Voices of students in competition: Health Science First Year at the University of Otago, Dunedin

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Abstract

**Aim** The experiences and adjustments of students enrolled in Health Science First Year (HSFY) at the University of Otago (Dunedin, New Zealand) were explored to understand students’ response to competition. The paper highlights the expressions of past and present HSFY students’ impressions of the programme, their experiences, coping strategies and the lessons they learned from the programme.

**Methods** Qualitative data were collected from past (n=15) and present (n=20) HSFY students who wanted to pursue medicine. Eight semi-structured interview questions were used to answer four research questions that aimed to answer the following: students’ impressions of HSFY, students’ experiences of HSFY; students’ adjustments to HSFY, and lessons learned from HSFY. The interviews were analysed using narrative analysis to gain a greater understanding of their experiences and adjustment.

**Results** The results indicate students perceive the programme as demanding and stressful. The highly competitive nature of the programme inhibited their engagement and involvement in other aspects of university life. Students identified their experiences as successes and challenges. In terms of adjustment, students used cognitive restructuring, self regulation and social support. Students learned that they need to balance academic and social life because spending too much time almost exclusively on academics didn’t enrich their first year at university.

**Conclusion** The nature of the learning environment impacts on students’ holistic development. The competitive nature of the programme elicited undue stress on students. However, they had to employ strategies to help minimise the impact of stress on their functioning.

The first year of university is perceived as a defining moment for students because their experiences and adjustment during that year influence the quality of their university life.1–8

During that year many students are leaving the family home for the first time and they have to adapt to a new lifestyle and cope with the academic demands of university. Researchers assert that the students’ perceptions of their experiences of and adjustment to university during their first year can make a significant impact on academic self-efficacy,9–11 wellbeing,12 and performance.3

Literature on “the first-year experience” suggests that students’ who are able to deal with their challenging university experiences during the first year exhibit positive behaviours during their years at university and display a high level of resilience.13,14
Other educators expressed concerns about the students who are unable to deal with the challenging first-year experience. The researchers conclude that students who do not display resilience suffer academically which in turn may jeopardise their success at university and their emotional wellbeing.

Research has suggested that the new generation of students who apply for admission into first-year university are familiar with the rigorous selection process. It is expected that students who wish to enrol at university, especially medical school, are faced with a competitive admissions process.

Although there is ample research on the challenges faced by students who apply to competitive universities for admissions there is far less work on students whose first year at university is the basis for admission into a programme beginning in the second year.

This paper explores students’ experiences of and adjustments to Health Science First Year (HSFY) at the University of Otago, who wish to pursue the study of medicine. The students are already enrolled in first year but they are competing for selection into second year medical school.

Selection is competitive because there are more students than places available in second year medical school. During the time of this research, approximately 1800 students were enrolled in HSFY; of these 750 applied for 190 places in medical school. Selection into medical school is based on how well students perform during their first year.

HSFY is an intensive programme developed by the University of Otago. It is one of the avenues for students to enter second year medical school. This programme provides students with the prerequisites to enter the following second year health sciences professional programmes, dentistry, medical laboratory science, medicine, pharmacy and physiotherapy.

A limited number of students are selected into the second year programme (dentistry 54, medical laboratory science 60, medicine 190, pharmacy 120, and physiotherapy 120). Therefore, students who are considered for selection into second year medical school must meet and exceed the academic threshold set by the university. Students are required to successfully complete the core academic courses as well as the ‘Undergraduate Medical Admissions Test (UMAT)’.

The preliminary courses for selection into second year professional programmes are very challenging. Besides the normal first-year experiences, HSFY students have to deal with a highly competitive first-year programme. The literature identifying the life events of first-year students is pertinent but it does not directly address the experiences of the students who are in a competitive academic programme during their first year at university.

The aim of the project reported here was to examine the perceptions, values, beliefs, and meanings students constructed during their first year in a high stakes university programme.
The research questions this project sought to address were:

1. What were students’ impressions of their first year in a high stakes learning environment?
2. How did students describe their experiences of HSFY?
3. What mechanisms were utilised by students to help them deal with any challenges they encountered during their first year at university?
4. What lessons were learned from the first-year experience?

Methods

Participants—For this study, a purposeful sample of a cross-section of students enrolled in Health Sciences. A total of 35 students were interviewed. All the interviewees were present and past HSFY students who wanted to pursue medicine. To represent as much variation as possible, the students selected were at various stages of the professional programme.

All students enrolled in the programme were invited to be a part of the research. One hundred HSFY expressed interest in the research. Students were given a brief description of the research and they were asked to participate. In the end 20 present HSFY students and the remaining 15 students were at varying stages of the professional programmes consented to be interviewed.

Of the 15 students, 5 students were pursuing other health science programmes; pharmacy and physiotherapy. These 5 students wanted to pursue medicine but were not selected because they did not meet the academic threshold. The other ten students were at varying levels in medical school, from second year to final year medicine.

Measures and procedure—Eight semi-structured questions were used in the interview to gain a greater understanding of the experiences, motivations and issues of concern of past and present HSFY students. To provide a context for the interviews students were asked to describe their impressions of HSFY. This was pertinent to provide a framework for subsequent questions on their experiences, personal adjustment and development during the year. Other follow-up questions were posed to clarify their descriptions and to encourage further elaboration of the students’ responses.

The questions typically took the forms of “could you tell me a little bit more about that?”, “what do you mean by that?”; “Can you give me an example?” In a number of cases the follow-up questions opened up avenues for exploration that the original questions did not. The interviews were an average of 30 minutes in duration.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was entered into multiple text files using NVivo software (QSR V 7, 2005).

Data analysis—The data were analysed using qualitative narrative analysis. Narrative analysis helps the researcher understand the context of the participants’ experiences and the meanings that were brought forward. The meanings of their experiences were placed within the context of HSFY. Using the narratives in the context of first-year experiences in a competitive environment the expression of students’ personal narratives within their reality; what was told and why it was expressed were explored. A simple contingency table chi square test was performed on the data to determine whether the students who were currently in their first year of HSFY saw the programme as fundamentally different from those who made it successfully and are now looking back at it.

Results

The four research questions were analysed on a question-by-question basis. The outcomes will be illustrated using direct quotations from the respondents and graphical representation of the major themes that emerged.
Question 1: What are students’ impressions of HSFY?—Students identified a variety of issues that were prominent during the year. Students’ impressions were grouped into eight major themes; competitive, the various choices available in the programme, the heavy workload, stressful, different from high school, large class size, challenging and limited interactions between lecturers and students.

Table 1 illustrates the themes that emerged from students’ impression of university and the similarities between the past and present HSFY students.

Table 1. Students’ impressions of HSFY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impressions</th>
<th>Present HSFY</th>
<th>Past HSFY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good course</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy workload</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressful</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different from high school</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large class size</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited interactions between lecturers and students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerns related to the competitive nature of the programme the heavy workload, and large class sizes were common among past and present students. Other views raised by respondents included the issues related to the difference between high school and university, the quality of the teaching and learning experience.

A number of students, however, highlighted the importance of the programme for future career paths. Although students felt the competition, the challenge and the heavy workload, they enjoyed the content and found the programme an interesting one.

Students’ gave very explicit descriptions and they made a number of observations about the programme. Students expressed concern that the competition demanded more effort than they expected. They needed to ensure that they attained and exceeded the academic threshold needed to be considered for selection into second year medicine.

I think that Healthsci [sic] is pretty competitive because you need to study and you need to compete for limited places in the professional course. Last year we had 1660 students. One of the things about Healthsci is that many people want to get in that is why we have so many students here working hard because everyone wants to get in (2nd year medical student).

In this competitive environment every mark gained or lost is important. One final year medical student remarked that the competition was so intense that she was even concerned about a fraction of a mark. She remarked that every mark counts because half a mark will determine selection into medical school.

I remember missing .5 of a mark in a Chemistry assignment and I panicked. Point five of a mark is important. Imagine me crying about half a mark. Every mark counts because someone would get a fraction of a mark more than you and he would get into med school and you won’t (Final year medical student).
Students remarked that the workload was stressful. They contended that the volume of work they had to cover in first year had an impact on the quality of the work they were able to produce and their wellbeing.

HSFY was like putting your head into a bucket of cold water, mind numbing. It appeared hard due to the amount of knowledge we are expected to learn. I knew it was going to be incredibly intense and very demanding. People told me that before I enrolled. I find it interesting but I am very worried about the amount of work I have to do (Present HSFY student).

The large number of students enrolled in the programme was also mentioned as significant in HSFY. Students perceived that the large class size was related to the competition and the intensity of the programme. They stated that the competition would be acute and therefore they had to work harder than they anticipated. Social comparison was also evident in the responses.

Students questioned their ability to secure the grades needed to secure a place in second-year medical school. The thought elicited stress.

Wow, there are so many people doing this course! It looked like it would be tough in terms of getting high grades to get selected into 2nd year medicine. There are so many smart people. When they first told us there were 2300 HSFY students, I really felt sick. (Present HSFY student).

I guess when I first came to university I did not actually know anything so my impressions of HSFY was HUGE!!! Like the first day the lines course approval was like Oh my God! Do I have to compete against all of them? It was a bit scary for me. I was really scared. You know how health science gets bigger and bigger every year and the line gets longer and longer. Have you seen the Course approval line? (3rd year medical student).

Transition from high school and university was seen as an issue for students. They identified fundamental differences between the two. Students stated that they were not adequately prepared for the transition from high school to university.

It was quite different from high school you have lots of time to revise so it is not that high pressure. At university there are so many subjects going on all the time it seems like it is more every day. When exams come there are so many things to memorize. Sometimes I felt like I couldn’t handle it because it is too much. It is quite stressful especially when you are trying to get high marks to get into medicine (2nd year pharmacy student).

Students’ perceived high school seemed more relaxed because they felt that their teachers provided additional support when they struggled with their studies. At university they did not feel that sense of support. Instead they had to come to terms with self directed learning. They also realised that it was all up to them to get extra support if needed.

Very full on! You go from high school which is low keyed and casual where you do work but at a relaxed pace with a lot of practice questions and plenty of opportunities to get further explanation from the teacher if something is not understood. At university you get thrown in the deep end you are required to pay full attention. You attend lectures up to 7 hours a day (for me including labs). Then, on top of that, you are required to understand it all and keep up will all the SDLs (self-directed learning), online tests, reading and revision (Present HSFY1 student).
The stress of HSFY was evident when students perceived that they were unable to keep up with the workload, they were not sure what was expected of them in the highly competitive environment.

The stress comes when you just can’t find the time to do it all and yet some people seem to be coping rather well. I had to keep on top of the entire workload. But I suppose it will just take getting used to and finding my own personal learning style (Present HSFY student).

Health sciences was quite stressful and very competitive. I had to study a lot. I think stressful is the main thing I can say about health sciences is very, very stressful. That is what that stands out in HSFY (5th year medical student).

One student identified gave an overview of the programme and identified all the common themes highlighted. The most striking observation was the behaviour of the students in competition.

My impressions of the HSFY itself, it seemed a like people were almost pitted against each other from the start. Not in the brawly type manner but in a quite subtle way. First they come [and] get the good seats, [and] people [were] going to the wrong lectures because it suited them. People were, and still are, pushy and inconsiderate. There is no feeling of camaraderie amongst students, this only refers to the majority, of course there is a very kind and considerate, sadly minority.

The first thing really that struck me was the arrogance of a lot of students, especially in the way streams were ‘hijacked’ to suit them. So the “people side” of my first impressions weren’t very good. But as far as lecture content went, I was ‘captivated from the start’. The programme was very organised from the get go, the lecture handouts were well structured with helpful diagrams where necessary, and this was great. Blackboard was up and running early and the organisation side seemed really good (Present HSFY student).

Question 2: How do students describe their experiences of HSFY?—Students’ described their experiences as either as successes or challenges.

Successes—Six major themes emerged from the narratives; doing well in exams, making friends, the quality of teaching, independence from home, learning how to cope with pressure, and interesting things to do. Table 2 displays the range of responses elicited from students’ descriptions of their successful experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful experiences</th>
<th>Present HSFY</th>
<th>Past HSFY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examination results</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the teaching</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence from home</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taught how to cope with stress</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting things to do</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, students described the learning environment, making new friends and academic achievements as common areas of success. Students attributed their successes to diligence, enthusiasm and social support

Exams, I guess getting good exam results was pretty rewarding. When I looked at the results I did the work and came out right I am on track. I studied a lot. I studied but at the same time I
had a side track where I went and blow steam out. I had good friends who were older than me and past HSFY students, who’d been there and done that, and so they helped me along (2nd year medical student).

Notwithstanding the competition, students applauded the quality of the lecturers and tutors.

I made a lot of friends in the college and also I met some great lecturers, they are very helpful. We have tutorial groups, the tutors are very nice as well because they are usually senior students who have been through the health science and they know how we feel. They can teach us how to cope with the pressure (Final year medical student).

The past HSFY students did not list independence from home and learning to cope with pressure as a successful experience.

I had a very good relationship with my parents but it was just really fun to move out and exciting just the whole general thing about student life and stuff. It was cool come down trying something new. Living on hall with your friends was really fun (First-year student).

It has taught me lots about competition and how to deal with competition and sort of keeping your cool. You can see what everyone else around you is up to and you have to keep concentrating on what you are doing. You keep going with that and you keep your mind on the end product. What you are going for and stick with that. I think that you need that focus (First-year student).

Challenges—Nine themes emerged from the students narratives on their experiences that described their challenges; examinations, getting used to university life, keeping up with the workload, not knowing what is expected of them, trying to balance academic and social life, getting caught up with other students issues, missing friends and family, getting motivated, and the competition. Table 3 gives a brief indication of the challenging issues highlighted.

Table 3. Students’ challenging experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenging experiences</th>
<th>Present HSFY</th>
<th>Past HSFY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examinations</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting used to university life</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping up with the workload</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not knowing what the lecturers expect from students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing academic and social life</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal challenges</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing home and friends</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting motivated</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keeping up with the workload was a major challenge for students. Students were overwhelmed with work and at the same time they had to deal with the living in proximity with other students who were experiencing personal issues. One student remarked that this was a major challenge for her.

Besides workload, there were issues of just living in close proximity. You get caught in other people’s issues. I think people do not realize how much it influences how well you do. It’s easy to say that you did well or you did not do well. However, if you had to look at the environment that you live in I think it kind of influence a lot more than people recognize. There are issues about them being away from home, their own self-destructive behaviour and...
it can actually rub off on a lot of people. Sometimes you have to wear other student’s issues. A lot of things are going on and because you are living in such close proximity you feel you are responsible as well (Present HSFY student).

Just being enrolled in HSFY was a challenge for some students.

Just the fact of being in Health science was a challenge. The other first years they seem more relaxed in general and everyone is sort of teasing you saying “dirty Healthsci, you dirty Healthsci go and study” (Present HSFY student).

Other variations in expressions of their experiences were expressed as the termination of romantic relationships.

One week before my exams were to start, my boyfriend of 19 months tried to dump me over the phone … I spoke to him on the phone for 5 hours to try and hear his point of view and get mine across (2nd year physiotherapy student).

I had some boy problems and this was annoying and very stressful because I got too distracted and wasn’t focused enough in my studies! At the start I couldn’t focus on anything but after this I decided that Health Sci is more important—there is always more time in life for boys (Present HSFY student).

Question 3: What mechanisms were utilized by students to help them deal with any challenges they encountered during their first year at university?—Students employed a number of strategies to deal with their challenges. Three major themes emerged from the data, cognitive restructuring (consciously changing negative thought patterns), self regulation and social support. Table 4 illustrates the strategies employed by students to handle the challenges of HSFY.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping strategies</th>
<th>Present HSFY</th>
<th>Past HSFY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive restructuring</td>
<td>12 (60%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self regulation</td>
<td>16 (80%)</td>
<td>13 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>14 (70%)</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students indicated that they had to look at HSFY from another vantage point. This helped them deal with the competition and the workload

Sometimes I had so much to do and it felt like everything was on top of me and I had to get so much work done. Sometimes I had no idea how I would get it done. Many times I sat down and thought about it… I’ve got to do this. I just sort it out and I knew that I had to just keep going step by step and I’d get there eventually. I also had to ensure that I did not get completely engulfed in stuff. I look at the stuff in a healthy perspective taking a step back and I did what I had to do (2nd year medical student).

Students employed a number of self regulatory practices to help them deal with the workload. They kept records and monitored their progress, set educational goals and employed time management strategies.

I find it [would] help me if I [would] write down my schedule at the start of the week allotted time for things I have to do during the week. I just made sure that I knew what I had to do and allow time to (Present HSFY student).
Well I made up my mind that during the week I won’t watch any television and keep to my schedule. I learnt that it’s important to not overload yourself, set realistic short term goals and try stick to my daily planner. If I plan it well then I shouldn’t feel over worked—its hard though with the amount of work I have to fit in (3rd year medical student).

Students also indicated that the support they received from their friends and family helped them cope with the rigours of HSFY.

I had really good friends on hall especially those who were not doing HS [health science] and they know how stressful HS is. So during the course they were giving me support and even with those who were doing health science although we were competing with each other we tried to help one another as much as possible so in a way it was very good (Final year medical student).

Students dealt with social comparison issues by becoming focused on their studies and ignoring the other students who seem to distract them.

Just close your ears eventually whatever they are just talking crap. They just sit there and go la la la do you know this do you know that? I go “no I don’t know” (laughs). I say to them “I’m so not listening to you” and they go like “oh my God I’m going to fail I’m going to fail it’s so hard it’s so hard! It gets to you. They study all the time every time. I’m not that kind of person I can’t just study all my whole life. I’m quite social and stuff. If you ask me to just sit there and study for the whole week I can’t actually. I just close my ears don’t let people pressure me (Present HSFY student).

**Question 4: What lessons were learned from the first-year experience?**—Clearly students indicated that HSFY was a major learning curve. Six themes emerged from students’ responses, time management, and perseverance, assess support, know how university works, put off starting romantic relationships, and do not pay attention to grades other students are getting. Table 5 illustrates the major lessons students learned during the year.

**Table 5. Lessons learned during HSFY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lessons learned</th>
<th>Present HSFY</th>
<th>Past HSFY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work hard to achieve goals</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not pay attention to other students grades</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic relationships can wait</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know how the university works</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access support from friends and family</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
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</table>

Students acknowledged that when they learned to manage their time effectively, they were able to deal with the heavy workload.

I learned that I had to manage my time. I am trying hard (laughter). I still have not improved on it but a little bit I am working on it I guess. I managed to sort of kinda like control my mind to get down studying. Last year in high school I say to myself I can’t be bothered now. I did it when I was in the mood. But this year it is different with Health Sci. I tell myself I have to do it now and make myself do it. It’s like I had to train my mind that way (2nd year medical student).
The students understood that procrastination is not the best way of handling such a competitive programme. They stated they had to learn to be on top of their work at all times and not to let the work ‘pile up’.

I learned that in Health sci you must not slack around in first half of each semester. It is a good chance to get on top of things. In the first semester I slack off because it was my first time at university adjusting to life and stuff and the third term it was UMAT. I did not really want to do any school work it was just like UMAT prep UMAT prep. Those two times I did not do anything cause me to fall behind. I had to end up catching up at the last minute before a test and it’s not really like the best way to do it (Present HSFY student).

Perseverance was another important lesson learned. Students spoke about other students who dropped out of the course because they felt intimidated by other students who seemed more capable or because they did not do well in a particular course.

I learned that I keep trying because people give up. I’ve seen a lot of people drop out they just think well this is too hard and can’t do it. Persevere you will get there in the end no matter what it takes. It is a year and you will get here if that is what you really want. Students gave up because of the pressure or they got a bad mark during midterm and they dropped out. A lot of them dropped out after chem. (Chemistry). Because chem. was tough (Present HSFY student).

A number of students indicated that they learned that they should seek help when needed.

Go to lectures! I made sure that I went to lectures and took notes; I paid attention to what the lectures said. If I did not understand something I was not afraid to ask for help. I discovered that here was lots of help available I just had to ask (Present HSFY student).

Another lesson learned was to understand the demands of university, especially a competitive learning environment.

Study hard it is completely different from high school teachers do not give you the answers you have to find out for yourself. You have to take the initiative to go and ask the people. Use the discussion board that is placed on the website where you can communicate with the other students and ask for answers. Study group will be good it lets you know what everyone else is for information and stuff like that. At school you would normally get exams with answers but not uni they don’t give you the answers (exams without answers). You can do the exams but you do not know whether you are right or not. This is another thing you can get over by having a study group and you have a better chance of getting it right (2nd year medical student).

Other variations in learning experience saw students learning that they had to change their own perceptions of themselves. One student remarked that she came into university as a straight “A” student from her high school. She quickly learned that she was amongst other “A” students and she was no longer the best of the lot but was now among the best.

I am human and I definitely ate a lot of humble pie this year my friend and I both came into Health Sci as A students. We aced everything at high school. I came at this knowing that it was difficult but with absolute certainty that I would achieve it. I was really, really disappointed that I did not achieve my goal getting into medicine. I thought like wow that’s amazing and maybe I’m not as bright as I thought I was. I was dealing with other ‘A’ students from all over. I was gone from a big fish in a small pond to a very, very small fish in a big river or an ocean (2nd year pharmacy student).

Students learned that social comparison can be defeatist. They had to get on with the work and do not pay attention to the other students achievements.

Not to pay too much attention to what people are doing how they are doing it and what kind of marks they are getting. Concentrate on what I am doing and see how I can improve myself.
Do what is best for me. What’s best for other people is not necessarily be what is best for me (Present HSFY student).

Students acknowledged the programme was stressful and demanded considerable attention. They also realized that they are first-year university students so they need to enjoy their first year at university do not get consumed with HSFY.

I learned that HSFY very competitive and it is a stressful year but I should not get too hung up on the stressful events and take it as my first year of being at university. I was my first year I should have had fun. Also be heavily involved in good effective time management. I see student who did not study as much as I did who had lots of fun got into medicine. They managed their time wisely and they were a good position to complete their papers well and to get good marks. I learned to do the readings and stuff that are recommended because the top exam questions that will give good marks do often come from extra reference material (3rd year pharmacy student).

Discussion

This research examines students’ perceptions of and personal adjustment in a high-stakes educational programme. The results suggests that first-year university can be daunting for some students. In addition, students enrolled in highly competitive programmes are confronted with the added issue of high stakes examinations which determine their future careers. This added pressure elicits behaviours that were not expressed in the first-year experience literature.

Students’ impressions of HSFY were varied. To begin, a large number of students found aspects of HSFY stressful and demanding. Students described the number, frequency and nature of the examinations as daunting. They claimed that the number of exams in close succession left little time to socialize. HSFY took all of their time. Students also felt intimidated by the large number of students enrolled in the programme which lowers the probability of them getting into the programme of their choice.

It is clear from the students’ responses of their experiences and personal adjustment that they have encountered a number of experiences highlighted by previous research. The results suggest that the students’ perception of their experience affected the quality of the university life. The use of reflective questions seems to get students thinking about their first year and their role in their learning. This was most apparent in past HSFY students. They were also able to give definitive responses on their ability to deal with the same issues if they were presented in the future. The results also suggest that there were no fundamental differences between the present and past students’ perceptions of their experiences and adjustment to a competitive first-year university programme.

The students acknowledged that they need to make a smooth transition from high school to university because it is important to understand what is expected at university. The study identified a number of concerns experienced by the students about the nature and scope of the role of students in a high stakes environment. Students on the whole were pleased with the quality of the lecturers and tutors.

The findings indicate that students were able to identify their successes and failures and used a variety of coping mechanisms to handle their challenges. They also attributed their successes to personal or collective effort and little or no mention of innate intellectual ability. They acknowledged that they have the ability to make the
marks needed to be selected into second year but it is not how well you do but how well you do in relation to others.

Thus hard work was more important than just being smart. It is also apparent in this research that the high stakes environment influences social life. It was apparent that students would have liked to spend more time socialising with friends as they perceived the other first-year students were having more fun the they did. However, competition and the workload inhibited their social life.

**Conclusion**

In this paper students discussed their experiences of and adjustment to a highly competitive first-year university environment. The results show that the nature of the environment impacts on the holistic development of students; even years later students recall in similar detail their experiences and adjustment to those who were presently enrolled in the programme. The students perceived the selection process as daunting but were able to identify strategies that they employed to minimise the stress associated with the competition.

**Competing interests:** None.

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