

Transitioning, Scholarships and the case for the Nofo A'oga: Impacts on the Perception of Higher Education in Samoa.

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Abstract

This article describes issues of transitioning and scholarships, based on the findings of a recent study on the perceptions of students on higher education in Samoa. The study focused on students at the National University of Samoa (NUS). A Pasifika and Sociological framework was used in this study, employing Pasifika research methods of talanoa and aspects of Fa'afaletui. Nineteen NUS students and one student member of NUS support staff were interviewed. The important findings will inform the National University of Sāmoa of their students' needs and the challenges they face, in order for NUS to provide appropriate support that is culturally and socially responsive to a Sāmoan student's worldview. It also highlights the case of the Nofo Aóga (the school boarder) and some culturally unique issues of access to academic and social support in higher education in Samoa.

Keywords: Transition, Scholarships, Student perceptions.

Introduction

Students' perception of higher education plays a significant role in how they view and approach success throughout their academic journeys. For this exploratory qualitative study, 19 Samoan students who were currently attending the National University of Sāmoa (NUS), and one support staff, were interviewed to learn more about their experiences of higher education, capturing their perceptions of the institution. These students were in their 2nd and 3rd year of study at NUS; therefore, they were able to refer to their foundation and undergraduate level of study as their experiences. Ethics were sought at the Victoria University of Wellington and with the National University of Samoa (UREC) and approval was granted. An indigenous approach was considered; thus, this study drew upon the Talanoa (Vaioleti, 2006) and Fa'afaletui (Tamasese et al, 2005) in conducting the interviews.

The main purpose of this research was to hear their voices around studying in an institution of higher learning in Samoa, so that appropriate support could be identified for them. This article outlines some of the key findings of this study, which uncovered transitioning, the impact of scholarships and a case of the *Nofo a'oga* (a student who boards with a family that is not their immediate family) as key factors that affected the students' perceptions of higher education, at NUS.

Background

The Sāmoa Education Sector Plan (ESP), 2013 – 2018 noted an increase of students entering some form of Post-Secondary Education Training (PSET) in the last decade (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, 2013). NUS is the largest government PSET provider in Samoa, usually rounding up 75 percent of PSET enrolments (Ministry Of Education Sports And Culture, 2013). From 2003 to 2011, enrolment growth has been approximately 100 percent (from 1,423 to 2,823 students). In 2011, there were 3,022 students

enrolled at NUS, including the Apprenticeship Scheme (Ministry of Education Sports And Culture, 2013). With enrolments expanding since its establishment, NUS now has a roll of more than 3,000 students. The transition rate from Year 13 to higher education saw an increase over the years where in 2011 it rose from 57 percent in 2006 to 90 percent (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, 2013). Interestingly the higher transition rates from high school education to NUS have been driven by a growth in Government of Sāmoa scholarships. The institution of higher learning has seen a considerable growth not only in enrolments, but also in staffing, courses offered, and physical infrastructure (Ministry of Education Sports And Culture, 2013).

Critical issues that are faced by PSET providers including NUS comprise the following: student drop-out and the impact of student fees as a barrier to access. Constraints include inadequate knowledge and skills of many PSET lecturers and trainers and lack of budget to support programmes adequately. In 2011, only 32.9 percent of the 152 permanent lecturers and trainers at NUS held a higher education qualification of either a master's or PhD degree. Learning resource materials and equipment, appropriate ICT support and access to library facilities and resources are all key ingredients of PSET quality, although funding is the main constraint for a PSET provider. These are limited at NUS. Without the necessary funding on an ongoing basis, it is extremely difficult to keep equipment up to date (Ministry of Education Sports And Culture, 2013).

To date, the constraints affecting young people from all backgrounds enrolling and completing PSET programmes are not yet fully understood and documented. Although pathways and opportunities are available from secondary to PSET, the main barrier is the constraints with tuition fees. As NUS is not fully funded, fees are charged. Therefore students who cannot afford the fees can apply for a scholarship or seek sponsorship. Further constraints worth noting that affect young people's participation include the following: fee levels that preclude students from poorer families; family and student limits on mobility; perceived relevance of programmes and associated weakened industry linkages; perceived low value of learning through non-formal education; Insufficient numbers of qualified teachers and trainers at all levels - often caused by migration for higher salaries amongst highly educated and qualified Samoans; restricting what programme can be offered; and limited learning pathways from secondary to PSET, and within PSET (Ministry of Education Sports And Culture, 2013). In this study, the findings would offer insights to addressing the needs of the Samoan students at NUS.

There have been very few studies of Samoan students in higher education in Samoa. Most studies that have included Samoan students were based on Pasifika students in higher education in New Zealand: (Anae et al 2002; Matautia forthcoming; Nakhid 2006; Davidson-Toumu'a & Dunbar, 2009; Nakhid et al, 2007; and Mila-Schaaf & Robinson 2010; as well as Australia (Cuthill & Scull 2011) and in Hawai'i (Uehara et al 2017). The few studies that did focus specifically on Samoan students in higher education included Petelo's (2003), Ng Shiu (2011), Penn (2010); Mara (2014), Utumapu-McBride et al (2008) based in New Zealand; Tsutsumoto (1998) in the US and Tuia (2018), O'Regan (2006) in Samoa.

Tuia (2018) found that when researching Sāmoan students studying at NUS in the Faculty of Education, their competence in English was a constraint. Lecturers used the English language for

teaching and the use of big English words was deemed difficult for the students to understand. Tuia looked at Sāmoan local educational needs with a focus on teacher education, arguing for the need for their training to include local values and knowledge. He argued that courses taught in these programs at NUS were filled with western ideas and methods adding on that most the lecturers teaching these courses were educated in New Zealand and Australia. Tuia (2018) makes a strong case that Western theories of teaching and learning strongly influenced Education in Sāmoa.

The perceptions of students and students' voices from the Faculty of Education at NUS, is also identified by Tuia (2018) and Utumapu-McBride et al (2008). The critique of the lecturers in particular was a common theme. This, and the challenges related to resource constraints and appropriate family support hindered students' ability to cope well within the higher education structure. More mature student voices captured by O'Regan (2006) acknowledged their struggle with the demands of a western institution (University of Canterbury) and the demands of *fa'a-Samoa*, advocating for Samoan students' cultural values and beliefs to be considered to provide meaningful programs and learning experiences. Thus, the literature points to the issues of western ideologies and the importance of culture and *fa'a-Samoa*. This is resonated in the abovementioned studies on Pasifika students in higher education. However, the literature is insufficient in identifying the perceptions of Samoan students in higher education, so appropriate support can be offered for them.

Result & Discussion

Transitioning

The theme of 'transitioning' was common across the students' responses. It was reflected as an aspect that largely influenced their perceptions of higher education. The term 'transitioning' in the students' responses referred to two factors: a) the transition from high school to university and b) the transition from foundation level to undergraduate level. At NUS, upon the completion of high school students who pass the Samoa School Leavers Certificate can enter the Foundation Program if they meet the entry requirements. This was previously known as the University Preparatory Year. This is a one year program. Upon its completion students are able to pursue undergraduate studies abroad and here locally. Some will be privileged to win scholarships to do so.

Transitioning from high school to university.

Difficulty in transition

Most of the students found it hard to transition to university. The high school setting is fairly disciplined compared with higher education where students have to be more self-motivated and able to organize their own use of time. One student said she was "quite nervous the first time." There was a number who expressed worry and doubt in themselves. They felt a lack of self-confidence and were intimidated by the assumption that it would be hard and of how other students would perceive them.

"I thought lowly of myself, when I came to university, it's difficult. Sometimes I look at the students I think that they are smarter than me and I'm so afraid when I come to the university. Sometimes I look poorly thinking the other students make fun of me."

Students who went to school in the rural areas before attending university made the following comments on how this impacted their transition.

"My feeling of being a Savai'i person it's like it's biased by people here in the university especially students in Apia and students in Savai'i, the people that run the university are biased on us it makes us feel like we are down to ourselves and that we don't mind but it's like we are all Sāmoan and that."

"Until when I moved to uni I was actually literally scared to actually start uni aye I was like a man people are gonna look down on Aleipata College like, imma be honest, in my Foundation when people ask me what my school was I would be like I don't know, I wouldn't even say anything."

Lack of self-esteem and lack of self-confidence was highlighted by the student support staff, as one of the issues that have come up when working with students who struggle with literacy. She also comments on the students who come from the rural areas.

"The majority of our students who are noted to be struggling are students from Savaii and from high schools in the rural districts from Upolu. And these students from my own experience have very low literacy skills, essay writing, research and then of course parts of speech."

"Along with the poor basic literacy skills come the lack of self-esteem; lack of self-confidence, to speak up, that their idea is wrong."

It seems those who had a very difficult time transitioning because they were lacking in self-confidence. Aspects of the transition that they found difficult included meeting new students from different high schools, feeling that the school they had attended was less prestigious than some other high schools, and believing they were more socially disadvantaged if they were from a rural area. This was further linked to the students' level of literacy skills, particularly in English.

Successful transitioning

Students who attended schools in the urban area found that their high school helped them with the transition. For example, the student below talked about how coming from Savai'i and attending Sāmoa College prior to university helped him with his transition.

"When I heard about Sāmoa College, I thought it was only for half caste and palagi kids. I thought lowly of myself. And then my perspective changed, I was so happy, because when I went there, there were lots of Samoan kids. So, when I was preparing to come to university my cousin and brother told me that it was going to be hard and there would be many students in big lecture rooms but I had confidence from college to communicate with people, get to know other students and communicate with the lecturers to gain more understanding. So, I got used to the lecturers and was able to gain more understanding on the subjects."

Another student who went to the same high school had an experience that resonated with the idea that it was an easier transition because it was similar to that in her previous school.

“But when I came and one week since NUS started and...it’s like I’m in college again nothing new it’s just um new level of teaching in each subject. But the process in school is like the same as in colleges.”

Although most of the students found entering university hard, they eventually overcame their anxieties through self-affirming beliefs and their faith.

“The first thing I think at that time is the reason why I come to school is that I love my parents. The most important thing is to complete why I came to school. Study hard. Sometimes I’m struggling. Sometimes I’m stressed.”

“So from the beginning during my first year, in foundation, it was very challenging in new area, new student, new teachers, but I eventually got used to it till now, in my final year, even though the first year was difficult it was kind of okay compared to now, it’s much harder now. Although it’s hard, if you put your heart into it and have the will then all will be okay.”

Freedom

Most students felt that there were positive and negative aspects to the greater freedom of studying at university:

“Here it’s like open, it’s up to you with what you do with your educational life whether you come, no one will come and tell you to do this or that whereas down in college like you’re under control by the principal and teachers but up here it’s up to you (laughs)”

“The teachers never worry about us; they have the mind-set that we as student will think responsibly about the fees that we pay.”

Freedom allowed for a more flexible timetable. This freedom was perceived as a kind of self-development, with the onus being on the student to manage this freedom.

The new found freedom included adapting to a new environment, to new teaching methods, and to a more independent learning environment. Students’ experience with their previous high school affected their ability to transition, as they constantly compared NUS to that experience. The progression rate from year 13 (high school) to higher education has increased over the years as more students are pursuing higher education after high school (Ministry of Education Sports And Culture, 2013).

At NUS there is the Student Support Services which offers academic and social counselling and support for students. Students who are at risk of failing a course are reported to the student support staff for counselling and intervention. The student support staff confirmed this as an issue in helping students understand their assignments which are in English, and to help them bring out their ideas, to gain the confidence they need to complete assignments and to contribute in the class.

“So one of the biggest issues is they struggle with English and because the comprehension is not so good...so all of these can be discouraging to a student. Hope it helps them have a positive experience feeling good about themselves and express themselves in tutorial groups and outside of that be able to communicate with friends.”

This is further supported by the literature as a problem shared amongst Pasifika students (Cuthill & Scull, 2011; Uehara et al, 2017; Raturi & Boulton-Lewis, 2014; Petelo, 2003). The lack of confidence by students to ask questions in class can be linked to their Fa’aSāmoa way of upbringing which Utumapu et al (2008) also notes. “Students will be reluctant to ask questions as it may be a sign of being rude or not listening to the teacher while he/she was teaching”. In the *fa’a-Sāmoa* young people are taught to listen and respect their elders. Students bring this attitude with them into formal education. This is also common across Pasifika students as found in the literature, where there is a culture of silence that persists within higher education (Theodore et al, 2018; Cuthill & Scull, 2011; Uehara et al, 2017; Raturi & Boulton-Lewis, 2014; Utumapu-McBride et al, 2008). As is the case of Tonga, “the process of Western education entails questioning, critical thinking and independent expression, all of which conflict with the cultural values of obedience, respect, and conformity” (Kavapalu 1991:191 as cited in Schoeffel et al, 1996).

It is also important to note here that students who were confident acknowledged their previous high school as instrumental to preparing them for university, as well as being able to comprehend in the English language which the student support staff confirmed, and supported by Utumapu- McBride et al (2008). Those who went to an urban area school transitioned well in this study. Students eventually gained self-confidence through peers and learned to adapt to their new environment. Peer’s support is noted throughout the literature (Petelo, 2003; Tsutsumoto, 1998).

Transitioning from foundation level to undergraduate level

A final transition is from the Foundation program to starting the degree. This was heavily impacted by the unchanged environment and the inability to secure a scholarship to study overseas. The desire for a scholarship to study overseas affected the students’ perception of higher education when returning to pursue higher education. Returning to the same physical environment did not offer any new excitement for the students. This is in stark contrast to the Sāmoan students who study outside of Samoa, who are able to experience a new setting and environment when commencing their undergraduate studies (Petelo, 2003; Penn 2010; Ng Shiu 2011).

Impact of Scholarships

Students in the NUS foundation program have the opportunity to win an overseas scholarship. These scholarships are the rewards on offer for the top foundation students each year. They are offered through the Tri-lateral Government partnership between Sāmoa, New Zealand and Australia. Students in the FOA, FOBE and FOS faculties are prioritized for these scholarships where they are distributed amongst these three faculties. The ranking of scholarships would be to university programmes in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu (University of the South Pacific –USP) and then Sāmoa (NUS and USP Alafua). Students who make the top five of each faculty would be the most likely to win a scholarship to study in Australia

and New Zealand. However, the process has recently changed; now students who attain high averages based on their academic performance are invited to apply for a scholarship and must meet all the requirements and criteria set out by the scholarship provider – Australia and New Zealand. These scholarships were managed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Samoa (MFAT). It was a common practice for MFAT Samoa to host a briefing session at the start of the first semester each year to communicate the selection process and criteria to the students enrolled in the Foundation programme. This is now the task of the Public Service Commission.

There are also scholarships offered by the Government of China, whereby those who have completed their foundation studies are eligible to apply. The criteria are set by the Chinese government and were processed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade Samoa (MFAT). Local scholarships to study in Samoa at NUS are usually sponsored by the government of Samoa, through MFAT, Ministry of Education Sports and Culture, and the Ministry of Health (MOH) for nursing students. Other local scholarships include sponsorship by private organization such as the Yazaki Kizuna Foundation Scholarship (National University of Samoa 2019).

Access to scholarships - and winning one or not winning one - was a major issue for the student interviewed. Most of them discussed why they thought they had missed out on a scholarship to study overseas. The response below is a summary of one of the students' ambitions towards a scholarship as well as his plans for when he was in foundation. It also points to the importance of receiving a scholarship and what it meant for him and his family.

"We have one member working which is my dad... so I feel sorry for him, he has to go apply for this huge loan at NPF, in order for me to proceed with my education. So after my foundation year, I did very well and I managed to get a local scholarship. I had two options, I mean three actually. If I didn't get an international scholarship, I will wait for the local MFAT scholarships and if I don't get a MFAT full scholarship I will apply for China. On that very same day I was going to apply for a scholarship to China, this was in 2018 and on that same day my dad called me to his office and he congratulated me, and I was like, for what? And he said, NUS called him that I got a MFAT full local scholarship and I was like, I should stay. Because it's shorter for me, it's a period of three years, if I go to China it'll be longer and then when I come back my dad will retire already and no one's gonna provide for the family. So [I] really want someone to stay back on the island and provide for the family. My dad actually provide for everything since primary, primary to college and now to university. But since now I'm on scholarship, my dad is only providing for my transport fare, food on the table."

Some students expressed their frustrations with the scholarship selection process which highlighted their insecurities towards the process, whereas others were unhappy with the lack of information communicated about the scholarships and processes.

"How they like give out information, be specific...for example: scholarships, the scholarship and how they brief...they don't even brief us on how like how we get like book allowance [because] they just give out the letter but they don't even like do a meeting or do anything to brief [us]."

One student acknowledged her own carelessness as to why she lost her chance to be awarded with an overseas scholarship to study at USP in Fiji through the two-round process. However, she was still able to secure a local scholarship.

“I spent too much time at the gym I lost my notes (laughs) so in the last semester I lost my maths book I lost my books I don’t who took them at the time. So I studied in the dark I didn’t know what I was studying so I got a scholarship to Fiji in the first round but the second time I got a local so I couldn’t go overseas all because I spent too much time at the gym and losing all my books.”

The desire for an attractive overseas scholarship was based on the goal of obtaining an internationally recognized qualification as well as overseas experience. Most NUS qualifications do not have international recognition. However, students who were unable to secure one felt sad for their family because winning an overseas scholarship is so prestigious, but accepted it as a call from God to stay in Sāmoa.

“I felt sad for my family, they had high expectations of me. They think I’m gonna get a scholarship but I say no I think this is God’s plan I don’t have to go out I have to stay in Samoa and study. The other thing I wanted to get a scholarship was that the papers offered by NUS it’s not really valid at overseas so my other aim after my degree I will aim to go overseas and get a job there but if I go with my certificate from here to look for job I can’t get a good job so that’s why I really wanted scholarship so that I can get a certificate that is appropriate for me.”

“I tried to get a scholarship (overseas), but thank God I didn’t get the scholarship but I got a local scholarship, then last year I was president for my faculty (and currently the NUSSA president). I can’t explain it, only God answered my prayers.”

Local scholarships

Interestingly, most of the students, when asked about how they felt coming back to the same institution to continue their studies towards their undergraduate degrees, acknowledged how grateful they were to have received a local scholarship. This to most of them was a great help to their families financially. For some it was a great privilege and were humbled to receive such an opportunity. And for others they credited the scholarship as the main reason they were able to continue at university.

“It feels great as in I’m happy and privileged because it’s not an opportunity that is easy to get, it’s not an opportunity other students get, a lot of families with low income so I’m grateful I got this opportunity because my family is a low income family and this opportunity has allowed me to be one of the students under the MFAT local scholarship program which is great help financially for my family because to be honest if it wasn’t for this I would not have continued my studies, the fees are too expensive. So there is much to be happy about in receiving this once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Now I am on a local scholarship so it’s okay not to help my parents with my fees so they don’t have to worry about it....my text books and fees they’re taken care of by the government (scholarship).”

The student below is a recipient of the Yazaki Kizuna Foundation scholarship and he explains how this scholarship helps him and his family.

“My starting fee for the foundation year is 1,000 per semester and that’s like 2,000 per year so my family didn’t spend a penny on that and even from my foundation to my first to my second year they didn’t spend a penny on that, I looked for a scholarship I want to help my family because you know we have, me and my brother here we are the same, only one person working, and my father makes 150 tala per week and that’s a little money because my mother is a su’isu’i [dressmaker]so yeah, the only thing that starting from foundation my mother always give me bus fare and now this time I’m doing my only bus fare.”

Student resilience: Sponsorship

Those who missed out on the main scholarships found ways to seek sponsorship from other government ministries like the Ministry of Education Sports And Culture as well as private organizations/companies.

“... so after my foundation year I applied to Ministry of Education Sports And Culture for a sponsorship because I thought of my family and the tuition fees and text books were too expensive and I wanted to alleviate the financial burden from them because there were other financial obligations as well. So I applied to Ministry of Education Sports And Culture and I they approved to sponsor me. So my parent, they only send me money for my lunch. As for the tuition fees and text books they are covered by Ministry of Education Sports And Culture from my first year till now in my final year which is a great help for me and my family.”

“... for my school it’s under Ministry of Education Sports And Culture sponsorship I wanted to further studies for bachelor level I applied. I knew that I wasn’t lucky with the local scholarship (MFAT) so I applied for Ministry of Education Sports and Culture. So that’s how I got this far. So it depends on the grades. So need to keep it high.”

Other students’ tuition fees were sponsored by individuals. One student shared how her participation with a non-for-profit organization called Brown Girl Woke (BGW) allowed her sponsorship from the founder of the organization.

“I also...BGW I asked them for help but they say if I participate in their program they can sponsor my tuition fees so I thank BGW I am able to get sponsorship for my tuition fees this semester. So my parents are also happy for the financial assistance and help to them regarding my fees which are almost \$2,000 tala.”

The mention of scholarships was a main theme for the participants, as it impacted their view and participation in higher education. It is evident from the responses that attaining a scholarship to study at higher education was desired, primarily to study overseas and secondarily to continue studying whilst simultaneously being able to help the family financially.

The prospect of scholarships for the students not only impacted their transition, but also their perception of higher education. The students desired a scholarship to study overseas but whether overseas or locally a scholarship was considered necessary in order for students to continue in higher education because of the expense of fees to their families. Only three of the students were self-funded by their families. Students who were on local scholarships or were sponsored embraced it as an achievement and privilege. It was a means of great financial help to their families. As noted earlier, in the Education sector plan, a higher transition rate from high school education to NUS was linked to a growth in Government of Sāmoa scholarships (Ministry of Education Sports and Culture 2013).

A few points worth discussing here: firstly, the hierarchy of importance that students placed on the obtaining of a scholarship, with the most prestigious being those overseas. As one student noted, her main ambition to study overseas was to ensure she received an internationally recognized qualification. Samoans are very likely to migrate and it is easier to migrate if you have an internationally recognized qualification. Secondly, the desire for a scholarship to help alleviate financial burden on families and to continue education as expressed by the students. I would like to argue here that this has something to do with the *fa'a-Sāmoa* and how the students are nurtured through the education system. When one student expressed her sorrow of not being able to secure a scholarship to help her family, she felt like she let them down and that they had to worry about her tuition. In contrast, the students who did secure scholarships talked proudly about how their families need not worry about paying for their fees – it was already an accomplishment. From my sociological lens, scholarships were offered as incentives to continue in higher education. These incentives are scarce and therefore those who win the rewards can be proud of their achievement. Another effect is that scholarships function as a beneficial means of encouraging competition between students to obtain high marks.

Boarding with Family (Nofo A'oga).

Many Sāmoan students at NUS are from the Savai'i or the rural villages and come to live with families who are closer to town where the university is located. Without these living arrangements many would be unable to attend. In such cases, students often live with either extended families or close friends of their parents. Ideally these living arrangements are in the best interest of the student and their families. However, there have been cases whereby some of these students are not well supported by their host families. It is the custom in Samoa for young people to do chores for the family they are living with, which can take up time that should be spent studying, and also host families feel a lot of responsibility for students living with them and may restrict their freedom.

Two students said that they found it difficult to live with their host families because of misunderstanding. One recounted how her aunty did not understand the expectations she had to meet as a university student and often questioned why she had to go to university every day given her timetable stated she did not have classes every day. When she told her mother about her situation, her mother encouraged her to remain with her aunty until she completed her studies. The following year when she completed foundation successfully and embarked on her undergraduate studies at NUS, her brother heard about what she went through the previous year and decided to take her in to live with him. Since

then, she has been enjoying university as her brother is more supportive of the extracurricular activities she engages in and does not question how long she has to be at university.

“Before I was staying with my aunty so I face difficulties being that kind of person who is a nofo ā’oga. And sometimes I almost give up coming to school and I want to go back to Savai’i to be with my parents. Now I’m staying with my brother so I feel okay now”

Another student explained how she stayed with her cousins and was often misunderstood. She expressed how she had to help look after her cousins’ children and often was not allowed to go and see her family. She now lives with the family of her best friend whose family offered for her to stay with them. She is happier there, as they are more supportive and even drop and pick her up from university.

“I used to live with my cousin and her brother. Most of the time she’s not happy with me because she always misunderstood me in many ways, both of us misunderstood each other. So I shared to my best friend and she told her parents and they said I can stay with them.”

A staff member of the NUS Student Support Services recounted a case where one of the students she was able to help did not live with her parents. She was able to provide the space for her on campus to do her studies before she had to go home, to ensure that before she goes home all the work was completed.

“I documented that success story. She came [and] she had a problem, I asked her what problem, [she said] ‘I have an aunty I live with’ – [I explained] if you’re not with your parents when you do what you want where you want, is this where you be very strict with your time management. Between classes you come and sit here. We used to sit in the front and so when she goes home all the work is done. So she doesn’t have to stress. Small things we do in order to help them. She graduated. She now works.”

This also highlights the importance for families to understand the expectations of the students in order for them to ensure a supportive home environment as well as a supportive attitude towards their commitment and participation in higher education. The case of the *nofo ā’oga* needs to be explored more in further studies, because there are various cases as such. This has a significant impact on the students’ academic performance and participation in higher education.

The issue that arises in the case of the *nofo ā’oga* is a major finding because it shows a dimension of the problems some students face that is social and goes beyond issues of student competency. Three students among the participants in the study were from Savai’i, who had to move to Upolu and live with their host families. Two of them have issues described above. A similar case of a NUS student living with family relatives in Upolu was documented by Utumapu et al (2008) whereby he felt he did not have enough time to do his studies and was conscious of using too much electricity at night. The staff member of the NUS Student Support Services previously referred to described how she has had to help a *nofo ā’oga* student complete their assignments before going home for similar reasons. It must be noted that this is not the case for all *nofo ā’oga* students who are able to live with their own parents, close relatives and in very supportive homes. This was the case of the male student who expressed his living arrangement as a supportive one.

Students boarding with relatives or other families do not have the same access and support as the other students whose families live closer to the university, who live in more supportive home environments and have additional problems in transitioning. In contrast to the Samoan students described by Petelo (2003) who also leave Sāmoa to study overseas are well supported by scholarships which ensure access to a secure and supportive accommodation, and further support at the institution of higher learning. NUS lacks the funding to offer students the kinds of support that are offered by universities overseas, which provide student accommodation and various forms of care and mentoring. At present NUS does not offer accommodation for NUS students who come from the rural areas and can only help them through the NUS Student Support Services, which was not specifically set up for this purpose. Although the students whose problems have been described here were able to resolve their living arrangements, this begs the question of whether there are high school graduates who need more support if they live far from the university. A further observation is that both students were females which can be viewed from a feminist lens, as further barriers faced by women in higher education (Lesley, 2016).

Conclusion

In the article I have revealed a range of issues arising from the accounts of the student interviewed. Transitioning from high school to university involved learning issues, such as English language comprehension, social adjustment, time management, self-confidence, and their hopes of winning scholarships. The case of the *Nofoa'oga* as highlighted has a further impact on the transition process. This paper presented these three key findings that are relevant to the case of NUS students. The following recommendations are put forward to NUS to consider as an outcome of this study; for NUS management to consider the transitioning needs of its students and a more positive student experience. The first suggestion is for a reorientation program for returning students who have completed foundation, to usher them into their degree programs. The second is that NUS should be more aware of the particular problems and social issues faced by Samoan students, particularly with the case of the *nofo ā'oga*. This suggests that a more proactive approach to student counselling is needed. Perhaps a survey should be conducted of all students enrolling to ascertain their living arrangement, whether they live with parents or other relatives or board with non-family, whether it would be worthwhile to produce a booklet of guidelines for families or hosts on how to support a student living with them. What other support can be offered for these students and what would alternatives look like? How can NUS take into account these inequities regarding students? A third strategy would be to provide more information to parents and students at the time of first enrolment on scholarship opportunities and conditions. Furthermore, awareness and information about local scholarships at NUS could be communicated clearly to the public. More learning opportunities and exposure for the students through the availability of internships, relevant learning resources as suggested by the students. The findings in this research can also inform some of the concerns raised by the Education sector plan 2013 – 2018 (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2013) regarding PSET providers and the challenges faced by the students.

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