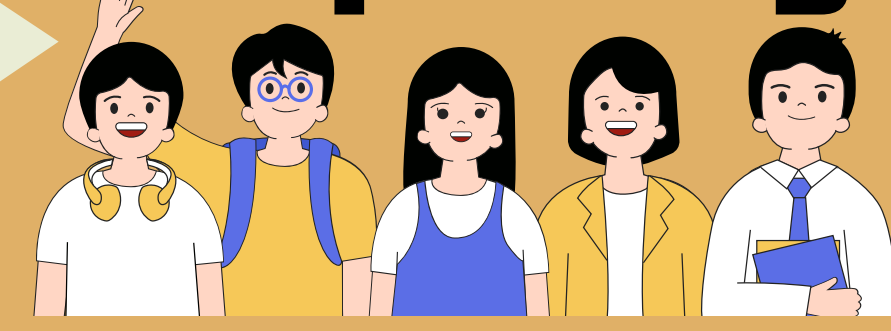


# Exploring Social Connectedness and its Impact on University Adjustment and Well-being: A Mixed-Methods Study in New Zealand



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## INTRODUCTION

Studying at higher education institutions exposes both domestic and international undergraduate students to a variety of challenges within academic, social, institutional, and personal-emotional domains. The transition to independence is different for each student; some adapt well to their new situation, whereas others find it harder to settle.

A high degree of social connectedness has been found to promote student adjustment and psychosocial wellbeing. Social connectedness can be defined as having strong social relationships or networks. However, the increased availability of lecture content online and the COVID-19 pandemic have affected how students interact, with implications for their wellbeing. Reduced social interactions and a lack of social support may negatively affect students' adjustment and wellbeing, for instance, high dropout rates, depression, eating disorders, mental disturbance, sleep difficulties, and risk of obesity. There is, therefore, justification for undertaking a study on the social connectedness of first-year students and its impacts.

## AIMS & OBJECTIVES

How does social connectedness of first-year university students in New Zealand impact adjustment to university and psychosocial wellbeing?

- Examine the strategies first-year university students use to form social connections and identify their adjustment challenges in the era of Covid-19.
- Conduct a New Zealand validation of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ).
- Measure the social connectedness of New Zealand university students together with adjustment and psychosocial variables at two-time points to:
  - determine the impact of social connectedness on university adjustment and psychosocial wellbeing;
  - identify risk and protective factors for students' adjustment and psychosocial wellbeing associated with differing levels of social connectedness.

## METHODS

MIXED

Qual

Quan

Interview

Survey

Study 1

Study 2

Study 3

Phase 1  
Baseline

Phase 2  
Follow-up

Interviews to explore the university experiences of undergraduate students (n=21).

300 first-year university students to complete online anonymous survey.

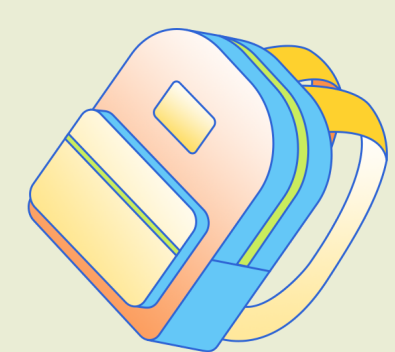
400 first-year students to complete an online survey.

Collect data from participants upon recruitment (baseline T1—approx. Feb/March, 2024), with follow-up (T2) nine months later (approx. Oct/Nov, 2024) using the same measures.

**Hypothesis**  
Students who report **increased** levels of social connectedness at T2 (compared to T1) will demonstrate a **higher** level of adaptation to university (as measured by SACQ) and **lower** levels of depressive, anxiety and stress symptomatology (as measured by DASS-21) at T2 compared to T1.

## FINDINGS

Study 1



Male: 6  
Female: 15



Age range from 18-28



International student: 6  
Domestic student: 15

32% Were unaware of any social connection strategies provided by their institution.

58% Expressed difficulties in making new friends.

45% Experienced loneliness

85% Encountered university adjustment challenges.

Study 1 Interview

59% Experienced stress

- For example:
- Increased academic demands
  - Language barrier
  - Leaving behind existing sources of support
  - Lack of friends/homesickness
  - Lack of time management skills to balance work and study
  - Unfamiliar environment and new settings

## FUTURE WORK

After all interview data analysis is completed, 2-3 open-ended questions will be formed for future Study 3, covering important aspects of adjustment.

Study 1

NOW

Study 2

Validating the questionnaire (SACQ) to use in further Study 3.

Current recruiting phase

Study 3

Phase 2

Phase 1

## SIGNIFICANCE

This research will contribute to a greater understanding of the factors that impact the successful transition to a university environment. It may also enable tertiary institutions to develop strategies to enhance students' academic experience and safeguard their wellbeing.

**Key words:** social connectedness, university students, adjustment, psychosocial well-being, social relationships, social networks, Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), academic experience, university adjustment.