Starpath
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THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
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Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Beyond the first hurdle: Student persistence beyond the first semester of university study

Starpath Project
The University of Auckland
Epsom Campus, Faculty of Education
Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142
starpath@auckland.ac.nz
www.starpath.auckland.ac.nz

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Irena Madjar
Starpath Project for tertiary Participation and Success
Auckland

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

This report describes a small, qualitative, follow-up study undertaken as part of the Starpath Project research on student transition from secondary school to university (Madjar, McKinley, Deynzer & Van Der Merwe, 2010). At the end of their first semester at university, in July 2008, the students who completed a longitudinal study on their transition experience were asked to take part in a less intensive follow-up for a further three semesters. Of the 29 students who completed the initial study, 25 volunteered to take part in the follow-up study. Of these, 11 withdrew and 14 remained involved until the follow-up concluded at the end of 2009.

The purpose of the follow-up study was to document the experiences of a known group of students who had overcome the first hurdle of transition to university and, in particular, to identify factors that contributed to their continuing, changing, or withdrawing from university study up until the end of their second year. If current disparities in educational outcomes are to be reduced, attention needs to be paid not only to matters of entry and initial transition but also to matters of persistence and success at university.

Personal experiences of the students who persisted to the end of their second year at university and to the end of the research project are instructive, and indicate that having a clear personal goal and determination to reach it are the most powerful sustaining factors that help students stay on track regardless of how smooth or challenging the experience. Not all of these students excelled academically, although a number proved to be outstanding. Knowing what they wanted to achieve (be it in arts,

film, commerce, science, or law), and why, helped them to keep going and to feel confident of reaching their goal. Academic preparation at school was a critical element in whether students could remain on their chosen path. Those with solid academic preparation were more likely to cope with the study in their chosen field, whereas those with less adequate preparation tended to change their direction, looking for courses they would cope with and enjoy, and moving away from those that proved academically too difficult. Thus students with less than ideal preparation were not necessarily ready to give up on university study, but were often forced to change their plans and adjust their aspirations in terms of what they could achieve.

Students who withdrew from university often did so for a variety of reasons or a combination of reasons, with external factors (including family difficulties or expectations) often playing a determining role.

The findings of this study raise questions about the adequacy of transitional and ongoing support for students who clearly struggle to become academically engaged, to find direction as their initial study choices prove inappropriate or too challenging, and to persist despite stumbling blocks on their pathway to academic success. The fact that some students require more than one year to find their way suggests a need for stronger transitional support both early in their student experience and in the period between the first and second year of study.

2. INTRODUCTION

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

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The purpose of the follow-up study was to document the experiences of a known group of students who had survived the transition period and, in particular, to identify factors that contributed to their continuing, changing, or withdrawing from university study up until the end of their second year. If current disparities in educational outcomes are to be reduced, attention needs to be paid not only to matters of entry and initial transition but also to matters of persistence and success at university. Overall attrition rates at the end of the first year of university are significantly higher for Pacific and Māori students (21% and 24% respectively), than for Pākehā and Asian students (11% and 8% respectively) and these patterns continue into subsequent years (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a). There is also some evidence from early scoping studies conducted by Starpath researchers that Māori students doing well academically are likely to withdraw after their first year at university for financial rather than academic reasons (Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2008; Tumen, Shulruf & Hattie, 2008). Earle (2007) reached similar conclusions.

The more specific aims of this study, conducted over an 18-month period, were to:

- Identify factors that students with different life histories experienced as helpful "stepping stones" or challenging "stumbling blocks" as they persisted beyond the first semester of university study;
- Identify factors that sustained them during this period;
- Identify factors that contributed to, or detracted from, their motivation, confidence, and the decisions they made (to continue, change, or withdraw from their initial course of study) during the first two years at university.

Research participants for this study came from two schools in Auckland and four schools in Northland. Data collection took place between September 2008 and December 2009, during which time participants were interviewed up to six times.

This project report is comprised of seven sections. It opens with an executive summary, followed by this introduction. Section three provides a brief review of existing research and provides the background and rationale for this study. The fourth section explains the project's design and methods. Section five outlines the backgrounds of the students who chose to be involved. The project's findings are presented in the sixth section, and the report closes with a discussion of the significance of these findings and their implications for students, families, and universities.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the recent decades, universities in many countries, including New Zealand, have tried to widen participation in university education to include students from underrepresented groups. Much of the research focus during this time has been on transition of such students from school to university. But the issue is not simply one of entry to university but also of students' persistence and success in terms of degree completion. Ultimately, degree-level qualifications can serve as a stepping stone to postgraduate education, professional careers, and higher incomes. This is particularly pertinent for the sections of the population such as Māori and Pacific young people in New Zealand that are currently underrepresented among university graduates and overrepresented among those in low paid jobs and the unemployed.

In 2008, 24 percent of 25 year olds in New Zealand had a bachelors degree. However, Pacific and Māori 25 year olds were only a third as likely as the general population to hold a degree (Ministry of Education, 2009a, 2009c). This disparity is the result of both lower levels of participation and lower rates of retention and completion in degree-level study among Māori and Pacific groups, and it is this gap in university participation and success that The Starpath Project aims to address.

As described in the Starpath Project's previous report on school to university transitions, *To travel hopefully: Students' experience of transition from low-mid decile schools to university*, Māori and Pacific students are less likely than Pākehā and Asian students to transition from school to tertiary education, and are much less likely than other students to begin a bachelors degree. Of students who left school in 2004, 33 percent of Pākehā students and 50 percent of Asian students began a bachelors degree within two years, compared to just 13 percent of Pacific students and 11 percent of Māori students (Ussher, 2007). While bachelors-level study is the most common course of study for Pākehā and Asian school leavers, Māori and Pacific school leavers are more likely to transition into level 1 to 3 certificate study than any other level of study (Ussher, 2007).

The underrepresentation of Māori and Pacific students in university study is compounded by higher attrition rates among these groups of students. Of all full-time students in New Zealand who began a bachelors degree in 2007, 8% of the Asian students, 11% of the Pākehā students, 21% of the Pacific students and 24% of the Māori students had left after one year. (It should be noted that attrition rates of part-time students are much higher amongst all ethnic groups; overall 37% of part-time

bachelors students that began in 2007 were no longer enrolled one year later). Māori and Pacific students are also much more likely than Asian and Pākehā students to withdraw in subsequent years of bachelors-degree study (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a).

As would be expected, given the higher attrition among Māori and Pacific students, degree-completion rates are also lower among these groups. Three quarters of the Asian and Pākehā full-time students who began a bachelors degree in 2003 completed it within six years, compared to less than half of the Māori and Pacific full-time students (45% and 47% respectively) (Ministry of Education, n.d.-b).

In addition to ethnicity, a range of other factors have been shown to be associated with retention and degree completion in New Zealand. There is a clear relationship between prior school achievement and achievement in the first-year of degree-level study (Scott, 2008). Achievement during each year of university study (in terms of GPA or accumulation of points) is, in turn, associated with progression to the next year of study and timely degree completion (Tumen, Shulruf, & Hattie, 2008). This is likely to be part of the reason for the higher levels of attrition and non-completion among Māori and Pacific students, as these students, on average, enter degree-level education with lower prior achievement and, on average, pass fewer of their papers than other students: in 2008, the overall pass rate in bachelors degree papers was 82%, but was 72% among Māori students and 65% among Pacific students (Ministry of Education, 2009b).

Other variables that have been shown to be associated with retention and completion include gender, age, decile of last school, study load, and field of study. Six-year completion rates have been found to be higher for women, full-time students, and students studying in the education or health field, and lower for men, part-time students, and students studying science or information technology, even after other demographic and study-related differences are controlled for. Younger students and students that attended higher decile schools are more likely to complete in actual terms. However, once other factors are controlled for, older students are more likely to complete than younger students and decile of last school attended has only a marginal effect on completion rates (Scott & Smart, 2005).

While large-scale quantitative research, such as that summarised above, has provided an indication of some of the predictors of persistence and degree completion, and the extent to which Māori and Pacific participation and success in degree-level education

lags behind that of other New Zealanders, it provides little insight into how persistence or withdrawal are actually experienced and viewed by students on the ground. Despite the fact that the recruitment and retention of minority students in tertiary education is a major area of concern in New Zealand and internationally, longitudinal, prospective, qualitative research on the experiences of students from underrepresented groups at New Zealand universities is scant, and it is this gap that the current study aims to help fill.

Increasing the proportion of students from disadvantaged groups who successfully complete degrees is important both in terms of improving the individuals' standard of living and in terms of raising the prosperity and productivity of New Zealand as a country, particularly as the New Zealand population is becoming increasingly Māori and Pacific. Degree attainment is very clearly associated with subsequent employment and earnings. New Zealanders with a tertiary education are more likely to be in employment than those without. This disparity is particularly evident in times of high unemployment. For example, between 1996 and 1998, unemployment rates increased by 34% among those with no qualifications and by 43% for those with a school qualification, but did not change markedly for people with a tertiary qualification. This indicates that tertiary qualifications make people less susceptible to fluctuating levels of employment (Ministry of Education, 2008b).

Among those in paid employment, those with any tertiary education earn, on average, 32% more than those with only secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education. Those with a tertiary type-A education (essentially, degree-level education) earn, on average, 44% more than those without any tertiary education (Ministry of Education, 2008a). Completion of a degree results in a premium on earnings over those who do not complete. For example, people who completed a bachelors degree in 2000 earned 25% more in 2005 than those who started in the same year but did not complete a degree. The premium for completion was greater for Māori, at 34%, compared with 22% for Pākehā (Ministry of Education, 2007). In 2007, the median income of those with degrees was around 2.4 times higher than those with only school qualifications. In 1998, when unemployment was at its highest level in the last decade, median income of those with degrees was over 2.8 times higher than of those with school qualifications only (Ministry of Education, 2008a).

As already mentioned, early scoping studies conducted by the Starpath Project (Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2008; Tumen, Shulruf & Hattie, 2008) and the research by Earle (2007) indicated that some Māori students who are succeeding in their university

studies might be withdrawing as late as their second year for economic rather than academic reasons. Given a group of students who had taken part in a study of transition from school to university, it seemed important to try and follow up as many of these students as were willing to be involved, beyond their first semester of university study. A longitudinal study, following students through to the end of their second year at university, was therefore planned with the aim of a clearer understanding of the factors that influence students to continue with, change, or withdraw from their studies.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This project was designed as a qualitative, follow-up study, continuing from the earlier longitudinal study on students' experience of transition from school to university. The students who took part in the initial study, until the end of their first semester at university, were invited to continue with less intensive involvement for a further three semesters. Twenty five of the 29 students who completed the initial study and planned to continue with their university studies agreed to take part in the follow-up study.

In total, 83 semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2008 and November 2009. In the majority of instances, interviews were conducted over the phone, one to two times per semester, although three interviews were conducted face-to-face (at a participant's request) and on eight occasions via email. The duration of individual interviews varied from 5 minutes to 43 minutes. Most interviews tended to be 10 to 15 minutes in duration, with the last interviews tending to be closer to 20 minutes.

The focus of this project was on the factors that contributed to the participants continuing with their original study plans, making changes (e.g. moving to part-time study, or changing to a different degree), or deciding to withdraw from university study. The focus of individual interviews was on updates of the students' experience and situation, their reflections on the current or previous semester or year, and their plans for the following semester or year. Typical questions included:

- What is it like being a student in the second semester/year? How similar or different is it from last semester/year?
- Has anything changed since the last interview (study programme; enrolment status; living arrangements; family contact/responsibilities; relationships; paid work; finances)?
- What were some of the challenging aspects of the previous semester and how did you deal with them?
- What were some of the enjoyable aspects of the previous semester and why?
- What happened in relation to your academic work (study habits; class attendance; study groups; written assignments; feelings about academic work)?
- How well did you do in your studies (assignments; tests, exams)?
- What plans do you have for the holidays, next semester/year?

Narrative data were transcribed selectively by a research assistant. The more factual information (relating to academic results, finances, changes in accommodation, etc) was coded directly from the audio-recorded voice files or emailed responses and

entered into Excel spreadsheet database. The more descriptive responses (relating to feelings, reflections, concerns, etc) were transcribed verbatim, or reconstructed from notes made at the time of the interview, and coded with the aid of N'Vivo™ qualitative data software programme.

5. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

At the conclusion of the longitudinal study on transition to university (Madjar, et al, 2009) the 29 students who remained in the study until its conclusion were invited to take part in ongoing follow-up for a further three semesters. Twenty five students (16 females and nine males) accepted the invitation and had their first follow-up interview in September 2008. In terms of ethnicity, nine were European/Pākehā, seven Māori, five Pacific, and three of other ethnicities. Twenty of these students were enrolled in bachelors degree programmes and five in preparatory certificate, or diploma programmes.

As shown in **Table 1**, 14 students (six females and eight males) remained in the study until its conclusion in November 2009. The majority of those who remained in the study were European/Pākehā or of "other" ethnicities, had attended a mid-decile secondary school in West Auckland, and were enrolled with the University of Auckland.

Table 1. Participants by school location, gender & ethnic affiliation at the start and (in parentheses) the end of the study

	Māori	**Pacific**	**European/Pākehā**	**Other**	**Total**
Northland					
Male	1 (1)	-	-	-	1 (1)
Female	5 (1)	-	4 (2)	-	9 (3)
South Auckland					
Male	-	2 (1)	-	-	2 (1)
Female	-	3 (1)	-	-	3 (1)
West Auckland					
Male	-	-	3 (3)	3 (3)	6 (6)
Female	1 (0)	1 (1)	2 (1)	-	4 (2)
Total	7 (2)	6 (3)	9 (6)	3 (3)	**25 (14)**

Only two Māori (one from a mid-decile school in West Auckland and one from a low decile school in Northland) and three Pacific students (all from a low decile school in South Auckland) completed the study.

Of the 11 students who left the study before its conclusion (five Māori, three Pacific and three Pākehā – all but one female), six did so at the end of 2008. Three of these students (one Māori and two Pacific) had completed their Certificate or Diploma studies and decided to not continue with tertiary education. One Pacific student who completed a certificate programme through a polytechnic was prevented from enrolling at university because of problems related to his residency status. One (Pacific) student withdrew from bachelors studies at the end of the first year, and eventually moved to Australia. Other students who withdrew from the research study, either at the end of 2008 or at various points in 2009, did so for a number of personal reasons even though they continued with their university studies.

6. FINDINGS

Although the experience of transition from school to university and the first semester proved challenging for most of the students in the initial study (Madjar, et al, 2009), the challenges they faced were not necessarily resolved by the mere passage of time. The lessons learned in the first semester, such as the need for regular study and adequate preparation for assessments, were not always applied in the second or even third semester. Similarly, many of the students used their experiences to confirm their initial study plans, or just as often, to reassess their experience and performance to date and adjust their study plans accordingly. Although only one student changed universities at the end of the first year, many more made changes to the degree or study majors they had selected initially.

As shown in **Table 1** in the previous section, the majority of the students who completed the study came from a mid-decile school in West Auckland, and most were of European/Pākehā or "other" (non-Māori and non-Pacific) ethnicity. It is important to note that of the 11 students who withdrew from the study four did so because they also withdrew or chose not to continue with their tertiary studies. As mentioned in Section 5, three of these students (two Pacific and one Māori) completed a certificate or a diploma programme and decided not to continue with further tertiary studies. In one case, despite family and student's aspirations, problems with the family residency status made university enrolment financially prohibitive (as the student would have been required to pay international student fees and would not have been eligible for financial assistance). In another case, family expectations that a student take on major responsibility for helping run a family business resulted in delays in university enrolment, attempts to move away from home and enroll at another university, and eventual postponement of any further university studies. The fourth (Pacific) student experienced extensive and ongoing turmoil within a complex family situation. She lacked clear education or career goals and used her year at university largely as a retreat from the demands and stresses of her family situation. Having failed to pass any of the seven papers she attempted over the two semesters she did not re-enroll in the second year and moved to Australia.

6.1 Lessons of the first year

Students who started with clear career goals and aimed to complete vocationally focused degrees in fields such as planning, law, commerce, or health tended to retain

their focus on the initial field of study, even when they encountered obstacles along the way. The most challenging obstacle was selection into the second year of highly competitive limited entry programmes such as medicine and law. Acceptance into law or medical school tended to confirm their original plans and they continued their studies, affirmed in their choice and their ability to reach their goals.

The situation was much more challenging for students who did not do as well in their first year and who failed to win a place in the limited entry programme of their choice. Most often such students regretted not working harder during the first year, questioned their ability to "make it" in their chosen field, and voiced thoughts of other possible study options or even postponing university studies and taking time out to work or travel overseas.

The students most likely to change their field of study were those enrolled in the more generic BA or BSc courses, without definite career goals, and those enrolled in a conjoint degree or a double major. These students tended to use their experience in the first year to decide which subjects they found interesting and enjoyable, which subjects required more work than others, or which were likely to lead to possible career options. Students enrolled in conjoint degrees that included law waited until the second year to find out whether they had "made it" before deciding to drop the second degree (in arts or commerce) and concentrate on law. The second degree had served its purpose as a back-up option, but was now seen as too demanding or likely to jeopardise success in law.

The few students who continued with a conjoint degree (arts/law, arts/science) past their first year had a strong academic record from school, did extremely well academically in their first year, felt "in their element" at university, and enjoyed the stimulation and challenge of learning and academic life generally.

Of particular concern were students who came poorly prepared for the demands of university study, who lacked clear career goals, and who struggled to become academically engaged within the university environment. This situation was not helped by the influence of peers happy to spend their time "hanging around" the university rather than attending classes or studying. Poor academic results in the first year reinforced these students' feelings of inadequacy and lack of agency, and they tended to drift toward subjects in which they had some success or which offered a sense of connection with their past experiences.

Summer school offered an important second chance to students who took the option. Not only did it offer a chance to "catch up" with the subjects they had failed in the first year, and thus be better prepared for the second year, it also provided smaller classes, more intensive and frequent contact with lecturers and tutors and, just as importantly, exposure to a different peer group, one focused on academic success.

Overall, most students reported feeling more confident and relaxed in the university environment once they commenced the second year of their studies, and resolved to be more organised, to attend classes regularly, to submit their work on time, and to study harder. The key factors in the students' decisions to continue were their educational and career goals, positive academic results in the first year, enjoyment of student life and learning, and having friends who shared their experience and aspirations.

6.2 The stepping stones of persistence and success

When asked what helped them to persist with and succeed in their studies, the most frequent comments referred to:

- Having clear personal goals – the university environment helped if it allowed students to discover and then stay focused on subjects that interested them, which they enjoyed studying, and which offered them an indication of a career that might arise from qualifications in that subject area, whether this be in law, science, film production, or another field.
- Becoming more independent, confident and relaxed in the university environment – this included feeling more self-sufficient and not having to be with friends all the time, negotiating greater independence from parents, feeling less homesick, as well as feeling confident about living in the city, knowing what is expected in terms of academic performance, approaching other students or academic staff as a normal part of being a student, and asking for help from specific people or services, when such help was clearly needed.
- Receiving positive feedback on academic work – staying the distance was helped enormously by feedback that indicated academic progress. For some students that meant passing one out of four papers in semester one, two out of three papers in semester two and, finally, all four papers in semester three. For others it meant getting their first A or A+ grade, even if that did not happen until the fourth semester. Finishing a preparatory certificate, doing well enough to retain a scholarship, being accepted into second year law, or being asked to

tutor first year students, were all positive reinforcements that helped students feel that they were capable of translating regular study into academic success.

- Support of like-minded friends and fellow students – persistence in university required that students associate with others who shared their goals of academic success, who were able to provide mutual support when pressures mounted, motivation lagged, and social life beckoned. Having friends who studied hard and who encouraged each other to keep working, was an important factor in some students not giving up.
- Learning from personal experience and mistakes – persistence at university for some students depended on being able to change attitudes and behaviours they brought with them. This included appreciating the help of a study group or a study pal (rather than persisting in always studying alone); finding a place to study that was conducive to serious work (often this was not at home); learning not to over-commit, whether in terms of number of papers or other activities; intensifying study efforts after a failed assignment or test, and picking up tips from others about study and exam approaches. For one student the turning point was the experience of summer school, particularly the influence of peers intent on academic success. For another student it was a brief note written on her assignment, inviting her to come and discuss the work with the tutor who had marked it. (Even though this happened in the second year, it was the first time the student felt able to approach one of her teachers to seek clarification and guidance with her academic work.)
- The benefits of academic and social engagement in smaller classes – although this was limited to a few students, those who participated in smaller classes, with more regular contact with teaching staff, spoke of being encouraged, supported, and even inspired by staff who were "cool" – knowledgeable, enthusiastic in their teaching, and interested in individual students and their learning.

6.3 The stumbling blocks on the path to academic success

The most frequently mentioned difficulty or challenge was the academic workload and the related stresses of assessment deadlines and dealing with negative feedback. Some students also experienced significant difficulties with family and other demands on their time, and learning to balance such demands with their academic work.

- Academic workload, including the amount of reading required and the size and frequency of assignments, featured as the key stumbling block for students who continued to experience difficulties beyond their first semester. Many were

surprised to find that the volume and demands of study increased as they moved from the first to their second year at university, suggesting that semester three was the most challenging. Some found that the accelerated pathway (taking five rather than four papers per semester) was too demanding and they found themselves "slipping" both in the grades they were achieving and in simply keeping up with the pace of the work expected of them. Some of the students regretted their overconfidence and changed back to four papers the following semester. Others commented on the loss of motivation when they became tired of constant study, with no time for family or social activities. A further de-motivating factor in some cases was the paucity or lateness of feedback on students' written work that tended to be used largely for assessment purposes and less so as a means of enhancing students' learning experiences.

- The stress of assignment deadlines, tests and examinations was a further area of difficulty for some students. Even by the end of their second year at university some students still felt that they did not perform to their potential in the exam situations and were disappointed when their internally earned marks were "brought down" by the exam results. Some still feared "going blank" during exams, or preparing for the "wrong" questions. Those taking law papers were particularly aware of the need to prepare across a broad range of topics and to ensure they did not omit preparing for topics that held little personal interest but could come up in the exams.
- Doing poorly, or failing in critical (or most) papers was a stumbling block that made students question their reasons for being at university, or the choice of a particular degree or major. There were students who failed all or most papers in their first year. There were others who failed only one or two papers (out of eight) but this still had a major impact on their study plans if the failed papers were critical to their chosen field of study in the second year or prerequisites for a major. With progression to more advanced study blocked in some way, students then had to complete additional first year papers, sometimes ending up with too many, before finding an alternative major and being ready to move on to more advanced study.

As students progressed from a preparatory certificate to a degree course, or from first to second year of a degree, some also became aware of the work and commitment required to succeed in their chosen field. Those who struggled to keep up with their classmates and to maintain adequate grades expressed doubts as to their capacity to sustain the effort they knew they would have to

put in for another three or four years, if they were to succeed. Although the students who expressed such feelings were still there at the end of year two, and intending to return, this is an issue that could influence their change of course or withdrawal form university at a later date.

- Balancing study, personal relationships, social life and part-time work required a degree of maturity and skill that not all students mastered. Although very few of the students kept existing or found new part-time jobs in their first year (when their priority was to study and decide later how much time they could spare for paid work), more of them tried to find paid work in the second year. Some established new personal relationships, while others' relationships broke down. Long-distance relationships could be as time and energy consuming as local ones. This was particularly challenging for students who were easily distracted or did not plan carefully enough to ensure that, whatever all the other demands on their time, they still had sufficient time for their academic work. Social distractions were common in hostel situations but just as likely to be reported by those flatting or living at home. Students reluctant to give up regular contact with friends who were not committed to their academic work also struggled to stay focused and to put enough time into their studies.
- For Pacific students especially there was the added demand of family expectations and obligations. While some students were happy to put their family's needs and expectations first, others struggled to find the appropriate balance. Family expectations included childcare for extended family, care of older family members, helping with church or community-based events, or assisting with the family business. In one case a student missed a whole semester of study because of the timing and length of the family holiday in the Islands. In another case, and despite attempts to find an alternative, a student withdrew from her studies in order to take a major responsibility for running a family business. For Māori students from rural areas, living a long way from home, the challenge was in not being able to share in family events, be these happy ones such as birthdays, or sad ones such as funerals.
- Even in the second year, there were students who felt that lack of adequate or appropriate academic preparation at school (e.g. in calculus or chemistry), and lack of strong study skills made university study a daily struggle. They did not necessarily envy their classmates who seemed to put in less effort for greater returns, but they did feel that they always had to work harder than other students, just to try and keep up.
- Poor time management skills, procrastination, and lack of personal agency created considerable difficulties for the students who even by the end of the

second year were still missing classes, submitting their work late, and adopting the “last minute” approach to their academic work. Although some students who started without clear academic goals developed these during the first year, there were still students in the second year who lacked clear sense of direction and commitment. They tended to be late with their applications or to make frequent changes to their study programmes. One student, for example, changed her study major each semester. Commuting time and early morning lectures were often given as reasons for irregular class attendance, and “procrastination” as a reason for late submissions of written work or submissions of poorly prepared work. One student was honest enough to comment on lying about family issues in order to get extensions of time for critical assignments.

- Financial concerns that were less evident in the first semester became serious for a number of students as time passed. Students who spent beyond their limit during the first year resulting in bank overdrafts knew that summer work would be essential to allow them to return for their second year. Lack of knowledge about available assistance also resulted in students taking actions that jeopardised their chances of academic success. For example, a student who was unsure how she would pay for her accommodation once her student allowance stopped, spent many hours looking for paid employment, instead of preparing for the upcoming final examinations. She was unaware of the StudyLink emergency unemployment assistance available to students in her situation. In other cases, students who were financially dependent on their families did not always feel able to give priority to their studies, if their contribution was required elsewhere.

6.4 Factors that sustained students through the university experience

- When asked what helped them to persevere and sustained them through good and bad times at university the most frequent answer related to having and working towards the goal of a university degree and pursuing a satisfying career. The rigorous demands of a university degree could be endured (and even enjoyed) in the short term if they ensured longer term goals. Even students who came with more passion than clarity in terms of their academic goals had realised the importance of settling on a planned programme of study. Having a clear goal was particularly important when students either chose or were required to take a paper that held little interest or required more work than

other papers. Although some students talked about their ultimate goal being able to help others, they had to accept that to reach that goal they needed first to achieve a professional qualification and university degree.

- For many students their love of learning and the enjoyment of being in a stimulating and challenging learning environment was an additional factor that helped them stay on course. They often commented on enjoying the challenge of learning new subjects or topics, as well as their growing confidence, freedom to meet new people, and to choose how to use their time.
- Becoming successful, and receiving positive feedback on their academic work, was an added bonus for some students but a critical factor in what sustained other students. Students who came well prepared for university study took it for granted that they would (or at least, could) achieve high grades and excel in their studies. Students who were less well prepared, or less confident of their abilities to rise to the demands of university study, needed the reassurance that they indeed were capable of academic achievement and excellence. (A student who failed most of his papers in the first year, but achieved an A grade in a paper in his fourth semester, felt that he finally belonged in the university.)
- Family aspirations that were not necessarily internalised by individual students made the transition to university particularly challenging for some students. Similarly, the pressure of the expectations that students would be available for family and communal activities, created difficulties and stumbling blocks for some students. Even so, a number of students identified their families' hopes and aspirations as the stronger motivator that sustained them, particularly during difficult times. Left to themselves they would have given up, but knowing how much hope and pride their parents and families had invested in their success, they persisted. In some cases family aspirations were for the individual student, as in the case of a student who was tempted to give up and move to Australia, but whose mother's strong advice convinced her to stay and complete her degree, and then decide where she wanted to live. In a more practical sense students also reported feeling sustained by their families' financial and practical support. The condition that ongoing financial support would depend on their academic results acted as an added incentive to apply themselves to their studies.
- Some students also identified their personal faith in god and spiritual life they shared through church activities as an important factor that sustained them through challenging experiences.

- Finally, a number of students also credited their friends and fellow students with not only helping them to persevere in their studies but also in helping them to enjoy student life.
- Other factors mentioned included a particular Māori support person, and a particular Pacific support person; living away from home and being able to focus on own goals and plans; regular gym sessions as a way of staying physically fit; the joy of playing basketball, and having relaxing family holidays away from the big city.

Students who were able to follow their chosen path from the beginning and who were successful in their studies approached the end of their second year of university studies with confidence and a sense of achievement. They were settled in terms of their academic goals, although open to new opportunities such as postgraduate study.

Students who encountered barriers or stumbling blocks along the way – not being accepted into a university or course of their choice, having to undertake a preparatory certificate course, or who were not successful in competing for a limited number of places in selective programmes such as law – had to re-evaluate their goals and the strategies for getting there.

Some of the students who struggled with academic engagement and who did poorly in their first year, left at the end of that year, but those who persisted had a much clearer appreciation of the mistakes they had made, of the direction they wanted to follow and where they hoped to arrive. These students still needed the support and help usually provided to first year students, but they were more aware of the need for such support and more ready to ask for it.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As noted in the earlier report on transition from school to university (Madjar, et al, 2010), only one student withdrew from university during the first semester. Other students who found the transition process difficult and who had limited success in their academic work, decided to continue, at least until the end of the first year. The end of the first year was also the watershed for students hoping to get into the second year of selective programmes such as law or medicine, and for those enrolled in conjoint degrees. Hence it was not surprising that, for some students, the transition to second year proved just as challenging, or even more so, than the transition from school to university. It is important to note that students whose difficulties related largely to their academic engagement and performance were likely to persist into their second year of study. Students who withdrew, or did not return, did so for more complex reasons. They had either completed a certificate or diploma and were keen to find paid employment, or were involved in family situations that prevented them enrolling or continuing with their studies. Pacific and Māori students were overrepresented among students who did not persist beyond their first year, but they were also more likely than other students to report complex family or other problems that made ongoing study difficult or impossible.

When available, the summer school option provided an opportunity for students who had failed compulsory or prerequisite papers to salvage their first year track record, by completing these papers before the start of the second year. What should not be overlooked, in terms of the benefits of the summer school option is that it also provided a different learning environment for students – smaller classes, more intensive study, greater contact with academic staff, and exposure to peers who were motivated to work and succeed. For one student the experience of summer school was a turning point; finally appreciating what university study could be like, and how satisfying it was to succeed.

Students who continued into the second year of their studies and were still there at the end of the second year attributed their persistence and success to attributes that they brought with them from school such as clear personal goals and enjoyment of learning. They also identified positive feedback on their academic work, the quality of academic and social engagement with academic staff in smaller classes, a growing sense of confidence and independence, peer support, and learning from experience, as the stepping stones that helped them to remain focused on their academic path and to generally do well in terms of their academic achievement.

Even students who did well academically identified heavy academic workload as a stumbling block. This was even more of a challenge for students who did less well academically or who struggled to make the grade. Poor time management, even towards the end of their second year, and inadequate academic engagement, combined with stress of assessment deadlines and negative feedback, contributed to poor academic results, which in turn contributed to lack of confidence in their capacity to be successful. For some students external pressures such as family demands and financial concerns also acted as stumbling blocks. For these students the outcomes included slower progress, changes to study plans toward subjects they found easier, or withdrawal from or failure to re-enroll at university.

In this context it is important to appreciate that at least some students who struggled with what it is to be a university student in their first year, did seem to learn from their mistakes and from positive examples around them, and were able to improve their academic work and outcomes in the second year. Although the path was smoother and easier for students who came better prepared and more ready for academic work, it was possible for other students to overcome the initial difficulties and to begin to make progress in their academic studies and along the path to eventual success.

Having a clear goal, and a determination to reach it, was identified as the strongest sustaining factor that helped students stay motivated and focused on their studies. For some students the love of learning and a feeling of being in the right place for what they wanted to do and achieve at this time of their life, was all that they needed to keep going. Other students were more dependent on others: drawing on positive feedback from their lecturers and tutors, family support and aspirations, and the support of friends and fellow students. Personal faith in god was important to some students as were individual mentors or advisers who helped individual students over the difficult patches of the journey.

Ultimately, students who felt pressured or overwhelmed by external demands on their lives were the most likely to withdraw from their studies. Some of these students had struggled academically as well, while others performed well in their first year. Those who persisted with their studies did so for a variety of reasons: some with a clear goal – others having to find a sense of direction; some feeling at home in the university environment – others taking time to adjust to it; some as academic high flyers – others needing to learn how to become effective learners in a new setting. All of them

completed their second year at university clearer about their plans for the future and more confident about reaching their goals.

Personal experiences of the students who persisted to the end of their second year at university and to the end of the research project are instructive, and indicate that having a clear personal goal and determination to reach it are the most powerful sustaining factors that help students stay on track, regardless of how smooth or challenging the experience. Not all of these students excelled academically, although a number proved to be outstanding. Knowing what they wanted to achieve (be it in arts, film, commerce, science, or law), and why, helped them to keep going and to feel confident of reaching their goal. Such resilience was critical for students who were keen on a selected field of study but did not find the path to their goal as easy as they had hoped.

Academic preparation at school was a critical element in whether students could remain on their chosen path. Those with solid academic preparation were more likely to be selected for and to cope with the study in their chosen field, whereas those with less adequate preparation tended to change their direction, looking for courses they would cope with and enjoy, and moving away from those that proved academically too difficult. Thus students with less than ideal preparation were not necessarily ready to give up on university study, but were often forced to change their plans and adjust their aspirations in terms of what they could achieve.

Students who withdrew from university often did so for a variety or a combination of reasons, with external factors (including family difficulties or expectations) often playing a determining role.

The findings of this study raise questions about the adequacy of transitional and ongoing support for students who clearly struggle to become academically engaged, to find direction as their initial study choices prove inappropriate or too challenging, and to persist despite stumbling blocks on their pathway to academic success. The fact that some students need more than one year to find their way suggests a need for stronger transitional support both early in their student experience and in the period between the first and second year of study.

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Starpath
A University of Auckland Partnership for Excellence

Starpath Project
The University of Auckland,
Epsom Campus, Faculty of Education
Private Bag 92019, Auckland
starpath@auckland.ac.nz
www.starpath.auckland.ac.nz