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Rose B. Cameron & Candice A. Rideout

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'It's been a challenge finding new ways to learn': first-year students' perceptions of adapting to learning in a university environment

Rose B. Cameron^a and Candice A. Rideout ^b

^aGlobal Resource Systems Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada; ^bFood, Nutrition and Health Program, Faculty of Land and Food Systems, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

ABSTRACT

The first year of university is a challenging period of academic and personal development for students. Through phenomenographic analysis of 27 interviews with students who had just completed their first year at university, this study provides valuable insight into students' perceptions of adapting to learning in a university environment. Four themes emerged: (i) incoming students were not prepared to be self-directed learners; (ii) students began to develop self-directed learning skills during their first year; (iii) peers supported students' transition to learning at university; and, (iv) at the end of first year, students were still figuring out how to be effective learners in a university context. Our findings can inform strategies to support students in their transition to university studies. In particular, our results underscore the importance of supporting first-year students' development of self-directed learning skills and facilitating their access to communities of peers who can provide academic and social support.

KEYWORDS

First-year experience; self-regulated learning; social support; college student development; higher education; qualitative

Introduction

The first year of university studies is a time of substantial transition and adjustment. It is a period of complex transformations, involving changes to students' values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as their knowledge and ways of understanding (Hussey and Smith 2010). The beginning of university is often associated with significant disruptions in students' daily lives, including changes in living circumstances and social networks. At the same time, students must adapt to new expectations and norms regarding learning in a university context (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012; Gall, Evans, and Bellerose 2000). During this complex period of change, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and lack of social connection may occur (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007). Loneliness in first-year students has, in turn, been associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress (Richardson, Elliott, and Roberts 2017). Considering the amount of disruption incoming students experience and the high-stakes environment of first-year university studies, it is essential that first-year students are adequately supported in establishing a strong foundation for their learning, wellbeing, and success at university and beyond.

Universities expect first-year students to be independent learners, capable of using effective learning strategies and managing their time to meet the various, often competing, demands of their courses (Bowman 2017; Gale and Parker 2014). Yet, some of the greatest challenges first-year

students face include time management, using effective study strategies, and maintaining motivation when faced with heavy workloads (Dixon Rayle and Chung 2007; Trautwein and Bosse 2017). A lack of supervision and guidance from university instructors can contribute to first-year students' difficulties with time management (Dixon Rayle and Chung 2007; Trautwein and Bosse 2017). When students are unable to organise and manage their time effectively, it hinders their learning and has negative impacts on their academic achievement.

First-year students' academic success is predicted by social support, in addition to factors such as study skills and motivation (van der Zanden et al. 2018) and it is becoming increasingly clear that first-year students benefit from developing a sense of belonging in the university community. First-year students who are more socially integrated have higher academic motivation over time (Noyens et al. 2018) and those with higher levels of social support tend to adjust to university more successfully (Friedlander et al. 2007). Students indicate that feeling like they belong is one of the things that matters most to them in first year (Meehan and Howells 2017). Developing a sense of belonging at university is an important aspect of developing an identity as a university student, and both processes are enhanced through social relationships with other students (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012; Thomas 2002). Social interactions with other first-year students support students' understanding of themselves in the university context, because peers are a prominent source of knowledge regarding institutional norms and expectations (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007). First-year students are more likely to feel a strong sense of identity as a university student if they have integrated with their peers and they engage in behaviours they associate with being a university student, such as studying and socialising (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012).

The first year of university forms the foundation for students' future success in higher education. It is a critical period for establishing the skills and habits of a self-directed learner and developing a sense of belonging in this new learning environment. University education (in the first year and beyond) proceeds on the assumption that students have already developed the skills needed to succeed as a learner, or that they will develop them naturally as they progress through their courses. However, many first-year students appear to struggle a great deal with adapting to the demands of being an independent learner in a university context. While previous research has identified factors that contribute to success and challenges in adapting to university, less is known about students' perceptions of their experiences with respect to learning in their first year of higher education. A better understanding of students' experiences is essential to both understanding students' academic development in the first year and informing curricular and co-curricular strategies to support students in becoming effective university learners.

The present study

In this study, we used in-depth interviews to explore how first-year students perceived their transition to learning at university, in order to inform strategies to better support students' development as effective learners during this critical period. Participants were recruited from among students who had just completed their first year of university in a science-based Faculty at a large research-intensive university in western Canada. In their first year, these students took various large-enrolment science courses, math, English, and one course (LFS 100: Introduction to Land, Food and Community) offered by their home Faculty in the Fall term as an introduction to the disciplines they may study in subsequent years (e.g. nutrition, food science, applied biology). We aimed to explore two broad questions: (1) How do first-year students perceive their adjustment to a university learning environment? (2) To what extent are first-year students prepared to learn effectively in a university context?

Methodology

To explore first-year students' perspectives of their experiences adjusting to learning at university, we undertook this study from a phenomenographic perspective. Phenomenography is a qualitative

research approach focused on describing the ways in which people experience and understand aspects of the world around them (Marton 1981; Yates, Partridge, and Bruce 2012). Initially developed by educational researchers and used to explore experiences of learning in different contexts, phenomenography takes a second-order perspective, meaning the aim is to describe how people perceive and understand phenomena (Yates, Partridge, and Bruce 2012). This second-order perspective is a key difference between phenomenography and a strictly phenomenological approach (Marton 1981). In the context of this study, our aim was to describe how this sample of first-year students perceived and understood their transition to learning in a university context.

In the month following completion of their first year at university, students who had started university the previous Fall and completed LFS 100 in their first term (346 students) were sent an email invitation to participate in an interview about their experiences as a first-year university student. Students interested in completing an interview were asked to provide their name and email address through an online survey (Qualtrics 2018) and advised they would be contacted to schedule an interview. Twenty-seven students scheduled and completed interviews; 15 interviews were completed in person and 12 were completed by phone. All interviews were conducted by the first author, a recent graduate of the Faculty from which participants were recruited. A semi-structured interview guide was used, which included general questions about students' transition to university and their learning experiences in first year (e.g. What was the biggest challenge you experienced as a first-year student? Reflecting on your first year as a learner in a university setting, do you feel like you figured out how to succeed as a learner in this environment?). Participants were also asked probing questions for clarification of their responses, as needed. Each interview was audio recorded, with permission of the participant, and lasted between 14 and 32 minutes (median length = 22 minutes). As a token of appreciation, each participant was given a \$15 gift card for their choice of campus bookstore, campus food services, or online media.

Following completion of all 27 interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo 12 qualitative research software (NVivo 12 2018). Both authors coded two transcripts independently using a line-by-line coding approach with in vivo and descriptive codes for comments perceived as important from their perspectives as a recent university graduate and an experienced university instructor. After coding the first two transcripts, we met to review, discuss, and further develop the initial coding structure. An additional five transcripts were then independently coded by both authors, and the resulting coding structures were shared, discussed, and further refined. The remaining 20 transcripts were then coded by the first author. Through each iteration of the coding process, a constant comparison approach was used to assess previously coded transcripts, continually adding references to the coding structure. Once initial coding of all transcripts was completed, the resulting coding structure was discussed and used to create meaningful categories, which were then grouped into a thematic structure that identified and explained key aspects of participants' experiences (Green et al. 2007). All transcripts were subsequently reviewed again by the second author and coded according to the specific categories that had been created, in order to clearly ascertain the number of participants whose comments substantiated each category and theme. In the attribution of example quotations, participants were identified with pseudonyms and filler words (e.g. um, uh, like) were removed, to increase readability.

Findings

Participants were 22 (81.5%) female and 5 (18.5%) male students with a median age of 18 years when they started university the previous September (Table 1). Eight (30%) participants lived on-campus in university residences during their first year and 19 (70%) lived off-campus and commuted to the university. Twenty-two participants (81.5%) had completed at least some high school in Canada and five (18.5%) completed their high school education internationally.

Four themes (each comprised of several categories) emerged which explained key aspects of students' experiences: (1) first-year students were not prepared to be self-directed learners; (2) students

Table 1. Participants’ pseudonyms and descriptive characteristics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age in years when started university	Lived on campus in first year?
Alice	F	18	No
Amanda	F	17	No
Amy	F	18	Yes
Anna	F	19	No
Anthony	M	17	Yes
Bronwyn	F	18	No
Christine	F	18	Yes
Deborah	F	18	Yes
Elizabeth	F	18	No
Emma	F	18	No
Erica	F	19	No
Harriet	F	17	No
Howard	M	18	No
Irene	F	17	Yes
Karen	F	18	No
Katherine	F	19	No
Kevin	M	18	No
Lucy	F	19	Yes
Lynn	F	18	No
Mathew	M	18	No
Megan	F	17	Yes
Miranda	F	17	Yes
Naomi	F	17	No
Rick	M	17	No
Sarah	F	17	Yes
Sophie	F	18	No
Stephanie	F	18	No

began to develop self-directed learning skills during their first year at university; (3) peers supported students’ transition to learning at university; and (4) at the end of their first year, students were still figuring out how to be effective learners at university (Figure 1).

Theme 1: First-year students were not prepared to be self-directed learners

All participants identified difficulties associated with becoming self-directed learners as key challenges in their transition to university studies (Table 2). This was often expressed as challenges with workload and time management (category 1.1), with 25 participants identifying these as major challenges in their first year. For example, referring to his workload as a first-year student, Rick said ‘as I was going through each term I kind of felt a lot of stress, like “wow, this is a lot”’.

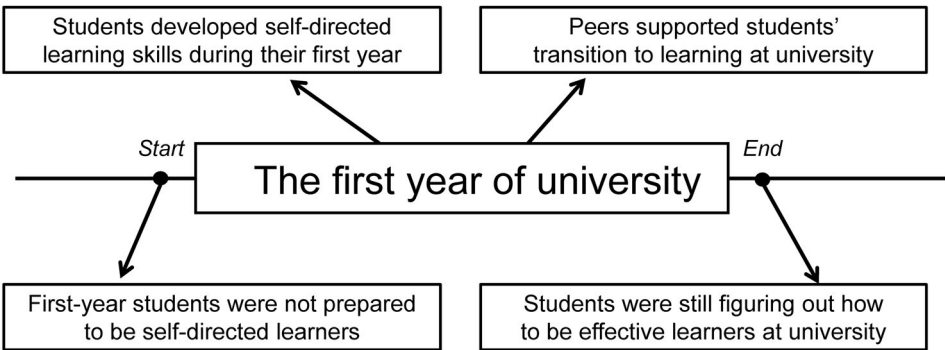


Figure 1. Themes describing first-year students ongoing transition to university studies.

Table 2. Themes, categories, and their distribution among participants.

Theme	Category	Number of participants substantiating category	Example quotations from participants
1. First-year students were not prepared to be self-directed learners	1.1 Challenges with workload and time management	25	[My] biggest challenge [was] scheduling, the time management, taking different classes and they all have their amount of work. So I had to get into the idea to do which part of which course, and then like tomorrow I need to do which part. (Miranda) Definitely time management [was my biggest challenge in first year]. So there was so much to do all the time ... I had to really block-out my time, and it's something I had to learn. (Sarah)
	1.2 Needed to adopt new study strategies (previous ways of learning were not working)	9	My study habits from high school had to be altered. In high school a lot of it was just me reading notes over and over and just eventually I'd memorise it, and then all the memorised content would be on the test or exam, so I'd get like high marks. But then here it's a lot more practical I feel – you have to actually practice. (Emma) I just needed to learn, to relearn, how to study math, because I used to just grind or just crunch numbers ... and that strategy worked really well in high school, [but not at university]. (Sophie)
	1.3 Not prepared for less contact and guidance from instructors	13	I feel like for high school ... they were helping you a lot more, giving you deadlines, and giving you extra worksheets or practice, and doing things step by step. But in university ... it's all about yourself, how you want to plan everything. (Harriet) In high school your teachers keep a bit of an eye on you, and say 'I haven't seen you in class for a while' or 'you haven't handed in this assignment' or 'you seem sad is everything okay', and you know in classes with 250 people, university was a lot more oriented towards me ... My performance entirely determined how my year went, so I wasn't entirely prepared for that. (Irene)
	1.4 Hard to maintain motivation	6	[My greatest challenge was] being self-motivated ... not having your high school teacher telling you this due date, this due date, and you have to study yourself, and look ahead to see self-timing and goals. (Christine) [My] biggest challenge really was I remember towards the end was the motivation, like getting closer to the end of semesters and finals are coming up, it's like trying to really focus even more ... the final exams are worth even more percentage-wise, yeah so kind of burning out a little bit. (Kevin)

(Continued)



Table 2. Continued.

Theme	Category	Number of participants substantiating category	Example quotations from participants
2. Students began to develop self-directed learning skills during their first year of university	1.5 Questioned identity as a learner in a university environment	9	I do think sometimes, especially first semester, I was like 'maybe I'm just not cut out for this', or like 'maybe I should go somewhere else' – like a less prestigious university or something. (Emma) When I reached university I really had to re-think [what] I thought about myself because of course my academic accomplishments weren't the same in university as they were in high school. (Sophie)
	2.1 Improved planning and time management skills	20	I learned a lot over those two semesters. I learned a lot about my work habits, time management skills really, priorities, so putting school work over social life and stuff at times. (Kevin) Second term, I did much better, because I figured out what I needed for myself, which is a better sleep schedule, and I guess better time management. So as a learner you just have to find out what works for you. (Sarah)
	2.2 Realised differences between high school and university	16	I guess just planning ahead definitely for studying, and realising that the course content is actually challenging now as compared to a lot of stuff in high school, where it's like you don't have to necessarily try for everything and you get a good grade anyways. Whereas here you definitely have to put in the effort. (Bronwyn) Back in high school you would just do the homework and the materials were much easier and required less time, in a sense. So in university you not only have to know the material, you have to be able to apply the knowledge into the real world situations where the final exams or midterm exams questions were mostly application-based problems and not just asking you for knowledge. And that really, that was the big difference for me, to transition from high school to university. (Mathew)
	2.3 Adopted more active learning strategies	17	[My study habits changed to emphasise] just more practice – like the prof suggested ... actually trying the practice problems. I think testing yourself with friends also helped. (Amanda) Well I actually ended up failing a course, and I, after much thought on it, realised it was mostly because I didn't really do practice questions, so it was a matter of keeping up with the content, not cramming, doing the practice ... not relying on theory alone, just being able to apply things in different situations. (Anna)

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Theme	Category	Number of participants substantiating category	Example quotations from participants
	2.4 Learned to prepare more effectively for exams	16	First round of exams I was doing a lot cramming I think, so second term I was a lot better about that and I studied a bit more practically. (Bronwyn) If there were two midterms, if I didn't really like my score in the first midterm, I would try and go over what I did wrong and try to do more practice questions. I would try to just change my study habits, to help me bounce back up to see more improvements. (Karen)
3. Peers supported students' transition to learning at university	3.1 Friendships supported students	21	I would tell myself to ... really work on those [friendships] that would enhance my academics, because I think for me ... I need support, and that support is the thing that pushes me through almost every difficulty I've had in life. (Deborah) I think friends are really, really important component in university because ... my friends supported me and helped me and we helped each other out, and I think that was really important. (Lucy)
	3.2 Peers provided valuable academic support	18	When you're going through [course material], you've got to explain things to each other and some people would be good at certain things, and then you could help them out with other things. It was kind of like filling in all of the gaps. (Rick) [Studying with people in my classes was helpful because] they can see a perspective that I can't see, or maybe I didn't really study something and they'd interject and be like 'oh no I think this quiz uses this application' which was really cool. (Alice)
	3.3 Peers motivated students	10	When you have friends that motivate you, when you see them getting good grades and you want to be like that too, like I would want to be like that, so that motivates me a lot. (Lucy) Once I made friends ... I held myself accountable to them as well ... It helped since they were taking a lot of similar classes, so they knew what was going on, with the courses and stuff, so we would work together. Or, you know, if someone's slacking off: 'hey, get the work done, you know we can help later', or something like that. (Anna)
	3.4 Helpful to know not alone	5	Just knowing that everyone's going through the same thing, everyone's struggling, so it's not just me, really helped me. It was a collective sense I guess, even if no one's really talking about it, I knew it was a lot of people were struggling. (Rick) I would say getting involved, that was the biggest highlight of my first year. I was able to actually like learn from others, have others talk about like their

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

Theme	Category	Number of participants substantiating category	Example quotations from participants
			problems, relate to what we're going through, and it just made me feel like I'm not alone, even when I was struggling. (Harriet)
	3.5 Engaging with peers through extracurricular activities was helpful	9	I joined a club in my second semester ... and immediately that made such a huge difference to me ... to be hanging out with people and meeting new people. (Irene) [Joining a club] definitely helped me, adapting to the university environment, where in the beginning I was, I was kind of lonely, and those people kind of helped support me, and guided me, gave me advice – how to better cope. (Mathew)
	3.6 University systems or resources that brought peers together were useful	16	Living on-campus, that definitely helped me a lot because that's how I met so many people, and that's how I got my support system ... without living on-campus, it would have been completely different. (Megan) [The university-provided space for commuter students] was actually a really helpful space to me, especially in first-term ... when you're trying to make friends and start school and get used to everything. (Naomi)
4. At the end of their first year, students were still figuring out how to be effective learners at university	4.1 Not sure what will happen in second year courses	20	I guess going into second year ... for the way to study I might not know exactly if it would work I guess ... I'm not very confident I would be able to do what I'm supposed to do in order to be prepared for [second-year exams]. (Elizabeth) I think that I figured out how to succeed in first year. I really feel like I'm going to need to figure it out again for second year, I feel like it's going to be different. (Deborah)
	4.2 Anxious about expected difficulty of second-year classes	9	I've heard second-year's the hardest year, and I hear they always try to weed people out and stuff. (Emma) [I am not] super confident [for second year] because I know the courses definitely, for sure, get harder. (Stephanie)
	4.3 Recognise opportunities for ongoing improvement	19	I'm going to keep trying to stop procrastinating, focus on my studies a bit more, as well as maintaining my health and other parts of my life ... I'll see how things go. (Amanda) I think I've gotten a grasp of it, but obviously I still have much to learn about different study tips or how to handle stress. (Amy)

Several participants indicated that challenges with organising and managing their workload, rather than course content itself, most influenced their success. For example, Alice stated:

I really struggled [with] not the actual course material, I thought that was okay, but just studying. Studying on time, getting all that organised was the difficult part ... I was surprised by that.

For many, the heavy academic workload left little time for other activities. Taking five courses each term (the typical course load for full-time undergraduate students) proved to be overwhelming for some. Three participants decided to reduce the number of courses they were taking in their second semester to increase their capacity to manage their academic workload. As Deborah explained:

The fact that I was taking so many courses at the same time [meant] I never felt fully on the same page ... but I took a lower course load this second term, and I did better.

Nine participants indicated they needed to adopt new study strategies in first year, because their previous ways of learning were not adequate for university courses (category 1.2). Many students realised their study habits 'had to be altered' and they had to 'relearn how to study' (Table 2). Students recognised that the study strategies they had used in high school, including re-reading materials and memorisation, were not effective in university. It was often students' first exams that caused them to realise this. As Emma explained:

Especially first semester of first year, everyone's still kind of going in with the same study tactics that they had in high school, I think. And then I think the first set of midterms and even the second set of midterms was definitely a huge shock to people. People were getting marks that they had never gotten.

Students' surprise and disappointment with the results of their midterm exams often prompted the realisation that they needed to adopt new study strategies in order to succeed in a university context.

Many participants spoke of ways in which their high school experiences had not adequately prepared them for becoming an effective self-directed learner at university. For example, 13 participants indicated they were not prepared for the reduction in personal guidance they received from university instructors, compared to high school teachers (category 1.3). Participants were used to ongoing personal contact with their teachers in high school, including direct supervision to ensure they met deadlines, and they struggled with receiving less guidance from university instructors (Table 2).

Two notable aspects of students' reflections demonstrated internal struggles with becoming self-directed learners in a university context. Six students mentioned they found it hard to maintain motivation for their academic work (category 1.4). Without the structure and reminders they were used to in high school, some participants found it difficult to motivate themselves, an essential element of succeeding as a self-directed learner. Nine participants spoke of how their first-year experience caused them to question their identity as a learner in a university environment (category 1.5). For some, a notable drop in their university grades (compared to what they had received at high school) challenged their perceptions of themselves as successful in academic settings. Rick described the drop in his grades as 'humbling', while Bronwyn said, 'there's that little kick to the ego when you come into [this university] and you're not the smartest person there'. The surprise and disappointment they experienced when they failed to achieve the high grades to which they were accustomed meant some participants had to 'rethink [what they] thought about [themselves]' and they questioned whether they were 'cut out for this' (Table 2).

Theme 2: Students began to develop self-directed learning skills in their first year at university

Twenty-six participants spoke of ways in which they developed self-directed learning skills during their first year as a university student. Of particular importance for 20 participants was improvement in their planning and time management skills (category 2.1) (Table 2). As Erica said, 'I definitely got a

lot better at managing my time ... I guess maybe that's probably my biggest accomplishment'. During their first year, students learned to better manage a heavy workload, set appropriate priorities, and organise their time. Erica went on to explain: 'I realised if stuff is assigned but you have a few weeks to do it, to start on it, and do little bits at a time ... not putting stuff off, keeping up'. Developing better time management skills was viewed as an important part of the university learning experience. As Sarah noted, 'getting more organised is something you learn in university'.

For 16 participants, a growing understanding and appreciation of the differences between high school and university (category 2.2) was an important part of their development as an effective learner in a university context. It was clear that many participants had not been expecting such substantial differences, as illustrated by Rick's comment: '[University] was quite different from high school, it was kind of a shock'. Participants reflected on how they had been accustomed to receiving high grades in high school with relatively little work and that they had needed to learn that this would not be possible at university (Table 2). Appreciating the increased demands of this new learning context appeared to be an important element of students' development as self-directed learners who could succeed at university.

Many participants spoke of how they changed their approach to learning during their first year at university when they realised that what they had done in the past was no longer sufficient in this new context. Seventeen participants spoke of adopting more active learning and study strategies (category 2.3) and 16 mentioned learning to prepare more effectively for exams, in particular (category 2.4). Learning the importance of doing practice questions was commonly identified as an important insight; it was specifically mentioned by six participants. Other active strategies participants started to use in their first year included self-testing and applying information in different contexts (Table 2). Adopting more active learning strategies was not easy for students. Anthony noted, 'it's been a challenge finding new ways to learn', and Rick said that the process 'was just kind of trial and error from term one to term two'. Although it was challenging to learn how to use more active study strategies, participants were aware of their usefulness. For example, Katherine explained the improvement in her grades between first and second term by saying, 'it's definitely how I chose to study ... I don't think I worked harder, but I worked smarter'.

Theme 3: Peers supported students' transition to learning at university

All participants identified ways in which peers provided important support in their transition to university, including friendships, academic support, and extracurricular social connections. Twenty-one participants reflected on how their friends had provided important social support during their first year (category 3.1) (Table 2). Eighteen participants spoke of how their peers had provided valuable academic support, which made notable contributions to their learning (category 3.2). For example, participants indicated that studying with other students enabled them to practice explaining concepts to others, which strengthened their learning and provided opportunities for 'filling in all of the gaps' in their knowledge (Table 2). Amy spoke to this when she said:

Explaining is another way to make sure you understand the concept, so when I would try to explain something to my friends, if I had a blank in my mind, then I would, I would be aware of that, and then make sure I knew it for the final [exam].

Eleven participants specifically described ways in which their peers motivated them (category 3.3) as an important aspect of how peers supported their transition to university. Studying in groups was identified as one way participants felt motivated to focus on their coursework and avoid procrastination (Table 2). Participants sometimes intentionally sought out new peer groups to help motivate them in their academic work. For example, Stephanie said, 'I needed to step up a bit the second term, and focus a lot more ... I found better friends to help me, to encourage me to work hard together basically'. Another important aspect of how peers supported students' transition to learning at university was noted by five participants: it was helpful for students to know they were not alone in

their struggles to adapt to this new environment (category 3.4). As Harriet noted, connecting with peers and hearing about their challenges ‘just made me feel like I’m not alone, even when I was struggling’.

Two approaches to establishing new connections with peers appeared to be particularly valuable: engaging with peers through extracurricular activities (category 3.5) and university systems or resources that brought peers together (category 3.6). Nine participants described meeting other students through extracurricular activities such as clubs as an important aspect of their first-year experience, echoing Irene’s comment that joining a club ‘made such a huge difference to me’ (Table 2). Sixteen participants talked about university systems or resources that had helped them establish useful relationships with their peers, including on-campus residence housing, on-campus leisure spaces for commuter students, and classes or supplemental activities that brought small numbers of students together.

Theme 4: At the end of first year, students were still figuring out how to learn effectively at university

Many participants indicated that while they felt more confident after completing their first year, they were still trying to adjust to university. As Emma said, ‘I think I’m still kind of figuring out [how to succeed at university], but I think it’s definitely ... a skill that I’ll build on, and eventually it’ll get easier’. Eighteen participants spoke of specific opportunities for ongoing improvement as they moved forward at university (category 4.1), including learning how to study more effectively, improving time management, balancing social life with academic work, managing stress, and committing to actions to help maintain health (Table 2). It was clear students recognised there was still a lot to learn about being an effective university student. As Irene put it: ‘I do feel I know myself a lot better, and who I am as a student, and how to succeed as a student ... But I think I’d be naïve if I thought I had all of it figured out’.

Having just completed their first year at university, participants expressed uncertainty and anxiety about what was to come in second year. Twenty participants specifically stated that they were not sure what would happen in second year (category 4.2). For example, Anthony said, ‘I don’t really know what to expect yet [from second year]’ and Amy noted, ‘right now [I am confident], but I don’t know what will happen next year’. Participants spoke of expecting second year to be different and that they would have to figure things out again (Table 2). Nine participants mentioned feeling anxious about the difficulty of second-year courses (category 4.3), with several students indicating that they had heard that second year is the ‘hardest year’ (Table 2). A number of participants were not confident in their ability to handle the challenges that would come in second year. As Mathew said:

I would say I’m a bit more confident, but still not very confident, because I’m still really scared of the new environment, and the new challenges that are ahead of me, and just the expectations that come with second year. I’m still kind of intimidated by that.

At the end of their first year, a sense of uncertainty clouded participants’ perceptions of the next year and they expressed concerns about whether they would be able to handle the challenges second year would bring.

Discussion

This study provides important insight into how students at a large research-intensive university experienced their transition to university studies. Given the very broad, open-ended nature of the questions used in our interviews, the extent to which a small number of themes clearly characterised diverse students’ experiences was remarkable. Four themes described these students’ transition to learning in a university environment: at the outset of their university studies, incoming first-year

students were not prepared to be self-directed learners; students began to develop self-directed learning skills during their first year; peers supported students' transition to learning at university; and, at the end of their first year, students were still figuring out how to be effective learners in a university context (Figure 1). Our results make important contributions to our understanding of ways in which students experience the academic transition to higher education. They provide a clear description of students' perspectives of their progressive transition to learning in a university environment, highlight the transition from first to second year studies as another notable (and perhaps insufficiently recognised) transition point, and underscore the importance of (i) supporting first-year students in developing the skills they need to succeed as independent learners and (ii) facilitating students' access to communities of peer learners to support their transition to university.

Becoming an effective university learner is a challenging and ongoing process

All participants reported significant challenges adjusting to a university learning environment and many were surprised by the nature of the challenges they experienced. Whereas before they started university, students had expected difficult course content to pose the greatest challenge to their learning, they identified their real challenges in first year to be time management, effective studying and exam preparation, and the ability to motivate themselves. The challenges students perceived as most significant relate to two learning pattern domains, learning strategies (in terms of both cognitive processing and metacognitive regulation) and learning motivation (Vermunt and Donche 2017). Receiving less direct contact with university instructors than they were accustomed to from high school teachers contributed to time management challenges. Without ongoing guidance and reminders from instructors, students were often unsure of what to prioritise. This corroborates what others have found: first-year students in a variety of contexts have struggled with receiving less guidance from their university instructors (Blair 2017; Brinkworth et al. 2009); becoming an independent learner is a critical component of adjusting to the university environment, even among those with some previous post-secondary experience (Christie, Barron, and D'Annunzio-Green 2013).

The transition to university studies, especially the results of their first exams, prompted participants in our study to begin developing the skills they needed to become better self-directed learners. For many, these first assessments of learning served as turning points (Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens 2009) that prompted their development as a university learner. Generally speaking, students' learning patterns are influenced by their perceptions of the learning environment (Vermunt and Donche 2017), and it was clear that our participants actively adapted their learning strategies given the demands of the new environment in which they were learning. Becoming an effective learner in first-year university involves finding new approaches to studying that do not rely on rote memorisation but rather include identifying personal learning needs, prioritising learning goals, and accessing appropriate sources of knowledge (Bowman 2017; Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012; Chan 2001; Clark 2005). The majority of our participants spoke of how they had developed better learning and time management skills during their first year and also identified specific opportunities for continued improvement as they moved forward into second year. This reflects the ongoing nature of developing self-regulated learning skills whereby feedback regarding past experiences is applied to inform current and future efforts (Zimmerman 2000). Providing students with resources and opportunities to refine self-directed learning skills would enhance students' adjustment to the university learning environment and help lay the groundwork for their success at university.

A key finding from our study was the degree of concern participants expressed about the uncertainties of second year and their capacity to handle future academic challenges. It is clear that the first year of undergraduate studies is not the only period of transition during which students may need particular support. From students' perspectives, their transition to learning in a university context was still ongoing as they prepared to enter second year. Although they had completed first year, the process of becoming confident and effective self-directed learners at university was still very much

a work in progress. This highlights the need for educators to consider strategies to support students in continuing to adjust to the university learning environment, beyond their first year of studies.

The important role of peer support

Participants in our study indicated several ways in which peer support was integral to their first-year experiences: peers provided friendship, academic support, motivation, and reassurance. Previous research found that social networks play a key role in helping first-year students overcome the challenges of adjusting to university (Gall, Evans, and Bellerose 2000; Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005) and suggested that the personal relationships students develop are ultimately more important to their learning and development at university than specific academic curricula (Chambliss and Takacs 2014). Observing other students facing similar challenges at university normalises the process of adjusting to higher education and provides students with encouragement to persevere through challenges. When faced with difficulties during first year, peers provide meaningful evidence that students are not alone in their struggles, as they share the challenges of adjustment (Thomas 2002). A social network of peers gives first-year students the opportunity to develop their sense of connection to the university, which in turn gives them a sense of purpose in their new role as higher education learners. Opportunities to observe and imitate effective peer learners are also important aspects of the process by which students can improve their own self-regulated learning skills (Zimmerman 2000), though previous work has indicated that learning with peers is not sufficient for academic achievement; accurate assessment of learning and metacognitive reflection are also key (Toms 2016).

Connecting with peers through the common experiences of first-year can also be seen as part of the process of forming a university student identity (Briggs, Clark, and Hall 2012). Identifying as a higher education learner is facilitated by learning from the cues and behaviours of other first-year students (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007), and first-year students often turn to peers to provide them with knowledge in unfamiliar situations (Clark 2005). Many of our participants may have found their identity as a first-year student, but this had not extended to perceiving themselves as effective, resilient university learners overall. Developing a strong identity as a university learner during first-year university is important because it will encourage students to persist and provide some resilience in the face of future academic challenges.

Conclusion

This study provides useful insights regarding first-year students' adjustment to a university learning environment. Students' reflections on their experiences in their first year at university showed a remarkably similar pattern. At the outset of their studies, students were not prepared for challenges associated with being effective self-directed learners, but they improved their learning skills throughout first year (a process often prompted by receiving disappointing results on their first exams). Future strategies to support first-year students' development of effective university learning skills could focus on the period immediately following midterm examinations in the first term as a time when students may be particularly receptive to encouragement and guidance to improve their study habits. Peers were key sources of support for participants, both socially and academically. It follows that first-year students' adjustment to university could be facilitated by ensuring frequent and ongoing opportunities for students to integrate with each other, in classes and through broader campus activities. Importantly, despite participants' perceptions that they had developed strategies to learn effectively in their first-year courses, they felt uncertain about what was to come in second year and concerned about their capacity to manage future academic challenges. The ongoing nature of the process of becoming an effective university learner cannot be overlooked – support for students' transition to university should extend beyond the boundaries of the first-year

experience to include subsequent phases which students perceive as important and challenging, such as preparation for second year studies.

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ORCID

Candice A. Rideout  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8283-7773>

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