Many first-year university students may feel pressure to conform to the perceived binge drinking culture at the University of Otago, and this pressure is strengthened by the difficulties they face in adjusting to university and wanting to fit in. Although drinking may create an ideal opportunity to interact with peers, excessive binge drinking creates its own physical and academic consequences. A high prevalence of university students experience alcohol-related problems, or as a result of their drinking inflict harm on others. Kypri (2003) found that of University of Otago first-year students in halls of residence, over 50% of male and female drinkers exceeded sensible alcohol limits, at least twice a week. In a 2004 study, McGee and Kypri found that of 1,464 University of Otago students who were surveyed, the most commonly reported physical consequences of excessive drinking were hangovers, vomiting, and blackouts. Female students tended to report more emotional outbursts, whereas male students reported more physical violence, vandalism, theft, and arrest. There were also academic consequences for students who binged frequently; missing class and concentration problems were common for both males and females.

Furthermore, in a study by Kypri and Langley (2003), 1,910 University of Otago students measured estimates of other students’ drinking. Students gave estimates of others’ drinking by indicating frequency on a likert-type scale, they were then required to compare
their own drinking frequency. Finally, students estimated the percentage of Otago students who binge drink in the weekend, and what percentage they thought had vomited because of their drinking in the last three months. The results indicated that levels of excessive drinking and vomiting were overestimated by the majority of participants. Interestingly, the heaviest drinkers were much more likely to overestimate the prevalence of episodic binge drinking. It is possible that excessive drinkers seek the company of other excessive drinkers and estimates of what is normal are influenced by the observations of close friends. In addition, the majority of participants believed that their drinking habits were more sensible than those of their same-gender peers. Only 9% of participants estimated that they drank more than other students, suggesting that the perception of normal drinking standards for the majority of students in Kypri and Langley’s study was skewed.

In order to be successful at university, students must be able to achieve a balance between academia and sociability. Partying to excess may be an attractive prospective for some potential students, but it is clear that it can have major health and academic consequences. The University of Otago presents a unique environment, in which students live in close proximity to each other and the university facilities, and have great support from the wider community. The Otago University student or ‘Scarfie’ ideal should represent high achievement as well as sociability, and should not promote a binge drinking culture. In recent years, a code of student conduct was introduced at the University of Otago. The code of conduct was, in part, created to deter student anti-social behaviour, often sparked by alcohol abuse, on and outside the campus (University of Otago Website, 2010).

**Acquisition of Skills.** The present experiment provided further evidence to suggest that first-year university students generally lack insight into the primary aims of a university education. The majority of the participants in the present experiment believed that the main purpose of a university education was to gain a skill set. Frequently, participants associated
these acquired skills with a high paying job in their future. While acquiring skills for the future is an admirable reason for attending university, there are obviously other reasons for obtaining a university education.

Often, students and university teachers have different expectations about the purpose of university education. For example, in a study by Alexitch and Page (1997), 120 professors were asked what they thought the purpose of a university education was. The most frequent responses were to impart knowledge and new ideas, to develop critical thinking, and to prepare students for a career. Overall, professors believed that students should attend university primarily for intellectual and learning-based reasons. Professors also indicated that attending university to gain a career should be a secondary motive. The professors’ outlook on the purpose of a university education contrasts greatly with what the participants in the present experiment thought.

The development of critical and reflective thinking was not mentioned often by participants in the present experiment; however, it is commonly claimed by tertiary institutions to be the major purpose of university education (Watkins, 1982). Vermetten, Vermunt, and Lodewijks (1999) examined to what extent first-year students develop more critical and independent ways of learning at university. The authors measured freshman learning strategies and learning orientations at the beginning and half-way through the year. The results suggest that students become more critical and meaning-directed in their learning over their first year of university. However, students will also use reproductive-directed learning strategies formed at secondary school, such as cramming and rote learning. It is possible that the change in the quality of learning is triggered by the demanding period of adjustment in the first semester of university. As a student sees what is required for university success, they will use more self-directed and critical strategies.
To some extent, first-year students are able to adapt and develop their way of learning, indicating that programmes prior to and at the beginning of tertiary study that are aimed at improving the quality of learning strategies could have a chance of success. Watkins (1982) suggests that students who attend university with a lack of insight into its actual purpose are more likely to adopt a surface-level approach to learning, such as rote learning. Perhaps first-year university students’ limited view of the purpose of university influences how they engage in university study and what they take away from the university experience. In secondary school, it may be beneficial to outline to future university students ways in which they should be studying at university and the benefits that are reaped by students who strive to become more critical, reflective, and self-directed. The results of the present experiment suggest that the University of Otago may need to be more explicit about what is expected of its new students, and what they will gain from the university experience.

**Change.** The transition from secondary school to university presents a time of great change and, in particular, a change in the type of teaching and learning that students experience. In the present experiment, the majority of participants expected that there would be a greater accountability in learning at university. Furthermore, over one-third of the participants expected that the workload would be much larger, and there would be much less direct help from university teachers in comparison to secondary school teachers. The change in learning was viewed by participants as not only a challenge, but a chance to gain independence and responsibility. Given this, how do students feel about leaving secondary school study, and do they actually take personal responsibility for their university learning?

Many university lecturers complain that their students expect to be spoon-fed information (Smith, 2008). “More than ever, college instructors have reason to believe that their students are out of touch with what their grades really symbolize, why they are even in college, and what responsibilities they have as students.” (Hassel & Lourey, 2005, p. 2.)
According to Kantanis (2000), secondary school students experience learning through the close scrutiny of work, positive draft feedback, high grades, and criterion-referenced assessment. In contrast, for university students, little guidance is given for task completion, assessment is norm-referenced, and low grades are inevitable. Kantanis (2000) examined academic success of school-leavers and their personal fulfilment at university. The majority of the students in that study felt concerned about the pace and style of university teaching, for many, it was a time-management nightmare because the majority of assessments were scheduled just prior to examinations. In addition, many students felt confused about their own accountability for study and how much detail was necessary for them to learn. Kantanis (2000) also noted that students frequently feel confused about who to turn to for help. In secondary school, they could have called on their teachers. At university, lecturers do not give the same support to their students. Kantanis (2000) found that first-year students were more likely to be successful if they had more realistic expectations of university life and independent learning, were better at negotiating negative feelings, and had a greater understanding of the difference between university and school learning.

In a similar study, Hassel and Lourey (2005) also assessed first-year university students’ impressions of university grades and their role in learning accountability. The survey of 1,100 students indicated that over 60% of participants put in far less time studying than was expected by their teachers. Despite this, over 75% of participants considered themselves to be high achieving students. Moreover, 40% of participants had missed a third of classes by their tenth week of university, and yet, 90% of participants indicated that they considered themselves to be responsible learners. These data suggest that there seems to be a gap between students’ perception of learning responsibility and their actual experience of learning. This gap was also identified in previous research by Devlin (2002). In that study, first-year students completed a questionnaire at the start of semester two; it included
questions about the learning environment, ideas of learning and how to improve it, and percentages of attributed responsibility. Devlin (2002) found that the majority of the participants saw university learning as a quantitative exercise in accumulating facts and knowledge. In addition, participants indicated that they took personal responsibility for their own learning. The majority of the participants also indicated that to improve their learning, outside influences needed to be changed. The author suggests that, despite participants perceiving responsibility for their learning, without the ability to conceive learning as qualitative practice, it will be difficult for students to adopt high quality study and learning methods. Students may accept personal responsibility for their learning, but at the same time, many still expect to be spoon-fed facts and procedures.

**Friendship.** Making friends was a theme that was mentioned by participants as both a positive and negative aspect of their transition to university. Many students were excited by the chance to meet new people and to make new friends, but at the same time, these students were also nervous about fitting in and finding a new peer group. For first-year students, friendship networks are a significant factor in their adjustment to university.

The transition to university requires first-year students to move away from their family unit, begin new peer relations, and navigate new academic challenges. The majority of first-year students are willing to meet new people, so why do some students find it hard to make friends? Research by Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, and Boswell (2006) suggests that shyness may result in a difficult transition to university. In their study, Mounts et al. examined whether shyness, sociability, and parental support for college transition were associated with loneliness and friendship quality. In addition, they also examined whether loneliness and friendship quality were related to anxiety and depression. Based on their study of 355 college freshman, Mounts et al. found that first-year students who reported high levels of shyness, low levels of sociability, and lower levels of parental support also reported high
levels of loneliness. In addition, loneliness was related to anxiety and depression during the transition to college. Interestingly, higher levels of parental support for college transition were related to higher levels of friendship quality. Furthermore, shyness and sociability were not related to friendship quality, shyness may inhibit friendship formation, but once the friendship is formed, shyness does not play a role in its quality.

The majority of the participants in the present experiment wanted and expected to make new friends at university, but previous research has shown that this expectation may not always be met. Kantanis (2000) found that first-year students mentioned that they expected to meet new and different people at university. However, 49% of participants did not experience success in the establishment of a friendship group by the end of the first semester. Kantanis (2000) outlined the repercussions of the inability to form quality social networks during the transition to university. Without friends, students have fewer resources at their disposal, and their self-confidence and self-esteem can be undermined. Often, students without a support network will restrict the time that they are at the university, and therefore their familiarisation and use of the facilities is impeded. Students may have no one to discuss course work with or have less ability to share scant resource material, therefore there is less chance of enhanced understanding. Students who do not establish a friendship group will lack emotional support, guidance, and encouragement from their peers. Without friendships, students will be less able to discuss transition expectations, experiences, and difficulties, and more than often students will lack the persistence to succeed in their chosen field of study. Overall, students who lack a quality friendship network during their first year of university will find it much harder to successfully adjust to university life.

In the present experiment, some participants mentioned that they chose to attend the University of Otago because their best friends were attending. Consistent with this response, Swenson, Nordstrom, and Hiester (2008) found that a student’s best friend from secondary
school plays an important role in their adjustment to university. Maintaining ties with secondary school friends can be beneficial in the initial transition to university. These friends are important for personal and institutional adjustment; they represent someone who is supportive and familiar in a time of great change. In contrast, new college friendships play a different role in adjustment. Academic, social, and institutional adjustment is associated with finding a loyal and trustworthy new best friend. The quality of this new friendship is positively related with adjustment among first-year students.

Boute et al. (2007) also examined the importance of friendship during the transition to university. The quality of new friendships formed in the first year of university was a significant predictor of social adjustment. In addition, having a friendship network was related to attachment to university and academic adjustment. Friendship fulfils a number of key functions in helping students’ transition to university successfully. Friends provide a sense of belonging, emotional support, advice, and assistance. Friends also provide a source of fun and enjoyment that balances the stressors experienced when adjusting to university life. Moreover, new friendships open up a much larger friendship network to meet potential friends. Many students do not anticipate the transition to university to be as hard as it is, so when new friends also share their difficulties, this helps normalise the experience. Finally, Boute et al.’s (2007) data also highlight the importance of openness to friendship before university begins. Students, who were more open to meeting and making friends, did in fact make more friends, in comparison to students who were less open.

**Learning for Interest.** Learning for interest at university was a major attraction for many participants and many indicated that this was a major difference between secondary and tertiary education. Having the ability to choose a subject in which you are interested seems to be an important factor for transitioning students, and is a major draw card for pursuing tertiary study. Participants in the present experiment indicated that being able to
choose interest subjects provided them with a higher motivation to excel, and would eventually allow them to have a career that they would enjoy.

At university, many students struggle to stay motivated and often fall behind in their lectures and assessments. Interest has been considered one of the central components to motivation and therefore is an important part of successful higher education (Hulleman, Durik, Schweigert, & Harackiewicz, 2008). Hulleman et al. (2008) examined the college classroom and the predictive role of task value and achievement goals on subsequent interest and performance. Students with high initial interest in their course believed their course to have more intrinsic value and utility. In turn, the perception of course utility was positively associated with final grades. Moreover, students who were interested in their course were more focused on developing knowledge and learning new skills.

Often, students who do not enjoy their course rely on surface learning strategies such as rote learning. In contrast, students who are interested in their subjects approach their study with more focus. For example, Pintrich (1999) examined the effect of interest on students’ use of self-regulated learning strategies. Self-regulated learning is defined as the strategies that students use to control their learning and regulate their cognition. For deep learning, more elaborate self-regulated learning strategies are required, such as summarizing and organised note-taking. In addition, students who strive for success at university will make study goals and will monitor these goals to ensure success. Pintrich (1999) found that students who had an interest in their course were more likely to use self-regulatory strategies. These students were willing to put forth more effort and time into their course work. Furthermore, these students were less likely to be distracted in class, and were more likely to bring with them prior relevant knowledge pertaining to their degree. Students were more likely to use strategies to enhance deep learning if they were interested in their course. Therefore, students should be encouraged to study what they are interested in.
Given the previous research on interest and quality learning, it would seem that universities should promote student subject choice when it is based on interest. Interest in a particular course seems to be positively associated with successful learning, and successful learning is considered a positive for students adjusting to university life.

**National Certificate of Educational Achievement.** The introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) has arguably been the most contested educational reform in New Zealand in recent times. Implemented in 2002, critics argued that the use of standard-based assessment over formative learning was NCEA’s greatest weakness (Rawlins, 2008). Research has shown that formative learning is related to greater depth in understanding, which is essential for success at university (Rawlins, 2008). In the present experiment, participants were asked if NCEA had prepared them for university study. The majority of the participants indicated that they thought NCEA was too easy. Moreover, many participants believed that NCEA provided no motivation to achieve at a high level, as passing credits with an ‘achieved’ grade was all that was necessary to gain university entrance. Previous research examining the academic transition from secondary school to university has shown the influence of NCEA on student motivation. For example, Meyer, McClure, Walkey, Weir, and McKenzie (2009) examined the relation between student motivation and academic outcomes in secondary school. In their study, 3,569 New Zealand secondary school students completed a survey about their learning two-four weeks prior to their final examination. Their academic achievement data were also calculated for credit attainment. The authors found that there was a strong association between student academic outcomes and self-reported motivational beliefs. Student self-ratings of academic motivation encompassed ‘doing my best’ and ‘doing just enough.’ ‘Doing my best’ was a positive predictor of grades and credits attained, whereas, ‘doing just enough’ was a negative predictor of grades and credits attained.
The ‘doing just enough’ attitude to academic achievement may be very detrimental for potential tertiary students. Research has shown that secondary school academic results are direct predictors of tertiary success (Evans & Farley, 1998). For example, Shulruf et al. (2008) examined first-year university results relative to secondary school performance in NCEA. University entrance for secondary school students in New Zealand is based on the number of NCEA credits attained and places no weight on grade point average (GPA). Shulruf et al. evaluated alternative models for determining criteria for university entrance; the most appropriate model included NCEA GPA. Merit and excellence pass rates were included in this model, and it was found that it had a much higher predictive correlation to first-year university GPA. The results suggest that the current NCEA system should shift the emphasis from minimum pass rates with more credits, to higher achievement in fewer credits. The NCEA system does have similarities to teaching systems at university, such as internal assessment and final exam assessment. However, the authors suggest that higher achievement (merit or excellence) will place students in better stead for their first year of tertiary study, even if these higher passes are not necessary for entry to tertiary study.

**Belief in Ability.** A key element to a successful transition to university is a belief in your own abilities. In the present experiment, over 65% of the participants believed that they did understand the academic demands of their course and they were confident that they could succeed even though they knew their course would be hard. These participants in comparison to the ones that felt that they did not fully understand their academic demands, had more self confidence and felt more prepared for the new style of learning.

Previous research has shown that academic confidence is a significant predictor of higher quality learning (Neuville, Frenay, & Bourgeois, 2007). For example, in a study by Livengood (1992), first-year university students completed measures of effort and ability, goal orientation, and their confidence in their academic ability. Course satisfaction and
participation, and learning orientation were also measured. Students low in academic confidence had a tendency to be performance-goal oriented. That is, they were motivated to perform and achieve in order to look good. In contrast, students who had high academic confidence tended to be more learning-goal oriented. That is, they participated in course work to develop their learning and critical thinking abilities.

Confidence in one’s abilities and optimism play a major role in a student’s success in negotiating the academic transition from secondary school to university. For example, Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2004) surveyed first-year students in their first few months of university. Measures of self-efficacy, optimism, stress, coping, health, satisfaction, and adjustment were taken. Academic performance was measured by a faculty rating for all courses. Self-efficacy showed powerful direct and indirect relationships with academic performance and adjustment. Also, students who were optimistic had more academic success due to an optimistic attitude influencing stress and coping. Overall, first-year students who enter university with confidence in their ability to perform well academically do perform significantly better than students who feel less confident. Furthermore, confident and optimistic first-year students were more likely to evaluate the transition to university as a challenge, not a threat. Coping with the transition to university as a challenge was related to reduced stress and more positive ratings of personal satisfaction, adjustment, and health. This research would suggest that a students’ attitude at the beginning of the transition to university can have a significant effect on their future adjustment and academic success. Therefore, increasing students’ self-efficacy should begin at every level of schooling.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

The transition to university is a period during which young adults are thrown into an unfamiliar environment that provides a number of new challenges. For the majority of students in New Zealand, university entrance is not particularly difficult to achieve.
Consequently, many first-year students are under-prepared for the higher level of university study (Mills et al., 2009). Academic inexperience, coupled with a new-found independence and responsibility, and the pressure to make new friends, can lead to negative outcomes. The onset of emotional problems such as anxiety and depression is common in first-year students (Dyson & Renk, 2006; McCarthy et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2006). In addition, experimentation with drugs and alcohol is also prevalent, and abuse of alcohol is common (McGee & Kypri, 2004).

In the present experiment, we aimed to explore expectations that first-year university students experience during their transition to university. In addition, we aimed to examine the effect of interview method on the quality and quantity of information that students report about their transition. We found that face-to-face interviews did elicit a higher quantity and quality of information from participants than did questionnaires. Moreover, in examining the information that participants reported, we found seven common themes. Participants attended the University of Otago because of its student lifestyle, they believed that the purpose of university was to acquire skills, they expected a change in the type of learning required at university, and they looked forward to learning what interests them. Furthermore, the participants mentioned concern about making friends and how well NCEA had prepared them for university study. Finally, participants believed and had confidence that they understood the academic demands placed on them at university.

The present data have important implications for tertiary institutions and secondary schools, because they can be used to improve the transition from secondary school to university. In the present experiment, students knew that tertiary study would be a step up from secondary school, but they may not have the specific tools or motivation to study effectively. Secondary school teachers may need to provide prospective university students with a better understanding of what is expected of them at university. Specifically, new
students need to be aware that teaching staff at university do not have as much time for one-on-one learning in comparison to secondary school teachers. Conveying specific details about how this change in learning will transpire will help reduce stress during the transition process.

Friendship was another common issue facing students in their transition and although students looked forward to making new friends, they were also concerned about fitting in. A positive transition to university is enhanced greatly by quality friendships (Wilcox et al., 2005), therefore, it is important that universities facilitate new ways in which students can meet each other. Prior to the first semester, online forums could be created in order for new students to chat and get to know each other. This kind of forum would provide an opportunity for students to meet others in a stress-free environment and with the ability to start up conversations about themselves and their transition to university.

Based on participants’ responses to the questions about NCEA, it is clear that this system may need to be reviewed. Recall that the literature showed that secondary school marks were directly related to academic success at university (Shulruf et al., 2008). In the present experiment, participants did not think that NCEA prepared them for university study because it held little motivation for them to go the extra mile and achieve their very best. Many students had a ‘just do enough’ kind of attitude to learning (Meyer et al., 2009). If a student takes this kind of attitude to university then their study will hindered greatly. In order for students to enhance their motivation to excel at the secondary school level, NCEA assessment may have to put more emphasis on merit and excellence grades.

Furthermore, when a student is academically prepared for university, he or she will generally have a higher confidence in his or her ability to succeed and consequently will be more likely to succeed (Chemers et al., 2004; Jackson et al., 2000; Livengood, 1992). To improve university completion rates, universities need to ensure that students are as
academically prepared as they can be. As mentioned above, improvements may mean reviewing secondary school NCEA assessment weightings and facilitating students’ move from school to university so that it goes more smoothly. It is also possible that New Zealand universities should increase their entrance standards, in order to uphold the standard of learning.

**Future Directions**

In the present experiment, participants expressed their expectations for university life. Our analysis revealed that the majority of first-year students at the University of Otago have common expectations regarding changes in learning style, sociability, and academic demands. Future research will be required to examine more specific areas of the transition to university. For example, it would be interesting to look specifically at the influence of alcohol or friendship on first-year students’ adjustment to university. Recall that McGee and Kypri (2004) illustrated the physical impact of alcohol abuse at the University of Otago. In the future, it would be interesting to examine what impact alcohol has on transitioning students. For example, orientation week is centred on alcohol-related socialising, but does this type of socialising help or hinder first-year students? Furthermore, does coming to university with friends from secondary school have an influence on first-year students’ adjustment to university?

In addition, specific interventions could be explored to help students in their transition from secondary school to university. Recall that the new type of learning at university is often very hard for first-year students to adjust to (Devlin, 2002; Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Kantanis, 2000). Future research could explore whether learning interventions at secondary school or the summer prior to commencing university could help students develop better learning strategies. Academic preparation and confidence impact greatly on student
performance and health (Chemers et al., 2004). Giving students as much of a head start as possible may help ease their transition to university.

Finally, there is a clear need for future longitudinal research on the long-term effects of the transition to university, examining how students adjust socially and academically over their time at university. First-year students often have experiences of university that do not match their initial expectations (Crisp et al., 2009). In the case of the present experiment, it would be beneficial to examine the outcome of the expectations and beliefs that were mentioned. For example, follow-up studies with the present cohort would allow us to determine whether students made the right choice to attend the University of Otago, whether their purpose in coming to university influenced their experience, whether their hopes and concerns were realised, and whether their preparedness and confidence (or lack of) impacted on their academic performance.
References


