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# Challenging the notion of the transition year: The experiences of rural and urban tertiary students



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## ABSTRACT

The assumption in the literature that the transition to tertiary studies occurs within the first year has not been tested. This study investigates the timing of the transition by comparing the experiences of domestic students from rural (n=7) and urban (n=8) secondary schools, using an ecological framework. Semi-structured interviews of students' experiences revealed that the timing of the transition period can extend beyond the initial transition year, particularly for urban students who experience less immediate changes to social networks. Research and support for students in transition needs to consider more than just the first year of studies to increase student satisfaction, reduce attrition rates and improve educational outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

The transition from school to tertiary studies can be a problematic time for students. While some students transition with ease, many encounter problems including issues with forming friendships, changing dynamics with old friendships or family, and new, sometimes challenging, learning experiences (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010; Sovic, 2009). Some students may have difficulty experiencing these changes simultaneously leading to increases in social isolation and mental health problems, as well as decreases in educational performance and general quality of life (Cassidy, 2004; King, Garrett, Wrench, & Lewis, 2011; Stallman, 2010). Transitional difficulties can lead to higher attrition rates amongst tertiary students (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010) which has implications for the finances and reputation of a tertiary institution (DOE, 2013). In the Australian context, the attrition rates in higher education institutions in 2013 was 13.47% which is the highest that it has been since 2009 (DOE, 2013). Research to date has focused on understanding student transitions and how educators and counsellors can assist students experiencing transition difficulties within the first year. Yet, the notion of the transition period only lasting one year has not been tested.

A notable finding in the literature regarding the transition to tertiary education is that students from different socio-cultural backgrounds have diverse experiences and differing levels of success with any transition (Crockett, Shanahan & Jackson-Newson, 2000). Numerous bases for socio-cultural differences among students have been considered in the literature, including the disruptions to different types of social bonds with friends, family, and the wider community, changes in residential location, parents' levels of educational attainment, and the perceptions of family and the community

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regarding the importance and value of education (Anderson et al., 2005; Brampton & Patrick, 2007; Crockett et al., 2000; Frenette, 2007; James et al., 2006; Johnson, Haigh, Craigh, & Becker, 2009). Socio-cultural differences reflect the increasing diversity in the backgrounds of commencing tertiary students (Hillman, 2005). One socio-cultural difference that has received mixed attention to date, is whether the student is transitioning from an urban or a rural area as this can effect their transition experiences. Thus, the key aim of this paper is to investigate the timing of the transition to tertiary studies using a qualitative and investigative approach in order to question any assumptions that have informed prior research. The present study will draw upon the ecological theoretical framework of the Bronfenbrenner (1979) model and will use a semantic approach in order to enhance the understanding of the nature of the transition for rural and urban students (Willig, 2008).

The literature demonstrates that students transitioning from rural contexts experience greater disruptions to existing social networks (Fabiansson, 2006; Hillman, 2005; Lewis, Dickson-Swift, Talbot, & Snow, 2007). Due to the dramatic changes in geography that accompany leaving high school, rural students lose the social support that most urban students have to manage the other strains imposed on them through transitions (Anderson et al., 2005; Brampton & Patrick, 2007; Crockett et al., 2000; Lewis et al., 2007). As a result, rural students are more prone to declines in mental health, including higher rates of stress, anxiety and loneliness (Anderson et al., 2005; Brampton & Patrick, 2007; King et al., 2011; Stallman, 2010). This poses the question of whether rural students' transition period is more complex and lasts longer than that for urban students?

An issue with existing research into the transition of rural and urban students is that the focus of the transition period has been on the transition from lower to upper secondary schooling (Cuconato & Andreas, 2015), or the embedded assumption that the transition to tertiary studies occurs primarily within a single year (Bowman, 2010; Hillman, 2005; Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2012; Meier, Reindl, Grassinger, Berner, & Dresel, 2013; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012). The reason for this assumption is that the majority of universities and educational institutions operate on yearly academic calendars with new student cohorts being introduced at the start of the academic year. The natural priority given to

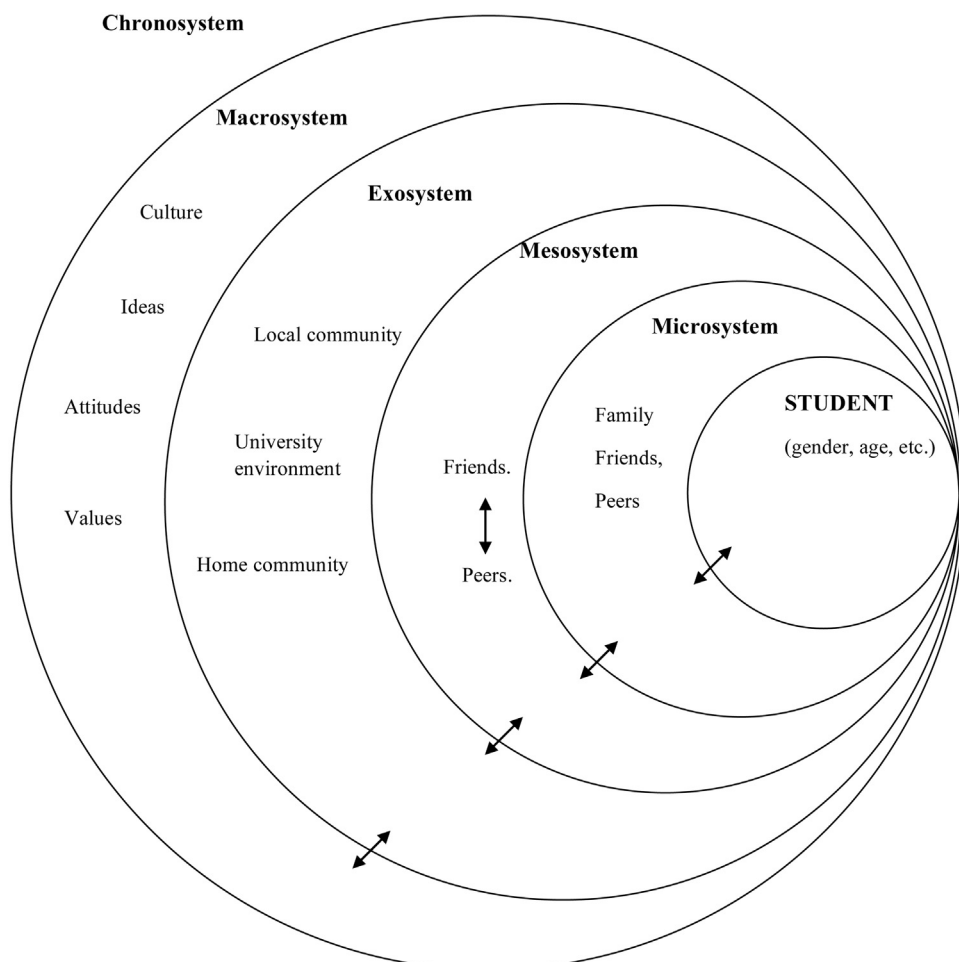


Fig. 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems.

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