Moving On from a Bachelor of Arts Degree: Demographic, Academic, and Experiential Factors

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Abstract
Understanding the causes of attrition at the undergraduate level has been an increasing concern in efforts to increase student persistence to graduation. Research has identified demographic, academic, and experiential factors influencing students’ decisions about withdrawing from university. This narrative enquiry was conducted to identify demographic and academic factors as well as learning experiences that may have influenced students’ decisions to withdraw from university. Twenty-one students in a Bachelor of Arts degree programme in a New Zealand university were each interviewed three to six times over their first year and a half at university, and the interview data was analysed thematically. Seventeen students continued their studies, while four withdrew. Relationships were found among academic achievement, ethnicity, and withdrawal. In addition, aspects of students’ learning experiences were identified that could be improved to increase persistence.

Keywords: higher education, withdrawal, retention, case study research

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Introduction
As aptly stated by Engstrom and Tinto (2008), “access without support is not opportunity.” A number of factors have been identified in the literature as contributing to the attrition of undergraduate students. The factors identified have been demographic, academic, and institutional factors, which relate to the learning experiences a student participates in. Many of these factors are context-dependent. This narrative inquiry will consider the main factors identified in the literature as causes of attrition at the undergraduate level and the extent to which these factors were at play for the participants of this research. In addition, analysis of the experiences of the participants over their first year and a half at university will seek to identify additional factors that may have contributed to the students’ decisions to move on from their undergraduate study.

This research adopts a narrative enquiry approach in order to see withdrawal and persistence from the students’ perspectives, perspectives which are often missing from the literature on the topic. In addition, the research was conducted in a New Zealand university, a context about which little has been published on this topic. The research questions for the present study were:

1. How do demographic factors relate to students withdrawing from a Bachelor of Arts degree?
2. How do academic factors relate to students withdrawing from a Bachelor of Arts degree?
3. What are the experiences of students in the first year and a half at university that could be improved to increase persistence?

Literature Review
There are a range of different kinds of factors that contribute to students’ decisions to withdraw from university. The factors of different kinds are interdependent, leading to challenges in attempting to untangle them from each other. Demographic factors have been found to play a role in determining which students will persist and which will withdraw from university before graduation. Academic factors also play a role, and academic preparation for university seems to play a different role from students’ academic success at university in withdrawal decisions. Students’ experiences at university also seem to have a role in these decisions. Of all the factors influencing students’ decisions, their experiences at university can be most easily influenced by institutions in attempts to increase persistence.
Demographic Factors

Students’ demographic characteristics have a significant influence on their likelihood of withdrawing from university. Males are more likely to withdraw from university before completing their programme of study than females. Mabel and Britton (2018) found that across all different types of tertiary institutions, 19.6% of females withdrew early, whereas 23.6% of males did. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2012) found that when compared to females, male students were significantly more overconfident about their ability to achieve, spent half an hour less per day studying than their female counterparts, and achieved significantly less well in terms of their GPA. Higher confidence combined with lower performance is likely to lead to students feeling dissatisfied with their academic experience.

The age of a student at the time of entering university is another factor that contributes to their likelihood of withdrawing before completion. Students who enter university straight after completing secondary school are significantly more likely to complete a degree than those who enter later (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008). This tendency is related to the higher likelihood of older students having other time commitments, such as work and care-giving responsibilities (Grebennikov & Shah, 2012). Perhaps for a similar reason, students who enrol in university full-time are more likely to complete their programme of study that those that enrol part-time (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Willcoxson, 2010).

Ethnicity has also been found to be significantly correlated with university withdrawal. New Zealand census results from 2013 (Statistics New Zealand, 2013) indicate that 20% of the population in New Zealand hold a bachelor’s degree. However, only 10% of Māori and 8% of Pasifika people living in New Zealand reported holding a bachelor’s degree. Part of the difference between these figures likely relates to people who do not enter university. On the other hand, at least part of this difference is likely made up of people who enter university but withdraw before completing a bachelor’s degree. In New Zealand, the education system was introduced by the European colonisers and is based on their ways of communicating and ways of knowing. Thus, Māori students have often been disadvantaged in the education system due to a mismatch between their cultural ways of communicating and ways of knowing and those that are privileged in the education system. Increasingly, people of Pasifika background have also lived in New Zealand and experienced similar mismatches. A sense of belonging is important to students’ persistence at an institution (Leach, 2013; Naylor et al., 2018; Tinto, 2017) and such cultural mismatches are likely to reduce the extent to which students feel that they belong.

However, even if Māori or Pasifika background students are made to feel a sense of belonging in an institution, they may still ultimately withdraw. Mabel and Britton (2018) found that although ethnic minority students were more likely to withdraw from university than ethnic majority students, once other factors had been controlled for, this difference disappeared, showing that there are other factors associated with minority students which ultimately lead to their withdrawal. For example, in New Zealand...
Zealand, students from Pasifika backgrounds often attend lower decile schools (Chu et al., 2013). Therefore, they often arrive at university not sufficiently academically prepared for university-level study (Alkema, 2014) and insufficient academic preparation is one of the strongest predictors of university withdrawal.

**Academic Factors**

The largest number of previous studies have found that the most influential factor in a student’s decision to withdraw from university is their academic achievement after admission (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Harvey & Luckman, 2014; Thomas, 2012; Willcoxon, 2010). Furthermore, a student’s academic achievement in their first semester of study is significantly predictive of later withdrawal, and even their achievement on the first assignment they submit at university (Tower et al., 2015).

Two studies from North America both attempted to understand the reasons behind the strong relationship between academic achievement after admission to university and students persisting to completion. Hu et al. (2012) found that although an increase in GPA equivalent to one standard deviation predicted a 72% increase in the likelihood of a student persisting to graduation, measures of learning achieved were not significantly predictive of persistence. Students gain information about their academic achievement through the grades they receive. However, students may place too much importance on GPA, which may not accurately reflect their actual academic achievement. Interestingly though, Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2012) found almost the opposite to be true: that students entered university overconfident in their likelihood of graduating. Although after entering university the students tended to achieve less well than they had expected, they did not revise their expectations of their own future achievement in line with the GPA evidence they received. The students on average did not expect to increase their effort but did expect their future achievement to be higher than what they were currently achieving. Moreover, Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner’s (2012) results demonstrated that students’ academic achievement in secondary school was the strongest predictor of university academic achievement, yet their secondary school achievement also did not lead to accurate expectations of university academic achievement. The different findings of these two studies demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between academic achievement after admission and the decision to withdraw.

Although Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner (2012) found that students’ previous academic achievement in secondary school did not sufficiently inform students’ expectations relating to their university academic achievement, a number of studies have found that less than optimal academic achievement at the secondary school level is a strong predictor of likelihood of withdrawing from university before completion. Grebennikov and Skaines (2008) found that students who had performed better in secondary school were more likely to remain at university until completion. More specifically, Mabel and Britton (2018) found that students with secondary school academic outcomes in
the bottom quartile of the population are three times more likely to withdraw from university than those with outcomes in the top quartile.

Experiential Factors
The learning students participate in after admission to university does play a role in students’ decisions to withdraw from university, but is generally considered to play less of a role than the academic factors.

One significant learning-related factor which contributes to a student’s likelihood of withdrawing from university is their choice of an appropriate programme of study and appropriate courses within that programme. Harvey and Luckman (2014) found that the Bachelor of Arts degree “is operating as a default option for those who aspire to university but lack specific career plans” (p. 24). If students do not have a specific goal that they are working towards, it may be difficult for them to maintain motivation when they are faced with difficult or less interesting academic tasks. Thus, students who lack commitment to a specific programme of study or career or who are not well advised about course enrolment options are more likely to withdraw (Willcoxson, 2010). Grebennikov and Shah (2012) found that students feeling that a course did not meet their expectations was the most often cited reason for students to leave university within the first year.

On the other hand, Wright (2010) believes that this difficulty is created at the secondary school level. If students have not had the opportunity to study the area they are interested in at secondary school, they have also not had the opportunity to discover the extent of that interest. Thus, if a wider range of subjects are offered at secondary school level, this will help to prepare students for university by giving them a better understanding of their own interests. If students have taken a subject in secondary school and discovered an interest in it, they may be more committed to that subject upon entering university and thus more likely to persist.

Another aspect of course selection that may play a role in students’ decision to withdraw from university is the number of courses they decide to take. Tower et al. (2015) found that the more courses a student was enrolled in, the more likely they were to fail at least one course. Since academic achievement after enrolment has been shown to be one of the most significant predictors of withdrawal (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Harvey & Luckman, 2014; Thomas, 2012; Willcoxson, 2010), encouraging students to take fewer courses in their first year, or even in their first semester of study, may help to increase achievement and thus persistence. Taking fewer courses as they transition to university study may ease a student’s transition to the more independent style of study, allowing them to focus on the development of time-management skills.

The availability of academic support may decrease the influence of academic achievement on student withdrawal. However, ensuring that support services are available is not sufficient. Xuereb (2014) found that traditional students were unlikely to seek
help from university support services, even when they were overwhelmed or struggling with assignments. Universities need to strive to encourage a culture in which receiving support is seen in a positive light, rather than as a remedial measure; as something that successful students do, rather than something that unsuccessful students do.

In relation to the learning which occurs at a university, students’ academic engagement with the course content is the key factor contributing to persistence (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Naylor et al., 2018). One way in which teachers can encourage academic engagement is by making explicit connections between the subject matter in focus and students’ past, present, and future lives (Tinto, 2017). Including students’ lived experiences in teaching content validates their prior knowledge and encourages an increased sense of belonging, especially for students from minority groups. Allowing students to apply the theories or concepts they are learning in the classroom to aspects of their present lives clearly demonstrates the relevance of the learning, while making explicit connections between current learning and their future demonstrates the importance of their current learning to reach their goals. Encouraging academic engagement requires that the course content is challenging enough to make students think, but not too challenging to be able to successfully achieve (Tinto, 2017). This applies not only to the level of the content but also the workload required. If the workload is too high, students may feel that they are incapable of completing a course, whereas if the workload is too light, they may lack academic engagement with the content area and not achieve significant learning. All these factors should be considered when attempting to increase student engagement.

Methods
This study is part of a larger research project looking at students’ experiences of studying in the humanities and social sciences throughout their undergraduate careers. This study focusses on the interview data from the first year and a half at university, which is a subset of the data for the larger project. The purpose of this study was to understand factors involved in students’ decisions to withdraw from university. Students were recruited through posters around campus as well as information posted on the course management platform in several large first semester, first year courses. Twenty-one students volunteered to be included in the larger project and participated in interviews which constituted the data for this study. In this study, students who withdrew within the first one and a half years of study were compared to those who persisted beyond the one-and-a-half-year mark.

Research Methods
Narrative enquiry was employed in this research, through the thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each of the 21 participants were interviewed within the first four weeks of entering the university, and then again at the end and
beginning of each semester over the first year and a half of their three-year Bachelor of Arts degrees. This meant that students who persisted in their studies for at least one and a half years had each participated in six interviews. In addition, any student who withdrew from the university at any time during their first one and a half years of study was invited to participate in one final interview to discuss their decision to withdraw.

Questions encouraged the participants to share their experiences with the researcher. The researcher asked different questions at each interview. However, the initial questions were general questions about students’ experiences at university. For example, “How did your semester go?”, followed by “Were there any surprises, anything different from what you expected?”, followed by asking about each course the student had taken: “You took course A, how did that go?”. Each of these general questions was extended through follow-up questions, which probed into what the students said to reveal more about their experiences at university. In addition, some specific questions were added at different stages throughout the year and a half.

The same researcher conducted all the interviews, meeting with each participant four times a year, allowing the opportunity for a relationship to develop between the researcher and participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and imported to NVivo for thematic analysis. The transcripts were read and analysed iteratively, allowing themes to emerge from the transcripts, and to be further refined throughout the reading and coding process. The researcher then attempted to draw comparisons between the students who withdrew from the university within the first year and a half and those who did not in order to gain a deeper understanding of the factors at play in withdrawal decisions.

Context
In the New Zealand context, 16 years of education are required to attain a Bachelor of Arts degree. However, unlike in many other contexts, 13 of those years are spent in primary and second education and just three years are spent in tertiary education. In many North American contexts, the first year of tertiary education is spent completing 'Basic Education', after which students choose a major to specialise in for the remaining three years. The New Zealand system is almost identical, except that 'Basic Education' occurs at secondary school. Students choose their major at the time of enrolment into university and study that specialization for the entire three years of undergraduate study.

Statistics from the New Zealand Ministry of Education (2018) show that 50% of secondary school leavers leave school with a university entrance qualification, allowing them to progress directly to university study. Of those who do enter university, 10% withdraw from their studies within the first year and a further 8% withdraw after completing at least one year of study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019). However, as demonstrated by Harvey and Lucknow (2014), students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts degree seem to withdraw at higher rates;
in the Bachelor of Arts degree at the university where this research was conducted, data from the cohort who entered in the 2015 academic year showed that 20% withdrew within the first year, 9% withdrew within the second year, and the remaining 71% of students completed their qualifications.

In the context where this study was conducted, the number of Māori and Pasifika background students is higher than in the general population. Whereas the 2013 New Zealand census results (Statistics New Zealand, 2013) showed that the general population of New Zealand consisted of 14% Māori and 7% Pasifika background residents, the 2015 Bachelor of Arts cohort consisted of 16% Māori and 8% Pasifika background students.

**Participants**

In order to exclude uncontrollable demographic factors in this study, participants were recruited from a narrow group of students who both make up the largest portion of the student population and have been found to be less likely to withdraw from their studies. This study focussed on domestic students, who had been born and grown up in New Zealand, and who had completed education at a New Zealand secondary school in the year immediately prior to their enrolment at university. The initial group of students were recruited to participate in the study at the beginning of the 2019 academic year, having completed secondary school at the end of the 2018 academic year. Within these parameters, the researcher attempted to recruit a group of students who represented as wide a range of academic performance as possible prior to their admission to university and who were largely representative of the ethnic make-up of New Zealand.

Twenty-one students were recruited to participate in this study at the beginning of the 2019 academic year. They consisted of 4 males (19%) and 17 females (81%). In terms of the ethnicity of the participants, 13 were New Zealand Europeans (62%), 4 identified as Māori (19%), 3 identified as Pasifika background students (14%) and the remaining participant was a New Zealander of African heritage. As shown in Table 1, the proportion of students from each ethnicity roughly matches the proportions of students from each ethnicity in the general population of domestic students in the Bachelor of Arts programme.

Lastly, in terms of their academic achievement prior to entering university, all 21 students had completed the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) which is offered at New Zealand secondary schools. Nine students had achieved an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Proportion in the general population</th>
<th>Proportion in the Bachelor of Arts</th>
<th>Proportion in this study</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Māori</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pacific</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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‘Excellence’ endorsement in NCEA, 6 had achieved a ‘Merit’ endorsement, 5 had ‘achieved’ NCEA, and the remaining student did not disclose their secondary school achievement level. In the nation as a whole in 2018, 15% of students achieved an ‘Excellence’ endorsement, 27% achieved a ‘Merit’ endorsement, and 9% achieved NCEA, while the remaining 49% of the student population did not achieve NCEA (New Zealand Qualification Authority, 2019). Since achieving NCEA is an admission requirement for entering university, any study of university students would only focus on the top 51% of academic achievers at the secondary school level. However, as shown in Table 2, the recruited students are also somewhat skewed, consisting of a larger number of students who received an ‘Excellence’ endorsement and a larger number who ‘achieved’ NCEA, whereas students who received a ‘Merit’ endorsement are underrepresented in this study.

Findings

As anyone who has been involved in in-depth longitudinal research will understand, not all participants were interviewed at the end and beginning of each semester of study, as planned. This was largely due to students becoming non-engaged in their university studies and not being available on campus for interviews, despite being enrolled as full-time students throughout the study. In addition, summer courses are optional, with the majority of students choosing to study for two semesters each year and take a break over the summer. Each student in this study participated in three to six interviews.

Overall, there were 17 students who persisted in their studies for at least one and a half years and four students who withdrew from the university within the first one and a half years: Three of whom persisted for one year (two semesters) and participated in five interviews, while the remaining student withdrew from university three weeks before the one and a half year point, but nevertheless only participated in three interviews in total. Thus, the total proportion of students who withdrew from study within the first year and a half was 19%. This is similar to the usual withdrawal rate within the Bachelor of Arts degree. An overview of the data collected can be seen in Table 3. Pseudonyms are used for all students.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Result</th>
<th>Proportion of students in the general population</th>
<th>Proportion of students in this study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achieved</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merit</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Demographic Differences
The demographic factors relevant to the participants in this study are gender and ethnicity. Although only 19% of the participating students were male, 75% of the male students withdrew from university in the first year and a half, whereas only one female student did. The fact that male students are in the minority in a Bachelor of Arts programme may exacerbate their tendency to withdraw.

The participants included 19% Māori and 14% Pasifika students, compared to 62% New Zealand European. However, 25% of the Māori students and 33% of the Pasifika background students withdrew from their studies, whereas 15% of the New Zealand European students did. After this attrition is taken into account, the ethnic make-up of the students who persisted beyond the first year and a half consisted of a slightly higher number of New Zealand European students and slightly lower numbers of Māori and Pasifika students: 65% New Zealand European (11), 18% Māori (3), and 12% Pasifika (2). Although the proportion of Māori and Pasifika students have decreased relative to the number of incoming students at the beginning of this study, they are still higher than the proportions of people with Māori and Pasifika background in the general population.

Academic Achievement Differences
The results of this study show that students who ‘achieve’ NCEA are more likely to withdraw than those who obtain a ‘Merit’ or ‘Excellence’ endorsement. Out of the five students in the initial cohort who had ‘achieved’ NCEA, three withdrew from university in the first year and a half (60%). On the other hand, out of six who had obtained a ‘Merit’ endorsement, none withdrew, and out of the nine who had obtained an ‘Excellent’ endorsement, only one withdrew (11%). At the end of one and a half years, 47% of the remaining students had entered university with an ‘Excellent’ endorsement, 35% had entered with a ‘Merit’ endorsement, and just 12% had entered having ‘achieved’ NCEA.

There was a relationship among academic achievement in the first year at university, ethnicity, and withdrawal. The students from Māori and Pasifika backgrounds who withdrew from university did so after failing multiple courses at university. One of these students, Nate, passed two of the six courses he took in his first year of study, while the other (Ned) did not manage to pass any courses, despite studying for almost one and a half years. On the other hand, the two New Zealand European students who withdrew were successful in gaining credits towards their degrees; one passed all her courses in her first year (Amanda) and the other, Ethan, passed six out of the seven courses he had enrolled in his first year. Moreover, the Māori and Pasifika students who withdrew talked about the academic difficulties they faced, while both of the New Zealand European students seemed to have a change of heart and feel that university was not the best route for them to meet their career goals (see the reasons for withdrawing from university below). While the New Zealand European students who
withdrew from university did achieve less well than their continuing counterparts, academic difficulties they faced seemed to be related to lack of engagement, rather than academic preparation for university.

**Learning Experiences**
The learning experiences that students shared during their interviews were analysed thematically. Three main themes and two sub-themes emerged from this data, which can be seen in Figure 1.
One point of contrast between the students who withdrew from university and those who persisted was their views about seeking help from instructors and asking questions. Two of the students who withdrew from university stated that they were unwilling to ask questions in front of other students for fear of being considered “dumb.” Although one of these students did mention that he would approach his tutor at the conclusion of the tutorial to ask his questions one-to-one, it is easy to imagine that if one waits until the end less questions will be asked overall. In addition, one of these two students mentioned that he would never e-mail a lecturer to ask a question: “I feel quite scared approaching my lecturer.”

In contrast, several students who persisted at university mentioned having much more proactive approaches to seeking help and asking questions. One persister, Lara, stated:

I want to know how I can improve . . . I’d go to the teacher and ask how I could improve and they’d say, ‘but you’ve got a good enough grade, you don’t need to’. But I always want to know how to improve.

Another persister, Amelia, mentioned that it depended on how much effort she had put into the assignment; “If I’ve put in the effort and it’s not a good mark, well then I’d go and seek help and find out why, so that I can rectify it for the next one.”

**Self-Directed Study Habits**
Two main themes were apparent in the data relating to self-directed study habits. The first was student perseverance in their self-directed study and the second was self-assessment as a self-directed learning strategy.
Perseverence. Several students mentioned strategies for learning new discipline-specific vocabulary. Two persisters discussed this as well as one student who withdrew from university. One persister, Lara, mentioned that

It’s quite easy to just sit there and listen and write down what they’re saying. But then it was often important for me to go back to the Powerpoint. It could be like, ‘ah, so that’s what the Anthropocene is’, because I didn’t actually understand it at the time.

Another persister, Nancy, explained that

Every time I don’t understand something, like you can even see it in my notes, I put them in bold or aside. And then I go through later when I have time and first look up the definitions. If I don’t understand the definitions, then I look at videos, find examples or people explaining . . . And usually it would make more sense after that . . . just little animations, like ‘this is what intersectionality is’ . . . I’m like, okay, that’s way simpler to understand, now I know what that is.

Ned, who withdrew from university, had a similar approach to learning vocabulary. He too would make note of words he did not understand during lectures and look them up later in a dictionary. However, he said that he often did not understand the definitions. He did not take the extra step of searching for further information online like Nancy did. Instead, he would often just give up if he did not understand what was written in the dictionary. This led to a situation in which there were an ever-increasing number of discipline-specific and academic terms that he did not understand, making it increasingly hard for him to follow the lectures.

Self-Assessment. The second theme relating to self-directed study habits was students’ use of assessment rubrics. One persister and two students who withdrew from university mentioned assessment rubrics. Olive, a persister, reported

We did have one sort of like a rubric that we could look at before going into [an assignment] . . . I looked at it. I didn’t so much look at it to figure out how to do it, but just kind of thinking like, tried to give myself a grade before handing it in if that makes sense.

One student who withdrew, Ned, admitted that “This is probably a bad thing but I’m not too concerned about marking criteria . . . as lots of people are. . . . if you memorized all the material you will know how to write it, you’d be fine.” Similarly, another student who withdrew, Ethan, stated “I never paid attention to the rubrics.”

University Support Services
All four students who withdrew, as well as nine students who persisted at university, mentioned support services offered by the university. Three of the four students who
withdrew mentioned the university’s main support service, although none of those students had used the service. The fourth student was aware of a support service offered by the library, but similarly had not used that service. There were, however, support services that three of these four students did use during their time at the university. Amanda was a member of two PASS (Peer Assisted Study Support) groups and actively participated in these groups during her first semester. Nate participated in two different kinds of support services offered specifically for Māori students: MPRs which are weekly two-hour revision sessions, in addition to one-to-one study support sessions offered by the Māori support centre. Ned attended support sessions at the Pasifika support centre. However, he mentioned that he did not actively engage in the sessions, instead just listening to the contributions of others: “I was just really shy at the time and was too scared to ask for help.” When discussing support offerings with these students, it was clear that three of the four students who withdrew from university within the first year were very academically engaged. Ethan was the only one who was not.

Nine of the 17 students who persisted at university specifically mentioned being aware of the university’s main support service. One student, Lorna, had heard that the service was “really good” and planned to go in future years, but had not used the service in her first year. Another student, Anna, planned to “definitely make use of the student learning resources” at the beginning of her first year, but never actually used the service. Another student, Alia, who had not used the support services available wished that she had done so:

I wish that I made some kind of schedule for me to stick to, so when I get home I have to study two hours on this and two hours on this. I would have gone to student learning, that would probably be the biggest thing, because . . . I didn’t know how much homework you needed to do.

Finally, one of these 17 students actually did use the main student learning support service, and commented that “Going to student learning was so helpful.” Interestingly, the only student of the 21 involved in this study who used the university’s main student support service was the one included on the Deans list for excellence at the end of her first year of study, arguably the participant with the best academic performance over the first year and a half.

In addition to the main support service, one persister (Anna) knew about support offered at the library, and another persister (Nancy) had actually used this support and found it “really helpful.” In general, these students were aware of support offerings available to them, and there was a general tendency for them to feel that they were well supported as first-year students. Rebecca mentioned that there was “more help than I thought there would be,” and when Elsa was asked whether anything about university had surprised her, she stated that “actually the support services. I didn’t know there were so many out there. Like so many people wanting to help you and stuff.”

Despite awareness of the support services, the majority of these students had not used them. However, a larger proportion of students who withdrew from university had
used some kind of support service offered by the university (75%) than those who persisted at university (12%). This suggests that engagement in their academic studies was not an issue for the majority of students who withdrew.

Reasons for Withdrawing from University
I conducted an exit interview with each of the students who withdrew from university, in which we discussed their reasons for reaching this decision. In this final section, I focus on the four students who withdrew from university and their reasons for withdrawing.

As is apparent above, Ned struggled throughout his one and a half years at the university. He withdrew intent on finding a foundational course that would help him to bridge the gap between the preparation he had received at secondary school and the academic demands of university. Ned is the only one of the four students who withdrew from university solely because he felt unable to succeed. Ultimately, I do not know whether he found such a course, nor whether he has gone back to university since the last time I spoke to him.

Nate withdrew after one year. Over the summer break he managed to find a full-time position working for the government. His employer was flexible about allowing him to reduce to working part-time so that he could resume his studies alongside his work. He thus decided to withdraw from this university and enrol at another university that allowed fully online learning.

Amanda also withdrew after one year of study. She had always intended to apply for police training and told me the first time we met that students were not usually accepted straight from secondary school. She left university with the intention to apply for police training and with the hope that if she was accepted, the police would fund university so that she could complete her degree. Therefore, her withdrawal could be seen more as a pause, rather than an end to her degree.

Ethan also withdrew after one year of study. When I spoke to him, he had already applied to a different degree programme at a different university. Moving out of the student hostel and into a flat had underscored the importance of money and led Ethan to withdraw from his Bachelor of Arts degree and enrol in a more practical Bachelor of Communication degree programme that was more likely to lead to stable employment after graduation.

Discussion

Demographic Differences
Previous literature has identified that males are more likely to withdraw from university studies than females (Mabel & Britton, 2018). The results of this study strongly support that trend and suggest that specific support initiatives should be offered for students who identify as male in Bachelor of Arts degree programmes.
Previous literature has also identified that ethnic minorities are more likely to withdraw from university than their ethnic majority counterparts (Mabel & Britton, 2018). In New Zealand, the main ethnic minority groups are Māori and Pasifika background students. Although both Māori and Pasifika students are overrepresented in the Bachelor of Arts programme in which this research was conducted compared to the general population, census data shows that they are underrepresented in the general population in terms of holding Bachelor’s degrees (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). The results of this study support previous research in finding that students from Māori and Pasifika backgrounds were more likely to withdraw from university than those from New Zealand European backgrounds. However, the proportion of Māori and Pasifika students who persisted at university beyond the first one and a half years is still higher than the proportion in the general population, providing an encouraging outlook in terms of closing the ethnic educational gap. It is noteworthy that both the Māori student and the Pasifika student who withdrew within the first year and a half at university engaged with specific support services targeted towards Māori/Pasifika students.

Academic Achievement Differences
Students with the weakest academic background prior to entering university have been found in previous research to be at significantly higher risk of withdrawing from university (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Mabel & Britton, 2018). Mabel and Britton (2018) found that students with secondary school academic achievement in the bottom quartile were three times more likely to withdraw than those in the top quartile. However, in the New Zealand system, students in the bottom quartile in secondary school cannot gain admission to university straight from secondary school with only the top half of all students gaining a university entrance qualification. Nevertheless, students who achieved NCEA without a ‘Merit’ or ‘Excellence’ endorsement were significantly more likely to withdraw from university than those with endorsements (60%, compared to 7%). Thus, it may be the case that it is not students in the bottom quartile who are at risk in New Zealand, but rather those in the bottom three quintiles of the secondary school population.

Experiential Differences
The experiential differences included in the students’ narratives suggest strategies that can be employed to improve student persistence. These experiences may provide useful implications for institutions and instructors who wish to increase student persistence.

From a theoretical perspective, university support services pose some difficult problems. The findings of this research support other research (e.g., Xuereb, 2014) in finding that enabling student awareness of university support services is comparatively easier than encouraging them to use said services. On the one hand, the fact that the student in this study who was the strongest academically was the only one who used the main university support service is a positive outcome, showing that such services are not
remedial, but are there to support all students. On the other hand, such services are likely to be even more beneficial for students, like Nate and Ned, who are struggling academically. Furthermore, in hindsight, many of the relatively successful students in this study who persisted at university wished they had made greater use of such services. Ultimately, this may be another argument for support being built into courses and offered by course instructors rather than, or in addition to, a dedicated support service. Instructors are the only point of contact for many students and building support into courses means that all students have the opportunity to benefit from that support.

**Reasons for Withdrawing from University**

The literature shows that academic achievement after admission is the most influential factor in a student’s decision to withdraw from university (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008; Harvey & Luckman, 2014; Thomas, 2012; Willcoxson, 2010). However, this was only a clear reason for withdrawal for one of the students in this study, and a possible factor for another student. Two of these students had no problems succeeding academically. Moreover, three of these four students viewed their withdrawal as a temporary situation, rather than a permanent change of plans. University staff may not imagine the extent to which students who withdraw from university do so with the intention of completing a degree later or at a different institution. Thus, withdrawing from university could be seen as moving on to a different institution and/or a different programme of study, rather than as dropping out.

**Conclusions**

There are several major limitations with this study. First, this study only included 21 participants who were all studying in a Bachelor of Arts degree programme at the same university. In addition, there was likely a selection effect since students volunteered to participate in this research. Moreover, only four of the 21 participating students withdrew from the university within the first year and a half of study. Nevertheless, interviewing these students multiple times throughout their first year and a half did yield some interesting insights into their personal beliefs about learning at university and attitudes towards seeking help from instructors and asking questions during classes. In addition, students’ self-reported experiences of learning at the university also proved insightful.

**Implications for Institutions and Instructors**

Of the students who entered university after having ‘achieved’ NCEA, 60% withdrew within the first year and a half of study. Two of these students failed more than one course in the first year, and this likely contributed to their decision to withdraw. The number of students who withdrew after ‘Achieving’ NCEA is three times the number
who would usually drop out in their first year of the Bachelor of Arts programme. This suggests that systematic support should be offered to all students who enter the university after ‘Achieving’ NCEA without a Merit or Excellence endorsement.

All the participants in this study were aware of the self-motivation required to succeed at university. However, some students may not have been aware of the role of asking questions of instructors. There was a slight tendency for the students who withdrew from university to feel that there was a power difference between instructors and students and to be reluctant to approach or contact instructors with questions. Clearly, it is not acceptable for students at tertiary level to be overly dependent on their instructors. However, most literature supports the value of asking questions (e.g., Watts & de Jesus, 2005). The types of questions that should be directed to instructors would be a useful topic to discuss with students both in student orientation sessions and by course instructors at the beginning of each course.

Equally, rubrics and/or grading criteria should be provided to students in advance of completing each assignment. The rubrics should be detailed enough so that students have a clear idea of the expectations of each assignment, and to allow self-assessment by students (Andrade & Du, 2007; Boud, 2013). It would further enhance their usefulness if the reasons for sharing the criteria were discussed with students, along with suggestions of how they can use the criteria to support their successful completion of each assignment.

Many of the participants in this study struggled with discipline-specific terminology. One way to help students to overcome these difficulties may be to recommend an introductory level text which introduces key concepts in the field in accessible language. This could be a supplementary textbook, which students could use to support their self-study. If no such published text is available, teaching assistants or tutors could be employed to prepare a disciplinary glossary, which could be shared with students, or students themselves could contribute to a glossary of discipline-specific terminology (Durrant, 2014). This kind of resource would help students, especially those who are less academically prepared, to understand the contents of their first-year courses.

**Implications for Further Research**
This research only focussed on the first year and a half of a Bachelor of Arts degree programme. However, the students in this research expressed fluidity in terms of withdrawing and re-enrolling at university. This finding suggests that in future studies it would be preferable to keep following students for the duration of their undergraduate degrees in order to determine the extent to which students who withdraw later re-enrol. Such a research design would also be able to capture students who withdraw late (Mabel & Britton, 2018), which were not captured in this study.

Little research has been conducted on the discipline-specific vocabulary learning of students at tertiary level who are studying in their first language. There is a great deal
of research on the learning of discipline-specific vocabulary in the field of language teaching. However, many of the recommendations which are appropriate for students studying in an additional language will not be appropriate for first language students. This is a worthwhile avenue for further research.

References


