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## First year students' perceptions of their difficulties

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### Abstract

*Scholarly investigations of the first year experience identify various difficulties for students, yet few studies investigate how those difficulties relate to each other or how students' appraisals help to overcome them. We asked two cohorts of first-year students (109 in 2013, and 98 in 2014) about their experiences with 11 commonly-cited difficulties. They used concept maps to make comparative judgements about their difficulties, appraised their biggest difficulty, and rated how they engaged with that difficulty. The students experienced multiple difficulties at a time. Time management, work load and others' expectations were the most prevalent and biggest difficulties. Students who appraised their difficulties as challenging or benign were happier with how they addressed their difficulty than those who appraised difficulties as harmful or threatening. Implications include the benefits of addressing more prevalent issues, understanding that students face multiple difficulties, and helping students change their perspectives of their difficulties.*

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## Introduction

The first year of university is a time fraught with difficulties for students. Educators and scholars addressing these difficulties need to identify which difficulties to address and how to support students in overcoming them. Studies to date have focused on students' experiences with single difficulties, such as finances, or workload, or family issues (Bexley, Daroesman, Arkoudis, & James, 2013; Brinkworth et al., 2013). The aim of the current study was to investigate students' experiences of multiple difficulties. Specifically, we wanted to know how different types of difficulties related to each other (in terms of relative size) and whether students' perceptions related to how they engaged with their difficulties. Understanding these experiences has positive implications for helping students to engage with their difficulties and develop resilience.

## Background: Research regarding the first-year experience

Over the last two decades, Australia has witnessed widespread scholarly investigation and interventions to improve engagement and reduce attrition during the first year of university (e.g., Nelson, Clarke, Kift, & Creagh, 2011). The same time period has witnessed an increase in a diverse Australian university student population, from 164,711 students in 2004 to 270,362 in 2014. Despite this growth, the diversity of the student population has remained relatively stable, with slight increases in the proportion of students who lived in low socio-economic circumstances (17.2% in 2004; 18.6% in 2014), had indigenous heritage (1.5% in 2004; 1.7% in 2014), lived with a disability (3.4% in 2004; 5.4% in 2014), or had non-English speaking backgrounds (3.4% in 2004; 4.0% in 2014; Department of Education and Training, 2015).

Sally Kift (2009) identified diversity as one of the six First Year Curriculum Principles: "The

first year curriculum should be attuned to student diversity and must be accessible by, and inclusive of, all students" (p. 41). This diversity has two implications for scholars and practitioners. First, there are a diverse range of difficulties facing first-year students, including financial strain (Bexley et al., 2013; King, Luzeckyj, McCann, & Graham, 2015; Nelson, 2014); study workloads (Brinkworth et al., 2013; Rogers, Creed, Searle, & Nicholls, 2015); mental, emotional and physical health issues (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015; King et al., 2015); course or family expectations (Wyn, Cuervo, & Landstedt, 2015); navigating unfamiliar university systems and cultures (McKay & Devlin, 2014; King et al., 2015); meeting family commitments (Hillman, 2005; Larcombe et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2015); and issues related to self-directed learning and time management (Häfner, Stock, Pinneker, & Ströle, 2013; Kyndt, Berghmans, Dochy, & Bulckens, 2014). Although many of these difficulties arise outside the curricular space, their impact on students' learning experiences cannot be understated. The most common reason cited by first-year students who consider dropping out is emotional distress (Baik et al., 2015). This distress has been associated with family care (Larcombe et al., 2015) and financial strain (Stallman, 2010). By helping students to manage or overcome these external difficulties, scholars and educators can help students persist with their education and reach their academic potential.

Second, these difficulties are not ubiquitous. Not all students are likely to experience financial strain or complex family responsibilities, nor are they all likely to see benefit from interventions addressing those issues. These two implications notwithstanding, the relative stability of diversity (in demographic background) as student populations increase suggests that issues are likely to be relatively prevalent across generations of first-year students.

Scholars, teachers and practitioners have limited resources to support students through first year, and addressing all student difficulties is neither practical nor feasible. The question becomes “which difficulties facing first-year students should universities address?” The answer might include the most common difficulties among student cohorts, or those that are most difficult for students to overcome on their own. With no research of the relationship between multiple difficulties, it is hard to pinpoint these difficulties. The current study investigates how 11 commonly identified difficulties for first-year students relate in terms of their relative size, and how the students feel about those difficulties.

Taking a broader position of the first year experience, McInnis (2001) pointed out that university students are experiencing not only academic development, but also social, emotional, and moral development. Therefore, researchers investigating the first year experience would do well to investigate the social circumstances surrounding the student rather than focusing on small milieu or singular academic issues. McInnis’ argument is best demonstrated by large scale whole-of-university approaches, such as the approach to student health in the United Kingdom (UK) (Orme & Dooris, 2010) and to the first year experience in Australia (Fernandez et al., 2016; Kift, 2009). These approaches take a long time to develop but have large-scale impact. Nelson et al. (2011) made a similar argument in their review of Australasian research of the first year experience. They identified three “generations” of research trends that evolved from isolated, subject or faculty-specific studies of individual student characteristics, to studies of curriculum and transition pedagogies, to larger scale whole-of-institution approaches. Although the scope of the current study does not have the breadth of a whole-of-university approach, it does consider the relationship between various social, personal, and academic difficulties that students face. It also investigates the difficulties for first-year students across two cohorts, one

year apart. Using two cohorts allowed us to ask whether there were any time-specific difficulties, or whether the various difficulties that students faced were relatively stable across cohorts.

## A developmental psychological approach to first year students’ difficulties

### *Young people as active participants in their own lives*

From a developmental psychological perspective, young people engage with the various contexts of their life in active ways so that events happening in one context are likely to affect other contexts (Lerner, Theokas, & Jellicic, 2005). The academic difficulties that a student faces in curricular domains are affected by – and have an effect upon – their experiences outside of the curriculum (at home, with friends, and in the workplace). For example, ongoing distress arising from family, academic, or work life can limit a person’s cognitive capacities, such as memory, attention, concentration and decision making (Marin et al., 2011). This can have negative consequences for a student’s learning experiences, as well as for their social and professional experiences. Mastery over one’s difficulties, in any domain, is associated with healthy development and wellbeing (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). With the right scaffolding and support, difficult experiences can become opportunities for a person to develop new skills and resources. The reward upon overcoming the difficulty is not only the absence of the difficult circumstance, but also the development of the person’s abilities (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012). If the difficult situation is instead avoided, then these rewards are not achieved. The task for universities is to help students overcome difficulties, rather than avoid difficulties altogether.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984; and Lazarus, 2006) distinguished between difficulties that can be mastered and difficulties that lead to avoidance, in their transactional model of stress and coping. They identified four different ways that a person appraised a situation. If the situation requires effort or causes discomfort, it might be appraised as either: (a) *harmful*, if it is currently causing the person damage or loss; (b) *threatening*, if harm is currently not occurring, but is likely to occur in the future; or (c) *challenging*, if there is potential for a positive outcome in the future. If there is no difficulty (no effort required and no discomfort), then the situation might be appraised as (d) *benign*. The person then makes a second appraisal about whether and how they can engage with the difficulty: threatening or harmful difficulties illicit avoidance or stagnation; whereas challenging difficulties invite engagement. The transactional nature of this model means that the person changes their appraisal of the situation as their resources or skills change. What might seem threatening at first (e.g., a student's uncertainty about academic abilities) is likely to change as the student receives feedback from their teachers and peers and s/he practices. This transactional approach builds upon the earlier question of "which difficulties facing first year students should universities address?" and also asks "how might students' appraisals of their difficulties help them to overcome their difficulties?" Answering these questions can identify opportunities to help students thrive in their first year of university.

### *Young people as the experts of their own experiences*

Many studies of the student experience rely on consultations with teaching academics (e.g., Brinkworth et al., 2013; Carey, 2013) or support services and university leaders (e.g., Martin-Lynch, 2009). Asking various experts for their advice is of course warranted, as any single perspective is framed by inherent biases that

may or may not match other people's realities. We argue, however, that there are two clear benefits to asking students for their perceptions of their experiences. First, individuals are the experts of their own lives and can provide nuanced, meaningful insights into the issues that affect their lives (Langsted, 1994). Langsted's seminal paper reported studies in which young children and teenagers discussed their experiences of equity and fairness in a local childcare centre. Their discussions lead to systemic changes in the childcare centre that improved processes and teaching practices. The young consultants' views regarding the systems in which they live offered new frames of reference that were not immediately apparent to their adult caretakers. If these young children and teenagers can become reliable consultants, so too can young adults and university students' contribute to discussions about improving university processes. Landsted's argument has found much support in the university context, in research addressing mental health (Quinn, Wilson, MacIntyre, & Tinklin, 2009; Trowler & Trowler, 2010; Wynaden, Wichmann, & Murray, 2013), quality assurance (Elassy, 2013) and curriculum design (Thornton & Chapman, 2000).

Second, if an individual's perspective comes with inherent biases, and a person's appraisals can change over time (Lazarus, 2006), then there is benefit in understanding how those biases and perceptions influence the person's behaviour. By giving students a space to voice their perceptions, we hoped to identify different types of perceptions (appraisals) that students use to frame their difficulties. These different appraisals might offer solutions for helping students engage with their difficulties and work to overcome them.

In this study, we aimed to investigate first-year students' experiences of the multiple difficulties they face, in order to help scholars and educators to think about two questions: "Which difficulties facing first-year students should universities address?" and "How might

students' appraisals of their difficulties help them to overcome their difficulties?"

## Research questions

To address our aim, we designed three research questions (RQs): (RQ1) What relative difficulty (size) do first-year university students assign to 11 commonly identified difficulties, and which experiences do they nominate as their biggest difficulties? (RQ2) Do students appraise specific types of difficulties as harmful, threatening, challenging, or benign? And (RQ3) Are students' feelings about how they engage with their difficulties associated with the type of difficulty (e.g., time management, health issues, etc.) or with their appraisal of the difficulty (e.g., harmful, threatening, challenging, or benign)?

## Method

### *Participants and recruitment*

Participants were 207 first year psychology students at a leading Australian university. Approximately 51% were studying a Bachelor of Science, 42% were studying a Bachelor of Arts, and 7% were studying other undergraduate degrees (e.g., Law, Commerce, Music). The students were recruited across two cohorts, one in 2013 (83 female, 26 male) and 2014 (79 female, 19 male). Both cohorts were between 17 and 21 years old (for 2013:  $M = 18.41, SD = 0.77$ , for 2014:  $M = 18.38, SD = 0.67$ ). Approximately 72% of each cohort were born in Australia (70.6% for 2013, 73.5% for 2014). The remaining students were born in Asia (23.9% in 2013, 19.4% in 2014), Europe (2.8% in 2013, 3.1% in 2014) and other English speaking countries (2.8% in 2013, 4.1% in 2014). The educational and cultural diversity and high proportion of female students is representative of the student cohort in this psychology subject.

The study was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 1442028.1). The study was advertised to all

first year psychology students during second semesters of 2013 and 2014, as part of a First Year Research Experience Program (REP) hurdle requirement for the subject. Two inclusion criteria ensured that all participants: (i) were studying a first year psychology subject; and (ii) had completed their final two years of high school in Australia. This second criteria met an assumption that all participants had experienced and mastered Australian secondary education. As such, this study does not report the exceptional difficulties for those who are novices in the Australian education system or who are international students or newly arrived immigrants.

### *Materials and procedure*

All data were collected using the *Pathways through education* computer-assisted interview (Brooker, Lawrence, Campbell, & MacInnes, 2010). *Pathways* was developed to ask young people about the difficulties they faced in education. It was extensively piloted with other Australian-born, immigrant, and refugee students. Piloting revealed similar patterns in type and size of difficulties for refugee and immigrant groups, and these were distinct from patterns for Australian-born groups (Brooker, 2014). Two features of the computer-assisted interview made it an ideal research method for this study. First, computer-assisted interviews are suitable for interviewing participants about potentially sensitive topics, such as asking people about the difficulties they face (e.g., Bradford & Rickwood, 2014; Brooker & Lawrence, 2012). Second, asking students about their academic experiences aligns with another of Kift's (2009) six first year curriculum principles: "Good first year curriculum design is evidence-based and enhanced by regular evaluation" (p. 41). This principle points to the importance of regular monitoring of students' needs. A computer-assisted interview is quick to administer, non-invasive, user-friendly, and offers data for immediate analysis. It is therefore ideal for regularly identifying any

difficulties that might affect a student's learning experiences, but which are not necessarily apparent in the classroom.

Throughout *Pathways*, we used the word "challenge" instead of "difficulty" because it made grammatical sense and was more accessible. We deliberately did not include Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model in our definition of challenge, instead describing it as "something that makes life difficult". Throughout the rest of this paper, and with the exception of direct quotes, we use the word "challenge" to describe challenging appraisals as per Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model and the word "difficulty" to describe the effortful and difficult situations that encompass harmful, threatening and challenging appraisals.

In the current study, interview sessions included between 5 and 20 students working at their own computers. Participants use *Pathways* to first build a concept map of their difficulties by locating their bigger difficulties in a central area, their smaller difficulties in a peripheral area, and leaving things that were not difficult out of their concept map. They could choose from a list of 11 common difficulties: Time management, family, schoolwork, other people's expectations, money, health, English language, personal skills, culture, school rules, and discrimination. Participants could also add up-to three of their own difficulties. This approach is less demanding than asking participants to conjure up a set of difficulties with no prompts, yet requires more thought and engagement than using a checklist. In moving the difficulties around a structured concept map, participants are not focusing on their own cognitive processes but on the relative weights of the difficulties.

*Pathways* presented participants with their maps and the text: "Here is a map of your challenges (*sic*) and how they fit together. Which of these is your biggest challenge (*sic*)?" Participants typed answers into the program

and responded to follow-up open-ended questions about how their biggest difficulty affected their lives at university, rated how they felt about the way they engaged with their biggest difficulty, and explained those ratings. Their responses were used as the basis of the qualitative analysis.

### *Measures and analysis*

We took a mixed-method approach that drew on quantitative and qualitative analyses of data from the computer-assisted interviews. To address the first research question, we analysed quantitative data from students' concept maps and coded their qualitative descriptions of their biggest difficulties. To address the second research question, we coded students' qualitative accounts of how their biggest difficulties affected their lives. To address the third research question, we drew on students' quantitative ratings of how they felt about how they engaged with their difficulties, and the patterns identified from the first two research questions. Each of these approaches is described in turn.

The program automatically recorded the size of each difficulty from its location in the concept map, yielding 11 location scores for each participant. The location scores were 2 = "big", 1 = "small", and 0 = "not difficult". A Repeated Methods Analysis of Variance was used to identify patterns in the relative size of difficulties for each student. This activity has been used with other student groups, from immigrant (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012) and refugee backgrounds (Brooker, 2014). In both previous studies, participants identified multiple difficulties and distinguished those difficulties by their relative size. For the refugee sample, discrimination and health were small difficulties, whereas English and money were big difficulties.

The participants' responses to the question "Here is a map of your challenges. Which of these is your biggest challenge?" were used to

address the first research question. Two of the authors independently coded students' responses to this question into one of the 11 difficulties from the concept map, or an idiosyncratic difficulty. There was perfect agreement in 95% of 207 responses (Cohen's Kappa = .94). Responses about how biggest difficulties affected participants' lives at university were used to address the second research question. The same two coders made categorisations of responses into four appraisals: harmful, threatening, challenging, or benign. These themes reflect Lazarus' (2006) description of people's appraisals of their difficulties, and is consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress. There was perfect agreement in 91% of the 207 responses (Cohen's Kappa = .87).

Students gave a rating response to the question "How happy or unhappy are you with how you engage with this biggest difficulty?" on a scale from 0 = "very unhappy" to 4 = "very happy", with 2 = "not happy, not unhappy" Analysis of Variance was used to determine any differences in feelings for students with different appraisals and different biggest difficulties.

## Results

### RQ1: Relative size of 11 commonly cited difficulties

The students included a mean of 6.23 difficulties ( $SD = 2.43$ ) in their concept maps, and indicated shared experiences in terms of the relative size and type of difficulties that they faced. A 2 (year-cohort) by 2 (gender) ANOVA with Repeated Measures of difficulties (12) revealed

**Table 1: Eleven difficulties' mean location scores and number of students nominating each as their single biggest difficulty**

Difficulty	Location scores		# students nominating as single biggest difficulty
	Mean location score	Standard deviation	
Time management**	1.62	0.57	89
Study work load**	1.39	0.69	29
Others' expectations**	1.22	0.70	19
Money*	0.89	0.78	6
Personal skills	0.74	0.77	13
Family	0.72	0.74	15
Health	0.71	0.76	15
"Other" self-defined challenges**	0.46	0.82	7 <sup>a</sup>
Discrimination**	0.29	0.55	2
Culture**	0.29	0.55	6
English language**	0.25	0.57	6
University rules**	0.19	0.42	0

Note: Significant main effects indicated by \* $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .0001$

<sup>a</sup> The seven self-defined difficulties that were nominated as single biggest difficulties were all related to uncertainty about the future.

a significant main effect for difficulties,  $F(11, 2233) = 74.97, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .27$ , but no significant effect for year-cohort or gender and no interactions. Table 1 shows the mean location score for each difficulty. As shown in Table 1, the significant main effect was that time management, study workload, and others' expectations were relatively bigger than other difficulties, and that only time management had a location score high enough to indicate a big difficulty (closer to 2). University rules, English language, culture, discrimination, and "other" challenges were relatively smaller than other difficulties, and only university rules had a location score low enough to indicate that it was not a difficulty (closer to 0).

Table 1 also shows the number of students who nominated each difficulty as their biggest difficulty when prompted by the computer program to do so. Eleven of the difficulties were nominated by at least one student as their major difficulty. This indicates diversity in the

students' experiences. However, consistent with the higher location scores, the difficulty most commonly nominated as the biggest difficulty was time management, followed by study workload and others' expectations.

**RQ2: Students' appraisals of their difficulties as harmful, threatening, challenging, or benign**

The students varied in their appraisals of their biggest difficulties. Table 2 shows the number of students making each appraisal, with example quotes. One third of the group (70) described both discomfort and potential reward in their experience with their biggest difficulty. Their comments represent challenging difficulties. Slightly fewer students (61) described situations in which they were already experiencing loss or damage in their academic, personal, or social lives. Their comments represent harmful appraisals. Fifty-three students were concerned about potential loss or

**Table 2: Students' appraisals of their biggest difficulties, with example quotes**

Appraisal of difficulty	n	Example quotes	
		Major difficulty	How does the difficulty affect university life?
Harmful	61	"Other people's expectations." "Parent's health"	"I feel very stressed and often give up. It also makes it harder for me to get along with new people." "Sometimes it's hard to leave so getting to class is an effort. When I'm at home, a lot of time is spent caring and helping so it is hard to get homework done. I don't feel as though I have time or energy to make friends at uni"
Threatening	53	"School tasks." "Time management" "Money problems"	"I often feel overwhelmed and anxious about everything I have to do." "It makes me worried I won't do as well as I need to." "I feel happy to be here but still concerned about going out with friends and having a good time."
Challenging	70	"Time management" "Learning academic skills"	"It helps be more organised, have timetables and fixed plans for when to do things." "I feel uni is quite hard, but when I make friends in my tutes and talk to them about work related topics, I feel better about uni and the work."
Benign	23	"Time management" "Discrimination"	"It's not so much that I can't handle it. There are worse things that can happen than getting to one class late or not getting an H1 on every assignment." "I am generally able to overcome it and therefore for the most part it has no direct impact on my studies."



harm in the future. Their comments represent threatening appraisals. Only 23 described benign experiences that did not involve a difficulty or a stress.

Four of the 11 difficulties were associated with specific appraisals. A chi-square analysis of the students' 11 biggest difficulties and the four appraisals revealed a significant association between the difficulties and the appraisal,  $\chi^2(30, 207) = 53.98, p < .005$ . Only four difficulties contributed to this association, as indicated by Adjusted Standardised Residuals ( $\hat{\epsilon}$ ) of greater magnitude than  $\pm 2.0$ . Compared to other students, a higher proportion of students with difficulties related to family or health appraised their difficulty as harmful (for family: 53.3%,  $\hat{\epsilon} = 2.1$ ; for health: 60.0%,  $\hat{\epsilon} = 2.7$ ). A higher proportion of students with difficulties related to discrimination appraised their difficulty as benign (100%,  $\hat{\epsilon} = 4.0$ ). A higher proportion of students with difficulties related to their personal skills appraised their difficulties as

challenging, but this pattern was only marginally significant (57.1%,  $\hat{\epsilon} = 1.9$ ).

### RQ3: Students' feelings about their difficulties

When asked to rate how they felt about how they engaged with their biggest difficulties, almost half of the sample (96 students) indicated that they were "not happy but not unhappy". Their explanations included feeling ambiguous towards the difficulty, or feeling sometimes happy and sometimes unhappy, or feeling both happy and unhappy all of the time. The 77 students who were either "happy" or "very happy" explained that they had support networks, or could overcome the difficulty. The 34 who were either "unhappy" or "very unhappy" either did not feel like they had the skills to overcome the difficulty, or could not see a way to overcome it. Table 3 shows the number of students who gave each rating, with example comments.

**Table 3: Students' ratings and explanations for how they feel about their engagement with their difficulty**

How do you feel about how you engage with your biggest difficulty?	n	Why do you feel that way?
Very happy	3	<i>"Because I have a lot of caring people in my life." "Because I can overcome these things, over time"</i>
Happy	74	<i>"Because I have a lot of support." "I know if I do the work, the results will come." "At the end of the day I feel like I can overcome any hurdles that are put my way."</i>
Not happy, not unhappy	96	<i>"There are times I can deal with it, and times I struggle with my challenge" "I always feel stress, good and bad." "Everyone has challenges in their life. I think life would be pretty boring without challenges."</i>
Unhappy	29	<i>"Because I seem to waste more time, I don't feel motivated"</i>
Very unhappy	5	<i>"Because I don't deal with it very well at all, and I don't learn from my mistakes" "Because I haven't been able to put a study routine into place yet, and I'm not entirely sure how."</i>

Students' feelings about how they engaged with their biggest difficulty were not associated with the type of difficulty that they faced. Students with different nominated biggest difficulties (e.g., time management, work load) did not significantly differ in their mean ratings of their feelings,  $F(10, 206) = 0.77, p > .05, \eta^2 = .04$ .

Students' feelings about how they engaged with their biggest difficulty were associated with the four appraisals. Students who appraised their difficulties as either harmful, threatening, challenging or benign differed in their ratings of their feelings,  $F(3, 206) = 11.68, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .15$ . Students with benign appraisals had the highest mean rating ( $M = 2.70, SD = 0.70$ ), followed by students with challenging difficulties ( $M = 2.44, SD = 0.65$ ) and students with threatening difficulties ( $M = 2.10, SD = 0.73$ ). Students with harmful difficulties had the lowest rating ( $M = 1.80, SD = 0.82$ ), indicating that they were the unhappiest about their experiences.

## Discussion

In this study, we aimed to investigate first-year students' experiences of the multiple difficulties they face. We asked three specific questions of our data: (1) What relative difficulty do first-year students assign to 11 commonly cited difficulties, and which do they nominate as their biggest difficulties; (2) Do students' appraise specific types of difficulties as harmful, threatening, challenging, or benign? And (3) Are students' feelings about how they engage with their difficulties associated with the type of difficulty or type of appraisal? Our answers to these questions have implications for two general questions for scholars and practitioners of first year experiences: "which difficulties facing first-year students should universities address?" and "how might students' appraisals help them to overcome their difficulties?"

## *Time management, workload and others' expectations were prevalent and biggest difficulties*

The patterns in students' concept maps of the difficulties speak to the diversity of the student experience. Although there is certainly no 'single' first year experience or single set of difficulties that students face, the consensus among the two cohorts' concept maps suggests that there are experiences that might be common during first year for undergraduate psychology students, which warrant attention from educators and scholars. Certainly, the patterns differed from patterns for other cohorts of young people who are not in first year university but have used the same tool (e.g., immigrant groups, refugees, and high school students; Brooker, 2014).

The prevalence of three difficulties among the students (managing time, work load, and others' expectations) is consistent with large-scale research studies of the first year experience (e.g., Brinkworth et al., 2013; Wyn et al., 2015). For instance, Wyn et al. (2015) discuss the pressure that students place on themselves from real or perceived expectations of their university and their family. The pressure to succeed is not limited to their academic life, but also extends to their social, personal and career lives. The implication of consensus between studies is that addressing students' difficulties managing time, work load and others' expectations will be relevant for a large proportion of students. An important difference between the current study and previous studies (e.g., Brinkworth et al., 2013; Wyn et al., 2015) is that the current study investigated the students' experiences of multiple difficulties, whereas previous studies have focused on a single issue or have treated difficulties as isolated experiences. Our results are a reminder that as well as these prevalent issues, each student faces a variety of other difficulties that may or may not be shared with their peers.

## *Students appraised their family and health difficulties as harmful*

That family and health difficulties were associated with harmful appraisals suggests that students experiencing these difficulties are struggling to address them. The conflict between university and family commitments has been identified as a concern for several equity groups, including indigenous students (Hillman, 2005), first-in-family students (King et al., 2015), and mature-age students with dependent children (O'Shea, 2015). Caring for family has been associated with higher levels of distress among university students (Larcombe et al., 2015). Our findings, and the developmental psychological perspective, indicate that these external circumstances can have a substantial impact on students' learning experiences.

According to Lazarus (2006), a person can change his or her appraisals and overcome a difficulty as s/he tries new strategies, accesses new resources or supports, finds purpose in the difficulty, or perceives a foreseeable ending. The implication of this is that students struggling with family and health difficulties might benefit from receiving varied types of support. Identifying the nature of that support requires more in-depth investigation regarding individual students' current strategies, strengths and needs. A developmental psychological perspective suggests that these supports can be found in a variety of contexts including the curricular and co-curricular spaces, and the family and community environments.

## *Students' feelings about their difficulties were associated with their appraisals*

The association between students' appraisals and their feelings how they engaged with their difficulties is consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984; and Lazarus, 2006)

transactional model of stress. According Lazarus (2006), people with harmful or threatening experiences are more likely to be unhappy with those experiences than people with challenging or benign experiences. The implication of this association is that students' feelings warrant attention from educators and scholars as they reflect the students' perceived abilities to overcome their difficulties. This also speaks to the inherent biases in an individual's perceptions of an event. Instead of using these biases to discount a person's perceptions of their experiences, we suggest helping students to develop perspectives that will help them change their appraisals of their difficulties and work to overcome them. Rather than removing or reducing students' difficulties, Lazarus' transactional model would suggest that educators can provide structures, resources and supports to help students try out new strategies and change their appraisals.

## *Who takes responsibility for the first year experience, and how?*

So far, we have raised several implications for the two broad questions facing scholars and educators of the first year experience. We have also briefly implied that, among other people within and external to university life, educators and researchers can help students address their difficulties. As active agents, students have the capacity to manage their lives and making decisions about how to engage with their difficulties. Educators and researchers can help to facilitate that engagement and provide opportunities for change.

Educators have the potential to reach a large number of students, and can therefore have substantial impact on the more prevalent difficulties (i.e., managing time, work load, and expectations). Curriculum and teaching strategies can be designed that offer opportunities for students to test new strategies, develop support networks, and appraise stressful elements in their courses. For

example, a curriculum approach to time management might consider spacing out assignments or contact hours, or explaining to students the purpose for the existing course structure. A teaching approach to managing expectations might include pointing out how activities align with the course purpose, or encouraging students to engage in self-reflection activities throughout semester. With respect to changing appraisals, teaching strategies might include the type of 'scaffolding' and support for which Vygotsky (1978) advocated in his conceptualisation of the zone of proximal development. Many texts highlight the teaching practices that align with Vygotsky's position, including providing clear instruction, encouragement, breaking complex tasks into smaller tasks, modelling behaviour, and providing opportunities to practice discussion (e.g., Wang, 2007; Wass, Harland & Mercer, 2011; Yorke, 2001). A recent national collaboration identified a variety of other curriculum and teaching strategies that drew on these types of activities to promote student wellbeing (Larcombe, Baik & Brooker, 2015; <http://unistudentwellbeing.edu.au>).

Researchers can support the student experience through studies that trace the effectiveness different types of supports for helping students with different difficulties or appraisals. The immediate impact of intervention studies is limited to those who participate in each study, but there are more widespread benefits from contributing to scholarly knowledge. There are also ethical issues that need to be addressed, such as risks of providing only some students with a particular service, or investigating potentially sensitive topics. Although an in-depth discussion of mitigating these risks is beyond the scope of this paper, we encourage researchers to take guidance from the four ethical values of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2007): respect, beneficence, justice, and research merit and integrity.

## Limitations and future directions

A limitation of this study is that it is specific to one learning context, in that we focused on first-year students from one psychology subject at one university. This might lead some readers to perceive our study as akin to the isolated "first-generation" studies that Nelson et al. (2011) describe, and therefore not as generalisable as other "third generation" large-scale, cross-discipline intervention studies. This was the first study to investigate first year students' experiences with multiple difficulties, and as such, it was appropriate to run as a small scale study. We mitigated this limitation to the best of our ability by choosing a psychology subject that comprised a diverse student population (from a variety of undergraduate streams) and by including two cohorts separated by one year. In order to understand whether the consensus among these two cohorts reflects the broader student population, future studies with larger cohorts (across faculties or institutions) are now warranted.

## Conclusion

The research literature to date suggests that first-year students face multiple difficulties. This is the first study that provides evidence of the number of difficulties that students face, and their relative size. The three most prevalent difficulties for the two cohorts in this study were managing time, work load, and others' expectations, indicating that interventions addressing these issues would be relevant for many first-year psychology students. This study also suggests that students' perceptions of their difficulties are associated with how they appraise and engage with those difficulties. Family- and health- difficulties were appraised as threatening difficulties, suggesting that students facing these difficulties require more support. The findings of this study offer insights for scholars and educators invested in helping first year students to overcome their difficulties and face their full potential, during and beyond

university. Future studies in this space are warranted to expand the implications of this study to larger cohorts, and to investigate ways in which students' appraisals can lead to positive academic and developmental outcomes.

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