First-year students' experiences at university – A Samoan case

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Abstract

Student attrition in the first year at university is a global issue. This article reports on a study of 143 first-year students from the Faculty of Education (FoE) at the National University of Samoa. While students appeared to be positive about the technical support available to them, they did not fully utilise other support services such as academic advising, counselling and learning support services. The study findings suggest that many participants were not autonomously motivated to access the services available to them, nor did they fully participate in tutorial classes. "Self-determination theory" is used to explain the relationship between attrition at university and levels of self-motivation. We argue that many students are not fully prepared for university life and suggest that a collaborative relationship between colleges and universities is important to prepare students for university life.

Introduction

Student attrition in the first year of university is an ongoing global concern (Brinkworth, McCann, Mathews, & Nordstrom, 2009; Soiferman, 2017). Wilcoxson (2010) notes that "approximately half of all attrition occurs in the first year of studies" (p. 624). This concern is also prevalent in Samoan universities, although no research has been undertaken to explain this phenomenon. Driven by the desire to know more about why many students dropped out during their first year, we surveyed first-year students from the Foundation Certificate of Education (FCE) program at the National University of Samoa (NUS).

The FCE program targets first-year students who have an interest in teaching. An ongoing concern in the FoE has been the high number of students who, once enrolled, do not complete the program. Some students failed and others withdrew. In early 2016, an analysis of the graduation rates of students who enrolled in four foundation programs at the University from the period 2006 to 2015 was undertaken. The analysis indicated that the graduation rate for FoE students has always been very low compared to other faculties at NUS (refer Table 1) and further confirms the high numbers of student withdrawal or failure during their first year.

Table 1: Graduation Rates Compared of the Foundation Certificate Programmes of Four Faculties between two five-year Periods: 2006–2015

Faculties	2006 - 2010	2011 - 2015	% Change
Faculty of Arts	65.9	67.7	1.8
Faculty of Nursing	46.4	46.6	0.2
Faculty of Science	69.8	68.3	-1.5
Faculty of Education	35.2	31.7	-3.5

(Adopted from a presentation by Asofou So'o during a FoE staff meeting June 2016).

The aim of this study was to:
1. survey students enrolled in the 2016 foundation education program at the FoE about their views and experiences as first-year students at the National University of Samoa;
2. report on how their university experiences may have affected their academic performance at the university.

Literature review

A common assumption made by many university educators and those in academic institutions is that first-year students who are fresh out of high school are ill-prepared for university life (Krause & Coates, 2008). The perception is that these students are "disengaged academically, unmotivated, can't write and spell, have a ten-minute attention span and expect instant gratification" (Barefoot, 2000, p. 13). Inherent in this view is the notion that first-year students are too dependent on lecturers and lack the autonomous skill expected of a university student.

In spite of these assumptions, the literature also notes that the transition from high school to university can be a very stressful and challenging experience for most students leading to many either dropping out or failing in their first year of university study (Brinkworth et al., 2009; Soiferman, 2017). Factors which seem to affect students' transition from high school to university include: students' level of expectations, their goals for entering university and the manner in which they prepare for and adapt to university life (Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987). Other factors include the lack of support mechanisms which are available at university to support students (Awang, Kutty, & Ahmad, 2014) and the university's expectations of students (Lowe & Cook, 2003). These factors, as reported in the literature, will be explored further in the next sections.

Students' expectations of university life can affect the way they adapt to the university environment. Holdaway and Kelloway (1987), while acknowledging the university as an alien world to many high school graduates, also added that students have varied expectations and aspirations of university life. While some students are excited and enthusiastic, others will be apprehensive and uncertain as to what university life will be like. Many students enter university assuming that the academic demands they

experienced at secondary school will be no different from that which they will encounter at university (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

Universities' expectations of students can also impact on a student's transition. Universities often expect students to adjust immediately to the teaching and learning style at university. The learning approach at university can be quite different from the type of teaching and learning that occurs at high school. There is also an expectation by the university for students to become independent (Leese, 2010) and self-regulated learners at the tertiary level (Lowe & Cook, 2003). If students are not already independent, self-regulated learners, they will not automatically become so upon entering tertiary-level study. The fact that students are not a homogenous group, while obvious, is worth noting as students adjust and adapt to university life.

Student rates of adjustment and of academic success in the first year are closely linked to how well prepared students are upon entering the university (Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987). The university can play a significant role in easing student transition. Most universities provide an orientation programme for new students. These vary in length, although most are reported as being too generic and providing insufficient time and information to assist students become familiar with the new environment, programs, courses, and timetables (Leese, 2010). Furthermore, orientation programmes, irrespective of their initial effectiveness, do not preclude the importance of ongoing support, particularly throughout the first semester (Beaumont, Moscrop, & Canning, 2016).

Another way that the university can contribute to student transition to university is by supporting students' sense of well-being (Awang et al., 2014). Peel (2000) found that many first-year students felt secluded, had the perception that they were just a number, and felt that most staff displayed a lack of interest in them. They "struggled for motivation and quietly slipped away" (p. 32). Awang et al. (2014) stressed the need for universities to address concerns of students and to consider ways to support them. They also emphasised social support from family, peers, and the university community.

While a smooth student transition is important in the first-year university experience, student goals and motivation for attending university are also significant. Holdaway and Kelloway (1987) cited results of a survey by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (1986) of more than 192,000 US freshmen about their reasons for entering university. They found that the most important reasons students identified were to get a better job (83%), followed by learning more about things of interest (74%); to be able to make more money (70%); and to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas (61%).

Lowe and Cook (2003) explained that, while students seemed motivated to enter university, once at university some tended to lose the motivation to pursue their studies and then withdrew. Whether this loss of interest is the result of the mismatch of expectations between students and the university, a lack of general preparation by the student, the lack of support from the university or student motivation, is the focus of this study.

Theoretical framework

To understand factors that affect students' attitudes to their studies, self-determination theory (SDT) is used in this study to understand and explain the affect that students' attitudes have on their studies. This section offers a brief explanation for SDT, its nature and how it works as a theory to frame this study. According to Deci and Ryan (2015), SDT is a theory of human motivation that examines a wide range of phenomena across gender, culture, age, and socioeconomic status. As a motivational theory, it identifies and explains the forces that influence behaviour leading to action. Further, it addresses how people's behaviour is regulated in the various domains of their lives. Self-determination theory categorises two types of motivation: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Individuals who are autonomously motivated are self-regulated and can act under their own volition. Controlled motivation, on the other hand, involves an individual who acts out of obligation or by use of force or coercion. An individual who is motivated to act by controlled motivation is driven by external forces and without the privilege of choice. Autonomous and controlled motivation can be differentiated by the intrinsic or extrinsic forces that lead to action.

According to Deci (1975), intrinsic motivation means people are engaged in an activity because they find it interesting, enjoyable, or fun; this is analogous to autonomous motivation. Intrinsic motivation is reflected in individuals who act of their own volition because of their interest or love for the activity, such as gardening or playing a musical instrument. Autonomous individuals are not driven by an external force but from an inner drive. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand, involves the use of stimuli to prompt behaviour. Stimuli can take the form of incentives such as rewards, prizes or scholarships or even the desire for social approval. Students can also be extrinsically driven to succeed by threats of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972), assessment deadlines (Amabile, DeJong, & Leper, 1976), and surveillance (Plant & Ryan, 1985). Some students may also be extrinsically motivated if they wish to gain approval from friends or to fulfil family obligations. In Samoa, where competition seems to be the norm, students who compete in their exam results in order to bring status and esteem to the family name can be viewed as being extrinsically motivated (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991).

Another factor that affects motivation is the psychological needs of individuals. Maslow's hierarchy of needs espouses that higher needs can only be met after basic needs are satisfied (Maslow, 1943). Thus if the social and learning environments are unsafe and unsupportive of the learner's needs, learning is unlikely to occur. Ryan and Deci (2009) maintain that supportive instructors lead to autonomously motivated students, who internalise the course material better and achieve higher grades. The concept of autonomous motivation could be negligible for participants in this study. This is because students have come through a schooling system where learning is strictly controlled. At the university, lecturers tend to control the learning situation. One may also argue that, in Samoa, as in learning contexts elsewhere, the use of a grading system and competing for scholarship awards seem to drive students more than autonomous and intrinsic motivation. In addition, the very hierarchical nature of the Samoan culture may inhibit individuals from becoming autonomous learners (Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010).

The present study reports on findings from a group of first-year students who

enrolled to study in the Faculty of Education at the National University of Samoa in 2016. We have investigated the experiences of these students including: the extent to which their expectations were met; how they adapted to university life; and the type of support they received at university. Our interest was in finding what factors may have contributed to high attrition rates for first-year students enrolled in the FoE program at the National University of Samoa over the past decade. We acknowledge the importance of gathering the views of students concerning higher education (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012). Our hope is that, by listening to students' voices concerning issues they encounter in their first year will help administrators and the university to design programs to support first-year students at university. This research is of interest to individuals who teach first-year students and those who design programs for this cohort. In a wider context, it is of interest to universities who are seeking ways to retain students beyond their first-year experience.

Methodology

As the literature highlighted, there are several factors that affect students' transition to university. The main goal for this study was first, to gain an understanding of these factors by surveying first-year students' experiences at university. A second goal was to report on how these experiences may have contributed to high attrition rates for FoE students over the years. The most effective way to achieve these objectives was to survey views of 143 first-year students from the FoE at the National University of Samoa. Surveys are appropriate for gathering data about abstract ideas or concepts that are otherwise difficult to quantify, such as opinions, attitudes, and beliefs (Rickards, Magee, & Artino, 2012). The researchers, who were full-time lecturers, found the use of a survey to be efficient since they were interested in gathering information from a large number of students within a short period of time. Although the survey allows for speedy collection of data from a large number of cases, it is however, limited, in that it does not allow the researchers to delve deeply into the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2003).

The study utilised a survey designed by the Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC) in 2013 to learn more about the experiences of first-year students in order to improve their transition into university. Only Likert-scale-type questions (see below), were used for this investigation in order to focus on less concrete concepts such as motivation.

The survey questionnaire consisted of five sections. Section A collected data about students' reasons for attending university such as: job preparation; desire for a higher education; preparing to earn an international scholarships; to develop academic skills and knowledge; to meet family expectations; and to make friends.

Section B collected information about their orientation experience and their level of satisfaction with their orientation at NUS. This included: their sense of feeling welcome; understanding of the university's academic expectations and how it eased their transition into university life; provision of information about university life and student services; and confidence building.

Section C focused on how successful students adjust to university in three areas:

academic; personal; and practical. In the academic area, the students were asked about adjusting successfully in meeting educational study needs; the program of study that met their objectives; getting academic advice; performance in written assessment; understanding course content; and getting help. In the personal area, questions targeted success in making new friends; involvement in university activities; new living arrangements; a sense of belonging at university; and time management. In the practical area, the questions asked about students' success in moving around the university, as well as library usage.

Section D questions included information related to the level of satisfaction with the university under the following aspects: size of class; instructional facilities; personal safety on campus; concern shown by the university to the student as an individual; general conditions of buildings and grounds, study spaces as well as places for social gathering. Section D also asked about the utilisation of services provided at NUS in addition to levels of satisfaction concerning these services: library facilities; recreation facilities; parking facilities; university social activities; university bookshop; personal counselling services; students learning support services; canteen; academic advising; tutoring services; university email; and computer support services (ICT). In addition, this section collected information about student satisfaction with tutor support; tutor–student relationships; tutor accessibility; and the quality of teaching.

The final section focused on information on students' academic profiles and the grades they expected to receive at the end of their first year at university. It also sought to identify factors that influenced students' decision to attend NUS as well as their level of satisfaction with the program they were enrolled in at the time of this study.

The questionnaires were self-administered within the university premises. Participants were required to complete the questionnaires and return them within a week. Of the 200 questionnaires that were distributed, 143 (more than 90%) were returned.

Results

Since the survey instrument to gather data was more quantitative in nature, a basic descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyse data. The Excel Microsoft application was used to process data into tables and calculate the percentages. We were more interested in the percentage of participants in relation to their responses to questionnaire items.

Section A: Reason for attending University

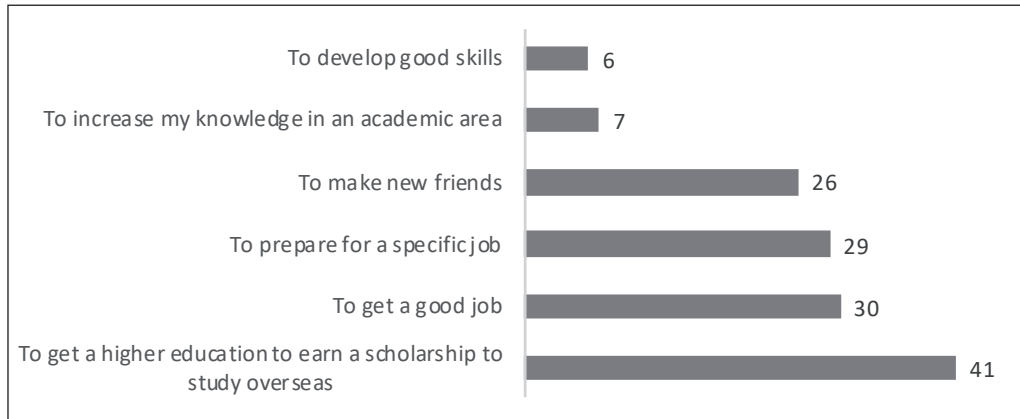**Question:** What was the most important reason to attend university?

Table 2: Reason for attending university

Reason	Value
To develop good skills	6
To increase my knowledge in an academic area	7
To make new friends	26
To prepare for a specific job	29
To get a good job	30
To get a higher education to earn a scholarship to study overseas	41

Table 2 shows that earning a higher education to earn a scholarship to study overseas (41, 28%) was by far the most important reason that drove the participants in their decisions to enter university. The next three most important reasons were to get a good job (30, 21%), preparation for a specific job (29, 20%), and to make new friends (26, 18%). Other reasons such as attending university to increase knowledge in an academic area, develop good skills as well as to meet their parents' expectation (3) were rated quite low. The results confirm that the reason most students decide to enter university at NUS is to gain a scholarship to study overseas as also noted by Dolgoy (2000). Many Samoan families have high expectations for their children and to enter university and study overseas is a desire of every family – these expectations seem to be reflected in the results.

Section B: Level of Satisfaction with NUS Orientation

Question: How satisfied were you with each of the following aspects of the NUS orientation?

Table 3: Satisfaction with orientation at NUS

	Very dissatisfied		Somewhat dissatisfied		Somewhat satisfied		Very satisfied		Don't know		No response	
Feel Welcome	78	55%	38	27%	4	3%	4	3%	7	5%	12	8%
Help understand university academic expectation	9	6%	6	4%	31	22%	81	57%	5	3%	11	8%
Easy transition to university life	8	6%	10	7%	36	25%	69	48%	8	6%	12	8%
Information about university life	8	6%	8	6%	40	28%	67	47%	10	7%	10	7%
Information about student services	13	9%	13	9%	46	32%	49	34%	8	6%	14	10%
Build confidence	6	4%	13	9%	29	20%	68	48%	9	6%	18	13%
Other	16	11%	14	10%	23	16%	22	15%	21	15%	47	33%

Table 3 shows the results of participants' level of satisfaction with aspects of the orientation at NUS. Results show that 57% students were very satisfied with the orientation as it helped them understand academic expectations. The next three aspects of orientation which students found satisfactory but by less than 50% participants include: confidence building (48%), as a means for an easy transition into university life (48%), as a source of information about university life (47%) and to gain information about student services (34%). As noted, apart from the aspect 'help understand academic expectation,' which was rated *very satisfactory* by half of the participants, all other aspects of orientation sat below 50%, which indicates that the orientation program was not to the satisfaction of participants. Another finding that is disturbing is that which relates to students feeling welcome. A total of 55% of participants rated this as an aspect of the orientation with which they were *very dissatisfied*.

Section C: Adjustment to academic, personal and practical aspects at NUS

Results relating to participants' level of success adjusting to academic aspects at NUS indicated that the highest number of participants had success in adjusting in three areas: the study program (83%, *62% very much, 21% some),* understanding course content (81%, *52% very much, 29% some*), as well as success in written assessments (81%, *52% very much, 29% some*). The next three areas where approximately 70% participants seemed to have success adjusting were: finding help with problems (78%, *48% very much, 30% some*), getting academic advice (73%, *55% much, 18% some*), as well as meeting educational study needs (71%, *50% very much, 21%, some*). Overall, results in this section indicate that, in all academic aspects more than 70% participants had either *very much* or *some* success in adjusting to all of these aspects. Nevertheless, even though all areas sat above 70%, we still find the result concerning. This is because there are a number of students (approx. 20%) who seem to struggle with adjustment. It is important that all, not just some, adjust well to their academic life.

Table 4: Degree of adjustment to personal aspects at NUS

|	None		Very little		Some		Very much		Not applicable		No response	
Making new friends	10	7%	33	23%	35	24%	44	31%	7	5%	14	10%
Becoming involved in university activities	11	8%	21	15%	24	17%	66	46%	5	3%	16	11%
New living arrangements	14	10%	13	9%	46	32%	49	34%	11	8%	10	7%
Feeling as if I belong at university	9	6%	14	10%	37	26%	55	38%	8	6%	20	14%
Organising my time to complete my studies	4	3%	14	10%	28	20%	77	54%	6	4%	14	10%

Results (Table 4) relating to participants' level of success in adjusting to personal aspects at NUS indicated that the highest number of participants adjusted well to time organisation to complete studies, (74%, *54% very much, 20% some*). Students also indicated much or some adjustment in areas related to: living arrangements (66%, 34% *very much, 32% some*), sense of belonging (64% 38% *very much, 26% some*), and involvement in university activities, (63%, 46% *very much, 17% some*). The area where students felt the least level of success was related to making new friends (55%, *31% very much, 24% some*). Results revealed that, in all five aspects, participants seem to be adjusting in some way although the percentages are not very high. We are concerned about the 30% of participants who seem to be struggling with adjustment in all these five aspects. Results showed that only 38% participants seem to have a strong sense of belonging. Students need to have a sense of belonging as, according to Awang et al. (2014), it has a positive impact on students' attitudes.

Participants' degree of adjustment to practical aspects at university revealed that most were confident using the library (75%, *55% very much, 20% some*) and finding their way around the university (62%, *41% very much, 21% some*). Results suggest that 25% participants do not seem adjusted to using the library while 38% seem to have issues finding their way around the university. It is disconcerting to realise that there are students who appeared to be lost within the university campus seven weeks after university started. Many lecturers complain about students walking aimlessly around the campus without attending classes. The results however, indicated that a number of students were still not familiar with university life half-way through the year.

Section D (i): Satisfaction with NUS infrastructural aspect

Question: How satisfied are you with each of the following parts of the university?

Table 5: Percentage level of satisfaction with infrastructural aspects of NUS
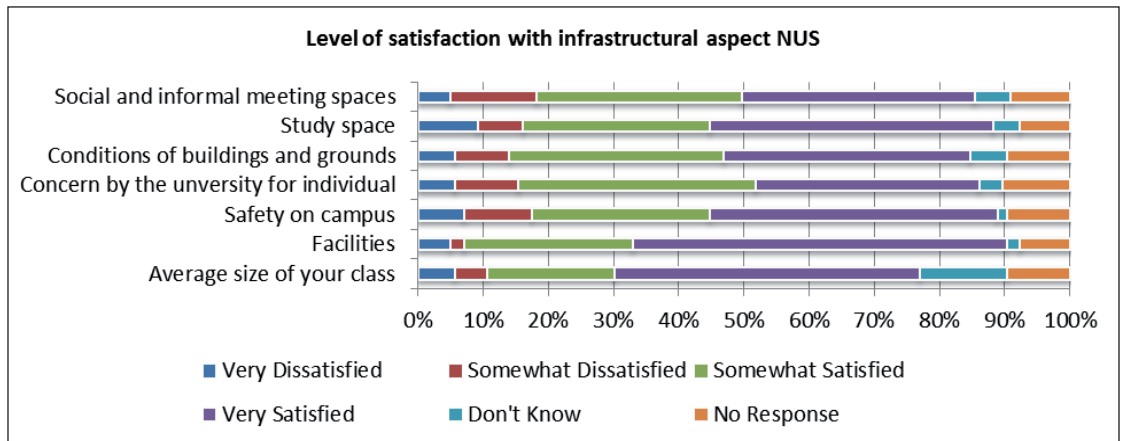
Results (Table 5) on level of satisfaction with university infrastructures shows that the highest number of participants were satisfied with facilities: 83% (*57% indicated being very satisfied, 26% somewhat satisfied*). The next aspects were around 70%

of participants finding *satisfactory* were: study spaces (72%, *43% very satisfied, 29%, somewhat satisfied*; safety on campus aspect (71%, *(44% very satisfied, 27% somewhat satisfied*); conditions of buildings and grounds (71%, (*38% very satisfied, 33%, somewhat satisfied*); and university concern for individual (70%, *34% very satisfied, 36% somewhat satisfied*). The areas that received the lowest scores were: average size of class (67%, *47% very satisfied, 20% somewhat satisfied*); and social and informal meeting spaces (67%, *36% very satisfied, 31% somewhat satisfied*). Results indicated participants' satisfaction with all aspects, however, one needs to note that, except for one aspect that was rated satisfactory by 83%, the rest were rated at 70% and below. This means that there are still students who do not find satisfaction in the university's infrastructure. There is a need for infrastructural aspects to be improved so all students will feel supported in their learning. Students are more likely to be motivated to learn and remain in the university if the infrastructure serves students' needs.

Section D (ii): NUS Support services consumption

Question: Please indicate whether you have used each of the following services at NUS.

Section D of the survey required participants to indicate their usage of services at NUS. Results indicate that the three most-used services are: library facilities (76%), tutorial classes (75%), and the university bookshop (71%). These are followed by the food services/canteen (59%), learning support services (53%), academic advising (52%) and ICT Services (57%). Areas that were used less by participants were: university social activities (47%), counselling services, (43%), recreational and sports facilities (43%), university email (38%), and parking facilities (14%). Results in this section are a cause of major concern as use of these services may be a significant contributor to students' academic performance. For example, results showed that less than half of all participants (43%) utilised counselling services. Another concern relates to the utilisation of learning support services. About half (53%) used learning support service while 36% never accessed this service. The learning support service at NUS was established less than a decade ago mainly to support students in their academic work. A similar number of participants used academic advice services (52%), while 36% indicated they never used these services. Another surprising finding relates to tutorial attendance. Although 75% attended tutorial classes, the number of students (35%) indicating otherwise is a major concern. These responses show that a significant number do not use the services that will assist them to find success in the program. The cultural context may provide an explanation. For example, the very hierarchical system of the *fa'a Samoa* may inhibit students from being forthcoming about their personal views as they may expect to be directed as opposed to being self-directed.

Section D (iii): Satisfaction with NUS technical support services

Participants were also asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the technical services at NUS. A significant number indicated they were satisfied with the library facilities (70%, *50% very satisfied, 20% somewhat satisfied*). Satisfaction levels for other services sat at 60% and below: the university bookshop 66% (*40% being very satisfied, 26%*

somewhat satisfied); social activities 51% (*24% very satisfied, 27% somewhat satisfied*); and recreational facilities 50% (*19% very satisfied, 31% somewhat satisfied*). Responses related to academic advising were notably low with more than 90% of participants not responding and only one percent (1%) being satisfied with this service. Other aspects of the questionnaire which received low responses included: counselling services, learning support services, food service/canteen, tutorial classes, university email, and ICT services. There is some concern about the manner in which this section of the survey was completed. Failure of students to complete sections as noted, may be attributed to students' misinterpretation of the questionnaire. Thus one can see this as a limitation of the research. What is interesting to note is that there seems to be a correlation between the responses in this section and those in the previous section. Aspects of service consumption that sat at 50% in the previous section are the same aspects that received no response in this section.

Section D (iv): NUS academic support services

In Section D of survey, students were also asked to indicate their level of satisfaction of the academic support offered by NUS. Results indicated that the majority are satisfied with the way lecturers and tutors encourage class participation (86%, *59% strongly agree* and *27% agree*). Participants also expressed satisfaction with: their decision to attend university (84%, (*55% strongly agree* and *29% agree*), and the quality of teaching at NUS (81%, *41% participants strongly agree* and *40% agree*). A slightly smaller percentage of participants were satisfied with: lecturers' accessibility outside of class (75%, *36% strongly agree, 39% agree*) and lecturer treatment of students (74%, *36% strongly agree, 38% agree*). The results in this section showed that the majority of participants are satisfied with the academic support available at the university. However, the item, 'lecturer availability,' even though it sits at 75% is still a concern for only 36% *strongly agree* while 39% *agree*, and 25% *disagree*. These responses indicate that some lecturers are perceived to be accessible by some students. Lecturer availability is, therefore, a concern as it is an important support for new students who are trying to settle into the university environment.

Section E: Expected grades, influences, and overall satisfaction

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked three questions:
1. What average grade do you expect to have at the end of your first year at university?
2. Who or what influenced your decision to enrol in this program?
3. How satisfied are you with your current FCE program?

In response to the question about the average grade they expected to attain after their first year of study, survey results show that about half of all participants expected to receive an average grade of 'A' (56%), 29% expected to receive a 'B' grade, while 6% participants expected to receive a 'C' grade. One student expected to receive a 'D'; grade, and 11 (8%) participants did not respond to this question. On the whole, students appeared to be confident about their expected success in the program. However, there is

some concern about the confidence levels of those who did not answer this question as well as the one participant that expected to fail.

Participants were also asked about who or what influenced their decision to enter university. Almost half of the participants (42%) made this decision themselves, while 25% were influenced by their parents or other family members. A further 18% decided to enrol at NUS as a result of their Secondary School Certificate (SSLC) score. These responses indicate that almost half of the participants made autonomous decisions to enter university. The importance of autonomous motivation for first-year students is discussed in the following section.

The final summary question asked participants about their general satisfaction with the Foundation Education program. More than half (69%, *48% very satisfied, 21% fairly satisfie*d) indicated satisfaction. A small number expressed dissatisfaction (*11%, 4% fairly dissatisfied, 7% dissatisfied*). A further 13% indicated that they don't know, and 7% provided no response.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand and explain students' experiences as first-year students at the National University of Samoa with a view to improving their transition from high school to university. While findings revealed some positive experiences, they also highlighted some challenges. On the whole, participants seemed to adjust well to the academic, personal and practical aspects of university life. This also applies to participants' level of satisfaction with aspects of the university's infrastructure. These findings notwithstanding, there were areas of major concern. For example, the under-utilisation of services such as counselling, learning support, academic advising, as well as tutorial classes is a challenge. Results indicated that 44% of participants never using counselling services; 36% did not use learning support services, and 36% did not seek assistance from academic advisors. The 35% of students who claimed that they did not attend tutorial classes is also very worrisome. Tutorial classes are compulsory at university so that students will have access to individual support within a small group. While these data indicate that a smaller number of students are accessing academic services, this remains a concern for the authors, who are also lecturers at NUS. The underutilisation of these services may be contributing to the poor academic performance and high attrition rate of foundation education students over the years.

While the data do not give reasons for the poor utilisation of support services, we can look to the literature for possible explanations. For example, half (55%) of all participants were highly dissatisfied with the welcoming aspect of orientation. If the orientation is perceived as dissatisfactory, that first experience may have a negative influence on further university experiences. Only 38% of participants felt a strong sense of belonging to the university. Awang et al. (2014) explain that students need to have a sense of belonging in order to have positive experiences at university. Further, Leese (2010) argued that students need more time than a few days of orientation in order to develop sufficient familiarity with the expectations and support available at the university.

Another possible reason for students' failure to use the support systems could be

attributed to a lack of self-autonomy once enrolled in their university program. While almost half (42%) of participants seemed to be autonomously motivated to make informed decision to enter university, this may not extend to seeking advice from counsellors and academic advisors. This may be attributed to the hierarchical nature of Samoan culture (Tufue-Dolgoy, 2010). Students may not feel that it is appropriate, nor would they be confident to initiate an approach to people in authority within the university structure. Peel (2000) found that some of the reasons why students slowly disappear from university, is that students perceived that staff were not interested in them; that they are just a number, which they found very demotivating. The correlation between supportive instructors and autonomously motivated students was also explained by Ryan and Deci (2009). They claimed that students who received support from their instructors were likely to become more autonomously motivated and successful in the academic achievement. The same kind of autonomy in students' personal lives will also lead to positive experiences and academic outcomes. Parker, Summerfield, Hogan, and Majeski (2004) explained that one of the most common reasons for first-year students leaving the university is the inability to manage their social life, time, and finances. The role of the university appears to be not just providing this support, but assisting students to access the support that is available.

Findings also seem to suggest that students may not be prepared for this new phase of their academic journey. The widespread responses about overall satisfaction in Section D of the survey seem to indicate students' indecisiveness regarding their program of study. Some students (13%) were undecided about their satisfaction with the program, and others (7%) had no response. This indecisiveness may indicate that students were unsure about what to expect in the program. Geer's (1964) and Becker's (1966) early work suggests that indecisiveness is not unusual. They noted that students had no clear idea about the academic and social demands of university life.

One of the findings that was not surprising relates to grade expectations. Only 58% of participants saw themselves as 'A' grade students. Many students enrol in education and teaching programs as a last option. If their secondary school grades do not qualify them for the Arts, Sciences, and other academic programs, their second choice is often Education. Therefore, many students with lower qualifying grades enrol for programs in the Faculty of Education.

Conclusion

Overall results of this study indicate that, although participants appear positive about most aspects of their university experience, there are also challenging areas which could have contributed to foundation education students' poor academic achievement since 2006. For example, although technical support is accessed by most participants, the same cannot be said for academic support such as academic advice, counselling and learning support services. Similarly, not all students seemed to participate in tutorial classes. We have identified the need to ensure that all new students at NUS value and can easily access these services. Furthermore, we cannot assume that first-year students understand the nature and value of lectures, tutorial, academic counselling and the like, as these concepts may be alien to them. Leese (2010) explored differences between

students' expectations and the reality of university and found that one of the highest challenges encountered by students was "understanding instructional language and terminology" (p. 24). In addition, we note that many participants were not autonomously motivated to seek these services at NUS. We have identified the tension between the cultural context of a strongly structured, hierarchical Samoan society and the context of the university which favours autonomously motivated and self-regulated individuals. This is an important matter which is beyond the scope of this paper.

The study is limited in a number of ways. First, the survey instrument provided quantitative data that did not allow participants to explain their responses; a qualitative approach using interviews could have provided richer data where students could elaborate on their experiences. Second, the study was located within one faculty. Expanding the research to include other faculties would enable a closer examination of its generalisability. A future comparative study could utilise both survey and interviews, to gather information from first-year students and lecturers in other faculties. The study could also explore the concept of autonomous learning within the Samoan context.

Recommendations

Some recommendations are worth consideration if the university aims for high student retention. Findings clearly indicate the need to prepare students well, while still at college, to ease their transition into university. The National University of Samoa might consider working with local colleges preparing students for their first year at university. The Pre-University Prepared Students (PUPS) program (McPhail, 2015), that was used at Queensland University to improve students' transition into university is the kind of program we refer to. The program is embedded in the senior years of secondary education to prepare students for reality of university. The reported success of the program makes it an appealing option for NUS. Finally, we suggest that NUS reviews and extends the length of its orientation program so that students are more aware of the nature and value of the range of academic support that is available to them and so that they can feel a strong sense of belonging to NUS.

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