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## First Year Students' Perceptions of the Transition to University: The Role of Informational, Instrumental, and Emotional Support

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# First Year Students' Perceptions of the Transition to University: The Role of Informational, Instrumental, and Emotional Support

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## Abstract

As students transition from high school to university, they must navigate new academic learning environments, develop new social networks, manage multiple new responsibilities, explore and regulate independence, and deal with the stressors that they will encounter. Successful transitioning to university often involves sources of support as well as internal resources. The current study aimed to understand supports and challenges of first year undergraduate students in their transition to university. A total of 66 first year undergraduate students participated in this study. Participants answered four open-ended questions about supports and personal factors during their transition to university. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and codes were systematically generated across the dataset. Themes were identified once coding was complete. The four themes that emerged were informational, instrumental, and emotional supports, and internal resources. Students transitioning to university may benefit from transition programs and resilience modeling to facilitate a successful transition.

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## Introduction

Achieving some form of higher education is often important for adult success, and the decision to attend university represents an opportunity for great personal growth and development (Richardson et al., 2012). As students transition from high school to university, they encounter a myriad of obstacles and challenges that they must overcome. Students transitioning to university must navigate new academic learning environments, foster and develop new social networks, manage multiple new responsibilities, explore and regulate personal freedoms, and deal with the psychological/environmental stressors that they will encounter (Blair, 2017; Credé & Niehorster, 2012; Fromme et al., 2008; Smith & Zhang, 2008; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

With the changing academic, social and emotional demands, students entering university are at risk for developing mental health issues, poor lifestyle habits, and social isolation that can negatively influence their capacity to successfully transition to, and complete, university (Burke et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2012; Stamp et al., 2015). It is not surprising that a number of students discontinue their first year of studies (Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Richardson, 2012). To reduce the negative consequences that can occur during a student's transition, it is important to understand student experiences during their transition to university both in terms of resources that are available to them and how they utilize these resources during this challenging period in their lives.

## **Social Support in Relation to Student Success and Challenges in Transition**

Social support helps students adapt to the demands of university life (Thompson, 1995), and adequate social support promotes positive outcomes including physical health, mental health, subjective well-being, and academic success (Lahey & Cohen, 2000). There are three primary components of social support including instrumental support (e.g., financial support, helping with tasks), emotional support (e.g., empathy, companionship), and informational support (e.g., advice; House & Kahn, 1985). Parents and other family members often provide these social supports to young adults during their transition to university as young adults begin to take on more responsibilities (Arnett, 2000), and better relationships with families and peers is related to stronger first year achievement (van der Zanden et al., 2018). However, university students often perceive their need for support as being higher than the support they receive, and this perceived lack of support is related to higher depressive symptoms (Rankin et al., 2018). Fostering connections between first year students and both their peers and faculty can enhance student experiences and support student success through intentional activities to foster relationship as these can counter their negative feelings and provide opportunities to develop missing or weak study skills necessary for success in postsecondary school (Vinson et al., 2010; Wilcox et al., 2005).

The transition to postsecondary school requires students to adapt to many changes as the academic demands increase at the same time that they often have to take on more adult responsibilities of caring for themselves. Students generally receive supports during this time that are categorized as instrumental, informational, and emotional (Arnett, 2000; House & Kahn, 1985). *Instrumental support* includes tangible, physical support such as financial support (e.g., tuition, groceries) and support with tasks (e.g., filing taxes, finding a mechanic). *Informational support* includes advice about what to expect during the transition and where to go to find needed information. Finally, *emotional support* includes listening and providing empathy when students share their worries, complaints, and concerns about the challenges of adapting to university. Generally, students who have better relationships with their families and others on campus including friends and faculty, perform better academically (van Rooij et al., 2018).

### **Informational Supports during Transition to University**

Academic preparation related to postsecondary school includes having the content knowledge and study skills that will support success; unfortunately, many students do not have the knowledge or study skills required for this transition (van Rooij & Jansen, 2018), leading to anxiety and fear that they will not be able to succeed (Vinson et al., 2010). Secondary school experiences related to knowledge gained and skills and habits acquired can either support or impede readiness for the demands of university. van der Zandent and colleagues (2018) found that academic preparation, measured by high school GPA, predicted stronger university achievement in the first year. They also found that students who enjoyed studying completed more courses and earned higher grades. In addition, students who took university-level classes in high school also performed better in their first year of university (van der Zandent et al., 2018). Interestingly, secondary school teachers and university professors had different views on student readiness for college with secondary school students equating graduation from secondary school with university readiness and college professors expecting a minimal level of content knowledge

and specific learning-related skills that are often not explicit in high school curricula (van Rooij & Jansen, 2018). Secondary school often provides a fairly structured system of supports that is not prevalent in higher education, which requires students to utilize high levels of self-regulation and self-advocacy; consequently, a number of students struggle to adjust to the lack of structured support and higher demands for independent work strategies (van Rooij & Jansen, 2018).

### **Instrumental Supports during Transition to University**

Instrumental supports include supports that are helpful with practical aspects such as financial support or tutoring (Worsley et al., 2021). Instrumental supports can facilitate the transition to university by providing help with coursework, tuition, or other expenses (e.g., groceries, rent; (Thompson et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2021). Instrumental supports that facilitate the transition to university include parental support such as providing financial support (e.g., for rent or tuition; Worsley et al. (2021). Students report parental financial assistance as positive and negative. Students appreciate support of their parents to help cover costs, however, also report feelings of failure for not being able to manage their finances on their own (Thompson et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2021).

In a study by Worsley et al. (2021), students reported that receiving more preparatory support would have helped facilitate their transition to first year university. This included learning about budgeting, independent living, and self-directed learning. For students moving away, budgeting and independent living are essential skills that can exacerbate their stress if these skills are lacking (Worsley et al., 2021). In addition, the general shift to more independence during university involving day-to-day task and time management is not usually anticipated by students and could be an area of support for this transition period (Thompson et al., 2021).

Students who enter university with larger lectures often feel as if they are “another face in the crowd,” leading to feelings of inadequate support (Worsley et al., 2021). Furthermore, students feel as if they are unable to ask questions or approach their professors for help, which can further impact their transition to university if they feel as if they have nowhere to turn for help. However, students in smaller lecture sizes and students who have formed friendships in courses have better task support from their professors and peers, respectively (Worsley et al., 2021). In sum, providing students with tutoring supports or facilitating study groups in first year university can help students feel adequately supported through their coursework.

### **Emotional Supports during Transition to University**

Transitioning to university is an exciting yet daunting experience allowing greater independence while balancing the higher demands of post-secondary (Worsley et al., 2021). Protective factors such as emotionally supportive friendships can help improve this transition (Campbell et al., 2022). Supports such as finding friends in courses can be a positive experience for students as this can provide support systems for students to share hardships and reduce feelings of isolation (Thompson et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant for students moving away for university, as they leave their established social networks behind and have to create new ones (Thompson et al., 2021; Worsley et al., 2021).

### **Internal Support during Transition to University**

Internal supports refer to a wide array of psychological domains that lie outside cognitive capacity or intelligence and which predict student achievement. Students who are accepted to university generally possess at least average levels of intelligence, the remainder of this section will focus on domains beyond intelligence (Frey & Detterman, 2004; Rohde & Thompson, 2007). Difficulty in transitioning to university is often due to some combination of not being prepared for university during high school, inadequate support from the university, and limited coping and adaptation to university requirements (Allan et al., 2014). These psychosocial factors are more readily addressed through intervention than more stable attributes such as intelligence. As students navigate their transitions to university, they must utilize their personal resources to overcome the considerable challenges in terms of their academics, social experiences, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and their mental health. Several salient resources have been shown to predict student transition and success. Students with better emotional self-management skills are able to cope and manage stress (Nightingale et al., 2013).

The first is self-efficacy, which is defined as the confidence individuals have in their ability to execute a course of action and that those actions will lead to specific performance outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Academic self-efficacy is, add a definition here, and is a predictor of academic performance in first-year university students (Chemers et al., 2001; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). A meta-analysis by Robbins and colleagues (2004) examining psychosocial factors that predict college outcomes found that academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation were the best predictors of GPA, and a more recent meta-analysis (Richardson et al., 2012) found a medium correlation between academic self-efficacy and GPA, suggesting that academic self-efficacy is related to academic achievement, and interventions can help to improve students' academic self-efficacy.

Resilience is broadly defined as the ability to adapt that draws on both individual and their interconnected systems (Masten, 2019). While there has been limited research in the area of resilience in higher education settings, there is some indication that resilient behaviors are related to a more successful transition to university with a stronger relationship for female than male students (Allan et al., 2014). Student motivation is a strong predictor of university success, and students who are confident in their capacity are more likely to invest the effort necessary to persevere through the adversities of higher education (Hsieh et al., 2007).

Organization, attention to studying, goal setting, persistence, and planning predicted first year GPA (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; van der Zanden et al., 2018). For example, motivation is not sufficient for students to reach their goals. They also need to implement strategies to help them to meet those goals, and many of these strategies fall under the broad concept of executive functioning (EF). While the exact definition and composition is still debated, it is generally described as cognitive systems that direct other systems (e.g., language, reasoning, etc.) and have been related to functioning (Avirett & Maricle, 2011). Goal setting, including both mastery (personal) and performance (normative) goals are beneficial in supporting both short- and long-term student success (Harackiewicz et al., 2002). Approaches to academic work related to EF such as procrastination lead to cramming and are negatively correlated with academic performance, and the number of hours a student plans to study is a strong predictor of grades (Beattie et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, decreased procrastination and increased effort

and perseverance are related to levels of academic self-efficacy (Feldman et al., 2016).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 66 first year undergraduate students (16 male; 50 female) from a large university in Western Canada. The mean age of the participants was 18.97 years with a standard deviation of 1.65 years and a range of 18-25. Participants were recruited from undergraduate programs across various university faculties: Science (31.8%), Arts (30.3%), Business (15.2%), Medicine (9.1%), Education (3%), Kinesiology (3%), Nursing (3%), and the remainder had not declared a major (4.5%).

### **Procedure**

The university's Conjoint Faculty Research Ethics Board granted ethics approval for the current study prior to data collection. Students were invited to participate in the study via a brief presentation by the researchers during regularly scheduled undergraduate lectures. Students who were interested provided their email address, and the researchers provided the students an online link to the survey. Self-response data from participants was gathered using an online survey platform (FluidSurvey™). Participants consented by clicking a box on the opening page, and were then taken to the survey. As part of a larger study on student transition, participants provided demographic information and answered four open-ended questions: (a) What personal factors do you have that made the transition to university easier? (b) What personal factors do you have that made transition to university difficult? (c) What kind of supports did you have that made the transition to university easier? (d) Where there any supports that you wish you had? No examples, guidelines, or character limitations were given to the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The current study employed a thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data from all participants was transferred from the online survey platform to a spreadsheet. Several evaluators read through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Following this phase, initial codes were systematically generated across the data set. Initial codes were confirmed via a consensus meeting among the researchers. Once the initial coding was complete, themes were identified. Once themes were identified, the researchers determined if they fit with the data set. Finally, the research team refined and defined the themes.

## **Results**

The excerpts provided by the participants were coded into themes that represented the data for each of the prompts (Table 1). Many of the responses to questions about personal factors included information about supports, so the responses to the first three questions were analyzed together.

Table 1. Frequency of Source and Type of Supports Reported

Supports I Had		Type			Total
		Informational	Emotional	Instrumental	
Source	Family	10	37	15	62
	Friends	14	33	13	60
	Institutional – High School	7	9	7	23
	Institutional – University	5	3	2	10
Total		36	82	37	155

*Note.* These categories are not mutually exclusive.

### Informational

The most prevalent theme regarding supports is related to students' academic preparation prior to entering university. For example, one student noted, "I took a lot of AP courses in high school so the transition in terms of academics was not too drastic." Others indicated that they were in International Baccalaureate programs, had strong study skills, or had self-directed learning experiences in high school. However, a number of students also indicated that life experiences prior to entering university positively supported their transition. For example, "Break years, so I could build confidence, work experience (teamwork, etc.), rapport/relationship building skills." Others also noted that they took time to work and travel giving them both life experience and maturity which supported their success. Together, this indicates that preparation in terms of either academic knowledge and skills acquired in high school or life experience were important for making the transition to university easier for students.

Information about what to expect during the transition to university came from high school staff, university staff, and family and friends. Having friends or older siblings who told them what to expect or asking professors for information helped many students during the transition. For example, "university advisors have been very helpful in assisting me with degree requirements, as program change, and overall support." One student noted receiving informational support across places, "Having friends to ask advise [*sic*] from. Coming to class consistently and learning how the university works. Asking professors and staff questions about how things work at the university. Being able to choose my own time for classes."

### Emotional: Family and Friends

Several students indicated that their families provided emotional support that was key to their successful transitions. These supports included living at home, spending time with family pets, friends, significant others, and family helping them get settled. For example, one student wrote, "I am currently staying at home with my parents, which made the transition easier because my siblings are always there to listen to my concerns and give me advice." This quote exemplifies how supports work together family offering emotional ("listen to my concerns) and instrumental ("give me advice") at the same time. Several students noted that having friends who came with them to the university eased the transition. Connecting with social groups on campus related to major or extracurricular activities such as sports or music ensembles, or being in small programs or those that used

cohorts so that students were consistent across classes helped to create vehicles for emotional support that students found meaningful.

### **Instrumental**

The most common instrumental support was related to financial aid including parents providing tuition support or room and board, scholarships, and jobs. Living at home also provided support for tasks such as laundry, grocery shopping, and meal preparation. For example, one student wrote that due to living at home “I do not have to pay rent and they help me with things like money, buying groceries, making meals.” Others noted that academic supports through tutoring helped them as they adapted to the increased academic demands of university.

### *Internal*

There were several internal attributes that supported students. Multiple students indicated that their organizational skills were important to their successful transition to university. For example, “I feel that being organized and excited about university made the transition easier.” Another aspect of executive functioning that was reported by students related to their ability to manage their time effectively. For example, “I have always been motivated academically and good at managing time and workload.”

Two EF areas, organization and time management were key in supporting student success. Students indicated that being able to adapt to the university setting was important for their transition. For example, “I’m fairly resilient and flexible, so I usually handle change well.” Students also reported that having an optimistic outlook eased their transition to university. For example, “My optimism and determination helped ease the transition and get me through the difficult times.” Another aspect of resilience relating to successful transition had to do with determination and persistence in the face of the challenging transition to university. For example, “I believe my determination kept me going.”

A large number of students indicated that their motivation and engagement in their studies supported their successful transition to postsecondary. The first of these related to how motivated they were to pursue their university education. Many participants indicated this very briefly using terms such as “motivation” or “self-motivation” to indicate that their personal strength was their motivation to engage in and complete university. These motivations included specific career goals, such as wanting to be a teacher, earn a degree, being ready to be out of high school and to the next stage, and paying for university on their own. The second of these themes related to how their work ethic impacted their drive to engage in and complete university. For example, “Diligence and hard work, the personal goal to strive for success” and “hard working” represent the types of responses that were provided by students when describing their personal strengths. The third of these inter-related themes related to students’ goal orientation. Examples of these types of responses include, “Setting a goal is really important once I got into university” and “I have always been so oriented to my goal that now my goal is in sight (high school math teacher) I have a push inside that keeps me working hard.” Personal motivation, work ethic, and goal-oriented behaviors supported many students in their transition to university.



### **Personal Factors That Made Transition Challenging**

A number of students indicated that they had adequate supports to successfully transition to postsecondary with one noting, "...that once I realized that the resources were there it was that I needed to be the one who wanted to change and seek help." Being able to identify and access supports can help adjust the transition. However, students transitioning to university often feel a lack of preparedness and experience emotional distress which can make this transition challenging (Worsley et al., 2021).

#### *Informational*

Some students noted that their lack of preparedness interfered with their successful transition to university. Some students' responses focused on their limited preparation in high school for the demands of university. For example, "Not being knowledgeable about how things work. There was more work than high school." Or "Not having the proper study methods." Another example of this provided indicated that there were new demands for university, and students frequently did not what to expect, "I didn't really know what to do in terms of filling out applications/picking courses." Students indicated that they felt as though they were not prepared to engage in university, which made their transition more difficult. Students also reported wanting to connect with older students to understand more about the university transition and emotional demands. For example, "I wish I had connections with people older than me aside from my family who are currently in university so I could understand if all the stress and uncertainty I feel is normal..." This example highlights the need for connecting with others for informational support.

#### *Emotional*

An interesting aspect of students' inability to adapt arose from issues within the family, in particular, parents who got divorced. For example, "Parents got divorced in October of my first year, this involved a lot of emotional ups and downs before the divorce actually took place. It was hard to focus on the transition," and "My family situation with recently separated parents, which puts a strain on all aspects of my life." Making friends was another area related to emotional support that students noted was challenging for them. For example, "I love people, but rarely made a conscious effort to be social and meet new people when I first arrived. It was lonely." This reflects personal challenges that students noted facing when they did not know anyone when they arrived at university often adjusting to university and a new area while trying to make friends. One student noted that moving to a city from a rural area made this transition particularly difficult. Another aspect reported relates to difficulty making friends potentially relates to the undergraduate alcohol culture. For example, "I no longer drink making it harder to meet new people." Together these reflect challenges in connecting with new friends that students face when transitioning to university.

#### *Instrumental*

Some students noted that having to find a job and pay for living expenses, especially while adjusting to both

university and a new geographic location was challenging. Another noted that a two- and half-hour commute added significant stress during the transition. Other instrumental support related to academics such as free tutoring. However, few students noted instrumental factors as interfering with their transition to university compared with those who noted it as a support.

### *Internal*

A number of students reported having mental health diagnoses or symptoms that interfered with their successful transition to university. Several noted elevated levels of anxiety. For example, “Anxious about new place and people,” reflecting general anxiety about engaging in a new environment. However, some responses reflected more severe issues, for example, “My transition from high school to university was awful. Though I was never diagnosed, I strongly believe I was suffering from depression and possibly anxiety at the time. There was no mental health support and I had to deal with everything on my own.” A related theme that was revealed in the data related to the stress and anxiety caused by students’ degree of perfectionism. For example, “Being too much of a perfectionist and uptight about grades and accomplishments. I have never been able to relax about how I perform.” This reflects the internal pressures that some students place on themselves to constantly perform at very high levels. In all, most mental health issues reported by students related to their overall stress and anxiety with only a few reporting other issues such as depression. Other students noted that they had personal characteristics that interfere with their success including laziness, procrastination, poor time management, and introversion.

### **Desired Supports for Transition**

The fourth prompt provided to students asked them to list supports they wish that they had while transitioning to university. There were three types of supports revealed in the data: (a) Informational, (b) Emotional, and (c) Instrumental. Interestingly, 12 participants indicated that they did not feel as though they needed any further support beyond what they had received. Table 2 lists the frequency of each source of support and the type of support that students wish that they had while transitioning to university.

Table 2. Frequency of Source and Type of Supports Desired

Supports I Wish I Had		Type			Total
		Informational	Emotional	Instrumental	
Source	Family	3	5	0	8
	Friends	4	12	1	17
	Institutional – High School	3	0	0	3
	Institutional – University	8	2	9	19
Total		18	19	10	47

In terms of informational support, many students indicated that more information about how difficult the transition may be would have facilitated their transition. “I wish the university/my high school had been more honest about how difficult the transition could be and how it would be different for everyone but everyone would struggle.”

Several others wished they had an older sibling or friend who could advise them on what to expect as they entered university. One noted,

“I wish I had connections with people older than me aside from my family who are currently in university so I could understand if all the stress and uncertainty I feel is normal [*sic*], because it is hard to know what you are doing is right.”

Participants also indicated that more emotional support and social connections would have made the transition easier. “I wish I had a closer group of friends in my classes.” While some reported wanting more emotional support from peers, others wished that they could be closer to their families. Participants indicated that more instrumental support would have made their transition experience better. “Free tutors should be available aside from our lecture teachers.” Several also indicated that additional financial support would have reduced the need to balance working and studying. Others wished there was more or more easily accessible mental health services available because they thought that earlier access to high quality mental health supports would have benefited them.

## Discussion

The current study aimed to understand strengths and challenges experienced by first year undergraduate students transitioning to university. Students responded to four open ended questions about personal factors, supports, and additional supports students felt would have been helpful in this transition. Personal factors such as academic preparation, executive functioning, resilience, and motivation were related to strengths students possessed that enabled successful transition to university.

Our results are consistent with previous literature examining academic preparation (e.g., advance placement [AP] courses in high school), suggesting this is a way to facilitate transition to university (van der Zandent et al., 2018; van Rooij & Jansen, 2018). However, this may not be available in all high schools. In addition, students in AP programs have reported higher workload, fatigue, and negative stereotypes as disadvantages (Foust et al., 2009). Therefore, other forms of academic preparation are recommended. Interestingly, some students reported taking a break year was helpful to their transition. This suggests that in this time, students may develop skills such as dealing with successes and failures that contribute to self-efficacy and strategies contributing to executive functioning such as organization and planning that may facilitate their transition (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2016; O’Shea, 2013).

Executive functioning was the second most prevalent theme, indicating that a level of organization and planning helped students prepare for this transition. This is consistent with previous literature examining executive functioning in first year students (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013; van der Zanden et al., 2018). This suggests that helping high school students with strategies to promote their executive functioning skills, such as tips for organization and time management, may contribute to greater academic success in university.

Resilience was identified as adaptability, optimism, and perseverance. This is consistent with previous literature

examining resilience in students (Holdsworth et al., 2018; Reich et al., 2010). The last theme related to personal strengths was motivation/work ethic/goal orientation. Personal motivation, work ethic, and goal setting were strengths identified by students in their successful transition. Taken together, these themes suggest that helping students gain a sense of resiliency can motivate them to engage in academic work and manage competing demands, supporting academic success in university (Ayala & Manzano, 2018).

Themes related to personal limitations were lack of resiliency, difficulty making friends, mental health, and preparedness. In terms of resiliency, students felt an inability to adapt to the university environment and previous research has shown that students who are not resilient tend to have less adaptive strategies, which ultimately hampers their academic achievement (Meltzer et al., 2004). Students in the present study experienced difficulty connecting with others when transitioning to university. Previous literature in the first-year undergraduate population has found that students with better quality and quantity of friendships adjusted better to university (Buote et al., 2007). In addition, students living in residence are more open to new friendships compared to students who commute. This suggests that part of the difficulty faced by participants in our study could be due to limited openness to new friendships (Buote et al., 2007).

Students also reported mental health struggles such as anxiety and stress. While we cannot eliminate the possibility of students having a pre-existing mental health diagnosis prior to this study, previous literature has demonstrated that first year college students often face stress from academic workload and anxiety with new situations (Hussain et al., 2013). This ties into the final theme of lack of preparedness in terms of university processes and expectations, and personal academic preparation. Students who may have a lack of procedural knowledge or effective study methods may experience more stress and anxiety when managing their new workload. Providing high school students with information about university procedures and tips for effective studying may help reduce the stress and anxiety related to learning these concepts in university.

Lastly, students identified family, friends, and institutional sources as supports they had or desired to have for their transition to university. Students identified receiving emotional support from family and friends as the most common helpful supports. Students without this support from friends desired emotional support in this transition, along with informational and instrumental support from the university. These sources of supports and desired supports are consistent with previous literature documenting family and peers as sources of support and these sources of support are increasingly important as the year goes on (Callcott et al., 2014; Tao et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2021). Further, Tao et al. (2000) found students with greater levels of social support were also more likely to adjust to the university transition.

## **Conclusions**

The transition to university involves personal resources and many sources of support. Educators and practitioners in high school are in a unique position to help facilitate this successful transition to university. Facilitating resilience, providing strategies for promoting executive functioning, and preparing students for this transition, may help reduce the burden in transitioning to university.

### **Implications for Practice and Research**

Offering high school students transition programs may help with preparing for university. Building these supports into the curriculum such as aligning curricula and instruction to university level coursework can help students plan for this change (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Peer support programs such as Network Teach is a student-led program in Australia, and could be another option for students (Callcott et al., 2014). This program offers orientation, professional development sessions, exam study groups, and peer mentoring. This program is entirely run by student volunteers, making it feasible to adapt. Students who participated in this program reported a greater sense of belonging amongst their peers and feelings of support (Callcott et al., 2014). Programs such as this can be implemented in university to help first year students adjust and meet other peers in their program, ultimately facilitating a successful transition. Peer-led programs are feasible and can improve perceived social support (Mattanah et al., 2010). An intervention examining a peer-led social support program at a similar size university in the United States found that students had improved social adjustment at the end of the school year, students developed more meaningful friendships, and a greater sense of belonging through shared experiences in transitioning to university (Mattanah et al., 2010). This program involved older students in undergraduate programs (e.g., 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year), and as some students in our study mentioned, having access to older students who have been through this experience could provide normalcy for new students transitioning to university.

Students who have influential models for resilience are more likely to perceive themselves to be resilient and have strategies in place that help with their academic achievement (Johnson et al., 2015). For example, pairing students who are struggling with those who can model resilience to encourage building this skill in students (Johnson et al., 2015). This is a simple strategy that can be employed in the classroom by having teachers arrange the seating plan in such a way. Fostering resilience can provide students with the basic foundation for university success. For example, social emotional learning is now becoming an integral part of early education, and this leads to enhanced social-emotional skills and positive social behaviors in students (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Providing students with the tools they need early on has lasting effects into adulthood, as this can help students feel they have the resources and strategies to manage challenges (Taylor et al., 2017). Furthermore, as resilience contributes to mental health outcomes, this can also help buffer some of the stress and anxiety faced by students entering university (Davydov et al., 2010).

Research is needed on understanding the types of supports currently available to students in high school and how to implement programs such as peer support or curriculum-based learning prior to their transition to university. If programs do exist, research is needed on evaluating efficacy of these programs in preparation for university. Longitudinal studies can enable a greater understanding of effective programs and the supports needed for first year students.

### **Limitations**

Approximately 75.0% of the respondents were female and the majority of respondents were from the Science (31.8%) or Arts faculties (30.3%). In addition, it is unknown if students had a preexisting mental health diagnosis,

which could influence responses. We also relied on self-reported data with no objective measures of performance (e.g., GPA) in university. These limit generalizability of our results, as we are unable to connect qualitative reports of support with measures of university success.

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