

Challenging the Notion of the Transition Year: The experiences of rural and urban tertiary students

Abstract

The assumption in the literature that the transition to tertiary studies occurs within the first year has not been tested. This study investigates the timing of the transition by comparing the experiences of domestic students from rural (n=7) and urban (n=8) secondary schools, using an ecological framework. Semi-structured interviews of students' experiences revealed that the timing of the transition period can extend beyond the initial transition year, particularly for urban students who experience less immediate changes to social networks. Research and support for students in transition needs to consider more than just the first year of studies to increase student satisfaction, reduce attrition rates and improve educational outcomes.

Keywords: Tertiary studies, transition, rural students, urban students, ecological framework

1. Introduction

The transition from school to tertiary studies can be a problematic time for students. While some students transition with ease, many encounter problems including issues with forming friendships, changing dynamics with old friendships or family, and new, sometimes challenging, learning experiences (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010; Sovic, 2009). Some students may have difficulty experiencing these changes simultaneously leading to increases in social isolation and mental health problems, as well as decreases in educational performance and general quality of life (Cassidy, 2004; King, Garrett, Wrench, & Lewis, 2011; Stallman 2010). Transitional difficulties can lead to higher attrition rates amongst tertiary students (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010) which has implications for the finances and reputation of a tertiary institution (DOE, 2013). In the Australian context, the attrition rates in higher education institutions in 2013 was 13.47% which is the highest that it has been since 2009 (DOE, 2013). Research to date has focused on understanding student transitions and how educators and counsellors can assist students experiencing transition difficulties within the first year. Yet, the notion of the transition period only lasting one year has not been tested.

A notable finding in the literature regarding the transition to tertiary education is that students from different socio-cultural backgrounds have diverse experiences and differing levels of success with any transition (Crockett, Shanahan & Jackson-Newsom, 2000). Numerous bases for socio-cultural differences among students have been considered in the literature, including the disruptions to different types of social bonds with friends, family, and the wider community, changes in residential location, parents' levels of educational attainment, and the perceptions of family and the community regarding the importance and value of education (Anderson et al., 2005; Brampston & Patrick, 2007; Crockett et al., 2000; Frenette, 2007; James et al., 2006; Johnson, Haigh, Craigh, & Becker, 2009). Socio-cultural

differences reflect the increasing diversity in the backgrounds of commencing tertiary students (Hillman, 2005). One socio-cultural difference that has received mixed attention to date, is whether the student is transitioning from an urban or a rural area as this can effect their transition experiences. Thus, the key aim of this paper is to investigate the *timing* of the transition to tertiary studies using a qualitative and investigative approach in order to question any assumptions that have informed prior research. The present study will draw upon the ecological theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner (1979) model and will use a semantic approach in order to enhance the understanding of the nature of the transition for rural and urban students (Willig, 2008).

The literature demonstrates that students transitioning from rural contexts experience greater disruptions to existing social networks (Fabiansson, 2006; Hillman, 2005; Lewis, Dickson-Swift, Talbot, & Snow, 2007). Due to the dramatic changes in geography that accompany leaving high school, rural students lose the social support that most urban students have to manage the other strains imposed on them through transitions (Anderson et al., 2005; Bramston & Patrick, 2007; Crockett et al., 2000; Lewis et al., 2007). As a result, rural students are more prone to declines in mental health, including higher rates of stress, anxiety and loneliness (Anderson et al., 2005; Bramston & Patrick, 2007; King et al., 2011; Stallman, 2010). This poses the question of whether rural students' transition period is more complex and lasts longer than that for urban students?

An issue with existing research into the transition of rural and urban students is that the focus of the transition period has been on the transition from lower to upper secondary schooling (Cuconato & Walther, 2015), or the embedded assumption that the transition to tertiary studies occurs primarily within a single year (Bowman, 2010; Hillman, 2005; Nelson, Meier et al. 2013; Smith & Clarke 2012; Ramsey, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012). The reason for this assumption is that the majority of universities and

educational institutions operate on yearly academic calendars with new student cohorts being introduced at the start of the academic year. The natural priority given to the newest students may be leading the institutions to abandon existing cohorts still experiencing issues in the transitional process, particularly in terms of social support.

As social support is central to the ease with which students transition to university (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Heister, 2008; Thomas, 2000), a better understanding of the changes that students undergo in their social support systems is needed (Cuconato & Walther, 2015). Friendships are dynamics that have no clear beginning or ending, but are rather a continuous experience (Cassidy, 2004; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Lansford et al., 1998; Oswald & Clarke, 2003). Thus knowing how long to continue support regarding changes in social networks that occur during the transition may assist with the retention of students and with their academic performance. Thus, this study seeks to answer the question of how students perceive the transition to tertiary studies, and what social factors influence their transition?

1.1 The Ecological Model of Transitions

In order to understand the various experiences of students in their transition to university, the ecological model by Bronfenbrenner (1979) has been used to compare and contrast the experiences of rural students (Fabiansson, 2006; Hillman, 2005; Lewis et al., 2007). We thus necessarily test this model as a part of this research to confirm that appropriateness of this choice. The five different levels of influence are investigated: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (as detailed in Figure 1).

[Figure 1 is submitted in a separate document, due to the online PDF conversation causing formatting issues]

Each system explores the different aspects of the students' environment, from relationships with close friends and family, to the broad community, the socio-cultural context, and the timing of life events. Each of the model's systems is interdependent with the factors in each system influencing the factors in others (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and thus considers the complexity of experiences (Renn & Arnold 2003) which allows both the factors influencing the student transition, and the timing of the transition, to be investigated.

1.1.1 The Micro- and Meso-systems

In the present study, the student sits at the centre of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model which comprises the individual traits of the student (e.g., demographics, genetics and health). The second layer represents the microsystem that captures the influence of direct relationships with friends, family, and peers on the transition experience. The third layer is the mesosystem that incorporates the influence of the interactions between those direct contacts on the student.

Prior research on student transitions suggests that at the micro and meso-levels, friendships often fail to be maintained as the proximity of friends change and individuals prioritise friends who reside in closer proximity (Buote et al., 2007; Cassidy, 2004; Chan & Poulin, 2007; Oswald & Clarke, 2002). While technology can maintain the frequency of contact with direct relations in the short term, in the long term however, it can either help friendship maintenance or hinder friendship quality (Johnson et al., 2009; Oswald & Clarke, 2001; Ranny & Troop-Gorden, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). In contrast, familial relationships are generally less influenced by changes in proximity. However, a limitation of existing research is that most studies have been restricted to the initial period of the transition with subsequent events and changes that follow in further

months or years largely ignored (Buote et al., 2007; Busseri et al., 2010; Hillman, 2005). Thus, the actual time period that comprises the transition in the micro- and meso- systems has not been the focus of any studies.

1.1.2 The Exo- and Macro-systems

The fourth layer of the model represents the exosystem which comprises the social settings that influence a student's experience, without the student playing an active role in the network (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This layer includes the broad social network of the university environment and the local community (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The fifth layer represents the macrosystem, which is the student's socio-cultural context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and comprises the ideas, attitudes and values that are held by the student and those around them.

Research into the transitions of rural students has found support for the presence of differences between rural and urban students regarding the exo- and macro-systems. For example, the attitudes and support from the community towards tertiary education, and the attitudes and motivations of students towards meeting new people differ considerably between the two student groups (Buote et al., 2007; Fabiansson, 2006; Renn & Arnold, 2003). For students who transition from a rural setting, the relocation to metropolitan centres removes them from their community and the social network that comprises it (Brampston & Patrick. 2007; King et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2007). The socio-cultural context can also be markedly different due to the differences in lifestyle factors associated with rural settings (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The studies in this area have always restricted their time frame to within one year, however the size and complexity of the exo- and macro-systems result in constant changes occurring at these levels. While there is a greater acknowledgment that the

transition period is longer at the exo- and macro-system level, no research has tested this assumption.

1.1.3 The Chronosystem

Surrounding all the layers in the model, is the Chronosystem which represents the influence of time. Bronfenbrenner (1995) noted that the timing of biological and social transitions are important determinants of socio-cultural influences, expectations and opportunities. The chronosystem captures all of the events and transitions that occur over an individual's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Thus, this study aims to extend research on the influence of the chronosystem by testing whether the assumed transition 'year' is a reality for students with different life experiences.

The present study employs the five systems of the ecological model to understand whether the student transition period extends beyond a single year. Specifically, this study investigates any changes that students from either a rural or urban background experience in their social support networks by exploring changes that occurred in each of the ecological systems during their transition to tertiary studies. A sample of students who experienced a transition from either a rural and urban context will be interviewed in order to determine when the key elements of the transition occurred for them enabling the two different transition contexts to be examined to understand any similarities and differences in their experiences and the timing of their transition to tertiary studies.

2.Method

2.1 Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured telephone interviews. The semi-structured interviews minimise interview effects (Green & Yu, 2014) and provide: an opportunity to

1 build rapport with the participants; the flexibility to encourage reflection or clarify the
2 participant's experiences; and a greater understanding of the meaning of those experiences
3 (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Willig, 2008).

4 The interview questions were developed by three researchers and included questions
5 that investigated the influence of the various systems of the ecological model on students'
6 relationships with their family and friends. The questions focused on the nature of the
7 experiences the student had for each system and the timing of those experiences (see
8 Appendix 1). The phone interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes and were recorded with a
9 computer application, AudioNote, with the participant's consent. Providing participants with
10 information prior to participation can encourage them to reflect on the topic (Cambridge,
11 Kypri & Elbourne, 2014). Thus to assist with memory recall and to encourage participants to
12 reflect on their transition experience, the participants were provided with the interview
13 questions approximately one week prior to conducting the phone interview. The interviewer
14 and primary researcher in the study was a 23-year old female from an urban background. To
15 address possible interviewer bias, the interview questions were developed with secondary
16 researchers, of different gender and age, with an understanding of the ecological model, to
17 ensure that an adequate coverage of each system was achieved. The study received ethics
18 approval from the University of South Australia's Human Research and Ethics Committee.
19 The interview recordings, transcriptions and analysed data were stored on a secure server on
20 university computers which were password protected.

22 ***2.2 Data analysis***

23 The data were coded using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clark, 2008) to
24 investigate emerging themes *across* data sets and to gain a description of the data set (Braun

1 & Clark, 2008). The analysis was guided by the semantic approach which assumes that the
2 participants' meanings are correlated with their personal reflections on their experiences
3 (Willig, 1998). This approach was chosen to minimise researcher bias. In line with semantic
4 approaches, data were sorted into patterns of themes, and then interpreted based on their
5 significance and implications for the research, particularly insights that would help inform
6 universities about how to support the transition period (Braun & Clarke, 2008; Patton, 1990).

7 The aim of this paper was to investigate students' reflective experiences of the
8 transition and the timing of the transition and not to investigate the separate influences
9 occurring at each level of the model. Thus, while the questionnaire was developed in relation
10 to the ecological model, the analysis of the data did not subscribe to the model as it was
11 conducted according to Braun and Clark's (2008) semantic approach. Each transcribed
12 interview was read three times by the primary researcher before any themes were coded. The
13 researcher then listed themes that emerged from the data, and proceeded to identify each of
14 the interviews according to these themes. Once all of the transcripts were coded, the coded
15 items were organised into themes using a coding table designed for this research. Verbatim
16 quotes where participants explained their experience were noted. Three key overarching
17 themes (stability, shared interests, social maintenance) reflecting the students' experiences
18 were identified. Two other researchers independently reviewed the coding, and any
19 discrepancies in coding were discussed until an agreement was reached by all coders.

21 ***2.3 Sampling***

22 The sample comprised eight domestic students who transitioned from an urban context, and
23 seven domestic students who transitioned from a rural context. The rural sample comprised
24 five females and two males, and the urban sample comprised five females, and three males.

1 Their ages ranged from 20-26 years, with a mean age of 24 years. The urban students lived
2 within the inner and outer metropolitan suburbs, and the rural students came from as far as
3 750 kilometres from Adelaide.

4 The sampling criteria sought adults who attended a secondary school in Australia, and
5 were currently studying in at least their third year of tertiary study or had graduated from a
6 tertiary institution in Australia. Prior research by the authors on the personal health and career
7 development of school leavers over a 10-year period had identified a representative group of
8 students, and a random sample of students were selected for the present study. Forty
9 participants who matched the inclusion criteria for the present study were contacted via email
10 and provided with information about the study, a consent form, and a copy of the interview
11 questions. Eight participants returned their consent forms and seven of those participated (two
12 females, five males) in the study. Saturation (reaching a point in the analysis where no new
13 themes emerged (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005)) was not achieved with this initial sample,
14 therefore eight more participants were recruited using a snowballing technique, where
15 participating students asked other students to participate. To ensure anonymity the participants
16 were assigned a code to identify their responses. Participants were identified by their socio-
17 cultural context and gender (i.e. rural female) as these are two key factors that may influence
18 responses provided. Age was not included as the participants were of similar ages. The
19 number corresponded to the order in which the participants were interviewed (i.e. rural female
20 1) was the first rural female who was interviewed.

21 There is no single definition of a rural or urban student in the literature. They are
22 generally defined by the population size of their home town, or the distance of their home to a
23 key urban centre, and there is no evidence as to which definition is best (Frenette, 2007).
24 Within Australia, an urban centre is typically defined as having a population greater than
25 100,000 people (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). The Rural, Remote and

Metropolitan Areas (RRMA) classification is also used with rural areas defined as having a population between 10,000 and 99,000 people, and remote areas as having a population less than 10,000 people (AIHW, 2004). The distances required to be classed as rural are more ambiguous. In the present study, we defined rural students as those who attended a secondary school that is: (a) more than 100 kilometres from an urban centre (which itself comprises 100,000 people or more); and (b) in a community with a population of less than 10,000 people.

3. Results and Discussion

The relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model to student transitions has been supported in this research. The model was applicable to the transition experience (see Table 1 for supporting quotes) and is thus suitable for examining its length. The transition to tertiary studies resulted in changes at the micro- and meso- levels mostly affecting friendships. Interactions between the systems occurred with the formation of new friendships influencing the role of pre-existing friendships. At the exo- and macro- levels, there were changes in the influence of social networks and socio-cultural backgrounds. The influence of the chronosystem was determined by the timing of the changes occurring in each of the other systems.

The application of the ecological model enabled the discovery of several key themes: *stability*, *shared interests* and *social maintenance* and the timing of these themes, which are all supported in the literature. Each of the themes will be discussed in the following section, and supporting quotes are listed in Table 2.

1 **Table 1:** Supporting quotes for the ecological systems model

Ecological Model Systems	Supporting Quotes
<i>Micro- and meso-level</i>	<p>‘Family relationships stayed relatively the same but there were definitely changes within friendship groups’ (<i>Urban female 5</i>)</p> <p>‘... spending less time with transitional friendship group and kind of more emphasis on meeting new people’ (<i>Urban male 5</i>)</p> <p>‘You know with friendships both people have to put time and effort into it otherwise it won’t work. That’s why I don’t have as much broad group of friends’ (<i>Urban female 2</i>).</p>
<i>Exo- and macro-level</i>	<p>‘Coming from a remote area influences every aspect of my life. The way I speak and conduct myself, my ability to converse with almost anyone.’ (<i>Rural female 4</i>).</p> <p>‘There’s just different crowds and different scenes in Adelaide you avoid’ (<i>Rural male 4</i>).</p>

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1 TTable 2: Supporting quotes for key themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Urban students	Rural students
Stability	Family	<p>‘I don’t think your friendships really impact your relationship with your family...’ (<i>Male 4</i>)</p> <p>‘Obviously I don’t see them physically as often...’ (<i>Male 1</i>)</p>	<p>‘No my current friendships do not impact on my relationship with my family’ (<i>Female 1</i>)</p> <p>‘I have a strong relationship with my family so this [moving to Adelaide] didn’t influence my relationship with my family’ (<i>Female 1</i>)</p>
	Friendships	<p>‘It was a bit different to have two friendship groups, and not one’ (<i>Male 5</i>)</p>	<p>‘Moving to the big city of Adelaide changes a lot of my friendship groups’ (<i>Female 3</i>)</p> <p>‘...it just gets a bit harder to keep in contact with everyone, especially with my friends from high school...’ (<i>Female 2</i>)</p>
	Timing	<p>‘It took a couple of years for my friendships to really change, I guess it took a while to build up solid new friendships that could replace declining previous friendships’ (<i>Female 3</i>)</p> <p>‘...especially in the second year we got quite tight’ (<i>Female 2</i>)</p> <p>‘After that [the first year of university] things started to change in terms of friendships’ (<i>Female 2</i>).</p>	<p>‘The biggest change... occurred in my first year of university when I moved into college.’ (<i>Female 3</i>)</p>

Shared Interests		<p>‘We were studying and then getting into the workforce... we were taking the same journey’ <i>(Female 2)</i></p> <p>‘I just couldn’t be bothered with their drama’ <i>(Female 2)</i></p> <p>‘Ones that haven’t got a direction... you don’t have as much time for’ <i>(Female 4)</i></p> <p>‘I started wanting different types of conversations, they [high school friends] were still talking about things that were quite young and immature,’ <i>(Male 4)</i></p> <p>‘I just chose different people who I would go to for different things’ <i>(Female 4)</i></p> <p>‘I just couldn’t relate to a lot of friends anymore’ <i>(Female 5)</i></p> <p>‘Living in an urban area I think makes it [maintaining friendships] a lot easier’ <i>(Female 3)</i></p> <p>‘We were all very city central, there was a central location for us to see each other face-to-face’ <i>(Male 1)</i></p>	<p>‘The same time constraints’ <i>(Male 1)</i></p> <p>‘Everyone else who doesn’t play footy with I don’t have time for’ <i>(Male 1)</i></p> <p>‘[my new friends] either came from the country or other areas or interstate or they’d be from a school in Adelaide where none of their close friends had gone...’ <i>(Female 2)</i></p> <p>‘[Netball] gave me access to the social aspect, which is what I needed in Adelaide’ <i>(Female 1)</i></p> <p>‘[seeking friends] also from rural areas’ <i>(Female 3)</i> or from the country or other areas or interstate’ <i>(Female 2)</i></p> <p>‘Like the same sorts of people’ <i>(Male 4)</i></p> <p>‘Experiencing similar challenges’ <i>(Female 3)</i></p> <p>‘I knew no one’ <i>(Female 1)</i></p> <p>‘More established... they don’t make the effort so much [to make new friends]’ <i>(Female 2)</i></p>
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Social Maintenance		<p>‘It is a lot harder to maintain friendships’ (<i>Female 1</i>)</p> <p>‘Just living so close to everyone and public transport...having somewhere central to meet up with lots of options.. makes things a lot easier’ (<i>Female 4</i>)</p> <p>‘[social media facilitates] a bit more regular contact’ (<i>Female 3</i>) ‘You can keep up with people too, you know, you can see what changes occur’ (<i>Female 1</i>)</p> <p>‘If it wasn’t for social media I would have lost contact with a vast majority of people years ago’ (<i>Male 4</i>)</p> <p>‘It [social maintenance] is all supported by social network sites and other means of technology as well’ (<i>Male 5</i>)</p>	<p>‘It just gets harder to keep in contact with everyone’ (<i>Female 2</i>)</p> <p>‘I did not see them as much’ (<i>Female 3</i>)</p> <p>‘[social media] allowed me to contact my friends ... without it I would have struggled to even maintain those friendships.’ (<i>Male 4</i>)</p> <p>‘Technology plays a major role in keeping in contact with both my family and friends on a daily basis’ (<i>Female 3</i>)</p>
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3.1 Theme 1: Stability

The theme of *stability* for familial relationships, and lack of stability in friendships, is in strong agreement with the literature (Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001; Chan & Poulin, 2007; Johnson et al., 2009). All participants reported that new friendships had no impact on their family. The finding of stable familial relationships held for both students who continued to live at home during their tertiary studies (some urban), and for those who moved out (all rural and some urban). While there was a reduction in face-to-face contact, this was not seen as negatively affecting the quality of their relationships with their family. Family relationships are known to have an important role in the initial year of tertiary studies (Bagwell et al., 2001; Chan & Poulin, 2007; Johnson et al., 2009). Yet, the results of this research also suggests that family continues to be important beyond the first year.

Both rural and urban students experienced changes in their friendship networks largely due to the formation of new friendships and the subsequent changes in pre-existing relationships. This is supported by previous research as friendships undergo many changes in both functional aspects, such as quality, roles and expectations (Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001; Chan & Poulin, 2007; Johnson et al., 2009; Rubin, 1985) and structural components of quantity and composition (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Chan & Poulin, 2007; Ramsey, Jones, & Barker, 2007). While lack of stability in friendships was prevalent in both rural and urban students, there was a distinct difference in the timing of these changes. For rural students, changes in friendships occurred in the early stages of the transition, whereas for urban students the changes occurred mostly in the second year of tertiary studies (both for previous friendships and the formation of new friendships). While not specifically addressed, the literature supports these findings as rural students seek out new friendships as they are faced with social challenges and the excitement of having moved away from school friends (Brampston & Patrick, 2007; Johnson et al., 2009; Schonert-Reichl

et al., 1995). This difference in timing raises concerns that the previous literature focusing only on transitions within a single year (Buote et al., 2007; Hillman, 2005; Kuh, 2009; Meier et al., 2013; Ramsey, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012) may have missed important elements of transitions. This research extends the literature as the comparison of rural and urban student experiences suggests that the assumed transition ‘year’ does not encapsulate the timing of the transition for all students. Thus, it is important that universities and other tertiary institutions should consider transitions as extending beyond the initial year, particularly for urban students.

3.2 Theme 2: Shared Interests

The theme of shared interests refers to students and their friends having homogeneous lifestyles, in terms of time constraints, direction, and interests in recreational activities. They also had similar levels of maturity and generally faced similar life challenges. Rural and urban students both felt that shared interests were important for friendship formation. Conversely, in some cases, a lack of shared interests was a reason for the dissipation of previous friendships. The role of *shared interests* for the selection of friendships is supported by Carstensen’s (1991) socio-emotional selectivity theory. Age-related changes in social motives during adolescence and young adulthood lead to a broad range of friends being required to gain information and learn. This learning is intended to help with the exploration of the self, the world, and the development of one's identity (Lansford et al. 1998). This motive does not change until adulthood, where emotional regulation results in the selection of better quality friendships as opposed to large networks, with time spent with those who can provide gratification of emotions, goals and desires (Carstensen, Gross, & Fung, 1998).

While shared interests was a common theme across all students, it manifests uniquely for each individual. However, there were notable differences between rural and urban student groups. For example, urban students underwent changes in their personal interests and started seeking out friends who shared their new interests. The seeking of new friends led to the dissipation of previous friendships. Rural students similarly sought out new friends who had shared interests but in contrast to urban students, rural students sought friends who were also from rural areas or interstate and who were experiencing similar challenges. The sample of rural students sought friendships immediately, as the relocation meant that they did not have a strong support network in their new location. The established friendships of urban students made it difficult for rural students to build social networks with urban students. Urban students found it easier to maintain previous friendships initially, and the change in friendships to those with more aligned shared interests thus took longer for urban students, in many cases exceeding the traditional transition one year time frame. This variability highlights the importance of considering all aspects of an individual's context. The variability in relationship changes is consistent with previous research (Chan & Poulin, 2007; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Lansford, Sherman & Antonucci, 1998; Rubin, 1985) and emphasises the complexity of trying to identify a specific time period for transition. Despite that difficulty, focusing on a single transition year is clearly not sufficient to capture all of the important elements of the transition for many student groups.

3.3 Theme 3: Social Maintenance

Social maintenance refers to the frequency of contact, means of contact, and the factors influencing contact with both previous and new relations. Several factors influenced the maintenance of social relationships, which were relatively consistent across all participants.

1 There was a general consensus that social maintenance is difficult for both rural and urban
2 students and both groups highlighted that this difficulty is moderated by technology.

3 While similarities existed, there were differences between rural and urban students in
4 why they used technology for social maintenance, how they used it, and what influence it had
5 on their friendships. For both student groups, telephones were the tool used to maintain
6 family relationships and friendships, but social media use differed. As rural students resided
7 long distances from previous friends' social media was important to them to maintain
8 existing friendships. Urban students were able to maintain face-to-face social maintenance as
9 they were in (relative) close proximity to friends and used social media merely to assist with
10 the frequency of contact. For urban students, social media augmented face-to-face contact
11 rather than replacing it, allowing them to keep up-to-date with friends without the need to
12 interact directly.

13 Technology prolonged friendship changes for both rural and urban students. For rural
14 students, technology assisted social maintenance that commenced at the start of the transition.
15 Social media thus extended the duration of former friendships after moving away as it
16 allowed continuity to be maintained. Such technology mediated contact did not provide a
17 sufficient replacement for personal contact with friends, but it extended the length of
18 friendships that these students would otherwise not be able to maintain. Urban students
19 reported a slower drift in relationships as the technology augmented contact, rather than
20 replacing it.

21 The extended maintenance of friendships blurs when changes in friendships occur.
22 Although probed on the timing of these transitions, no participant could identify a specific
23 period where they occurred once social media was taken into account. It can be speculated
24 that relationships seemed to fade rather than be lost. As the key changes identified with
25 regard to stability (theme one) were that urban students' transitions extended beyond one

year, it holds that the technology mediated passive relationships lasted well beyond that time. The ability for technology to extend relationships suggests that the transition period may be much longer than one year.

There is disagreement on whether proximity to friends plays a role in the maintenance of (long distance) friendships. A substitute effect has been found whereby peers supplant familial and 'old' friend relations for rural students (Cassidy, 2004; Terezini et al., 1994). In contrast, others find proximity is not an issue due to technology aiding the social maintenance of long distance friendships (Adams, 1998; Johnson et al., 2009; Oswald & Clark, 2001; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). The different results seem to arise from differing perspectives on the definition of an active relationship, with social media making it difficult to define. Technology appears to lengthen the period of which friendships are able to be maintained, whether this is with friends who are long distance, or friends who are not close enough to be maintained with face-to-face interaction.

4. Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. First, while the focus of this study was on the changes occurring within social support networks, a limitation was that there was no insight provided into the learning experiences of the participants involved. Thus, future research should use a similar qualitative approach to investigate the experiences of changes in social support and how this may have impacted on the learning experiences of students. It is recommended that this research be conducted closer to the transition itself to ensure greater memory recall, or potentially with a quantitative component where participants may provide outcomes such as their grade point average (GPA) grades during the university period. A more comprehensive framework may also be employed, based on Cuconato and Walther's (2015) multilevel analysis of education trajectories.

Secondly, the interview questions relied on participant's recall of events, thus it is possible that their recall was not entirely accurate of the experiences as they were happening, and the timing of the events may have been blurred. It may be useful to undertake this research while students are actually experiencing the transition.

A third limitation of this study is that as no prior interview questions relevant to the ecological model and this context were available, the interview questions had to be designed for the purpose of this study. This research provides some formative insight into the types of information that can be sought and suggests possible avenues for future research to build on the interview questions to gain a greater insight into the various experiences of students. In particular, future research could include questions relating to the period leading up to the transition to tertiary studies to gauge students' preparation for this transition.

5. Implications and Conclusions

The present study found that domestic students transition over varying periods of time. In this case, rural students predominantly within one year, and urban students over approximately two years. Existing research on student transitions should be revisited to identify whether limiting the scope of previous studies has led us to omit important phenomenon. Kuh (2009) supports this approach, stating that tertiary institutions know more about their first year students than students in following years, and highlights the need to focus on student experiences in later years. Present resource allocations for student engagement prioritises the newest student cohort, with later year students finding induction and orientation activities less relevant than commencing students (DOE, 2013). Research should examine what educational resources are best positioned when transitions extend beyond a single academic year. The need for continual support for domestic students is evident with lower satisfaction scores for

1 later year students compared to commencing students in areas such as: quality of education
2 experience (75.7 vs. 81.7); sense of belonging to the university (42 vs 49); and support for
3 settling into study (29 vs. 43) (DOE, 2013).

4 Staff entrusted with supporting students during their transition to higher education
5 may need to re-examine their approach in doing so. While it was always understood that rural
6 and urban students have different needs, this research highlights that urban students in
7 particular need additional transition support during their second year of university. There is a
8 strong focus on assisting during the first year, and even more commonly the first few weeks,
9 at a tertiary institution. While integrated systems of transition are encouraged (Briggs, Clark,
10 & Hall, 2012), there is a lack of research assessing the efficacy of specific services within
11 tertiary institutions beyond the first year. Thus, there is a need to continue researching the
12 lived experiences of students to better understand the ongoing transition occurring in social
13 networks (Gale & Parker, 2014). While an 'Orientation Week' is a useful event for new
14 students at tertiary institutions, providing an ongoing form of support would likely benefit
15 students. Ongoing information about such services, especially during the first two years of
16 university, will afford more opportunities for students to make use of them whenever they
17 start to face their transition difficulties. Improving the transition experience benefits both the
18 students and the tertiary institution through improved levels of satisfaction, reduced attrition
19 rates, and improved educational outcomes.

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10

1 **Appendices**

2 **Appendix 1 - Interview Questions**

3 1. Did your friendships change with the transition to tertiary studies? If so, how?

4

5 a. Number of friends?

6 b. Composition of friends (high school, university/TAFE)

7 c. Type of friendships? (close- regular weekly interaction, distant- irregular
8 interaction)

9 d. Quality of friendships (areas such as help, intimacy, reliability, emotional
10 security)

11 e. What you wanted from your friendships? (ie. Frequency of contact, more
12 emotional support, access to more social groups)

13

14 2. Have your friendships now changed from when you first transitioned to university/TAFE? If
15 so, how?

16 a. Number of friends?

17 b. Composition of friends (high school, university/TAFE friends)

18 c. Type of friendships? (close- regular weekly contact, broad- irregular contact)

19 d. Quality of friendships (areas such as help, intimacy, reliability, emotional
20 security)

21 e. What you wanted from your friendships? (ie. Frequency of contact, more
22 emotional support, access to more social groups)

23

24 3. Did your new friendships at university/TAFE impact on your high school friendships and

- 1 relationship with your family? If so, how?
- 2
- 3 4. Do your current friendships impact on your relationship with your family? If so, how?
- 4
- 5 5. At school who do you think was your main source of social support (ie. high school friends,
- 6 other friends, family)?
- 7
- 8 a. Did this change when you went to university/TAFE? If so, how?
- 9 b. Is this different now? If so, how?
- 10
- 11 6. How did you maintain contact with your friends and family during and after
- 12 university/TAFE? Did technology (ie. mobile phone, facebook, twitter) play a role?
- 13
- 14 7. How did this maintenance differ between your high school friends, tertiary friends and
- 15 family? Has that changed today?
- 16
- 17 8. What was your living situation while at school and during university/TAFE? (ie. living at
- 18 home with parents/family, boarding school, living with friends, living alone?). Do you think
- 19 this influenced your friendships and family relationships?
- 20
- 21 9. Do you think living in a rural or urban area influenced your friendships during and after
- 22 tertiary studies? If so, what aspects of your lifestyle do you believe contributed to this?