Student academic help-seeking in higher education: Insights from Bronfenbrenner's systems

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Abstract

The academic success of students is influenced by myriad factors, including their health and well-being, family situation, employment status, and university experience. When a factor threatens the academic success of a student, they often reach out to teaching staff for academic help. In recent years, academic help-seeking in higher education has gained significant research attention. Less explored and understood are the reasons that prompt students to seek academic help. This article explores these factors, repurposing Phase 2 of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to gain insight into the complex challenges students face and contextualise the reasons they provide for academic help-seeking. Survey data were collected from 214 university students studying at one university in Aotearoa New Zealand and analysed using deductive thematic analysis. Our findings showed that students experienced a range of challenges throughout their study, both anticipated and unanticipated, and that they use academic help-seeking as a tool for success - sometimes by requesting advice or extra resources, but most often by requesting extra time, so they can address challenges without deprioritising their studies. We argue that it is important for teaching staff to be aware of the various factors impacting their students, so they can provide proactive and meaningful support. Students described the academic help they received as kindness, and the effect of that kindness as profound. By drawing attention to the complexities that may underlie students' requests for academic help, we hope to encourage teaching staff to be informed and compassionate in their response.

Practitioner Notes

1. The neoliberalisation of universities means that there are fewer financial safeguards that would allow a student to study full-time while also affording to live.
2. Students do not learn in a vacuum; their home life, work life, and the wider political and economic state of the country all play a role in their academic experiences.
3. The use of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems supports the examination of the direct and indirect factors that personally and contextually challenge students in higher education across a range of immediate and wider contexts.
4. For many students, the need to earn money to pay for rent and food, and other responsibilities such as caring for family means that their time devoted to studying is compromised.
5. A student's request for an extension often reflects various stressors occurring within their other living environments, such as their work and home environments

Introduction

Universities around the world are facing financial challenges (Brammer & Clark, 2020; Scott & Guan, 2022). One measure to combat this is to increase and broaden student intake (Bornschlegl et al., 2020), an approach that has led to more diverse student populations (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022), and more diverse student challenges (Moriña, 2019; Smith, 2020). Furthermore, Walker et al. (2023) recently found that students in higher education (HE) are facing challenges "from suicidal ideation … to feeling a little stressed" (p. 4).

The physical, mental, social, and financial challenges students in HE are facing can impede or prevent them from completing course requirements, learning, and assessment tasks, and from meeting deadlines (Martin-Arbós, et al., 2021). Physical challenges can include not eating healthily and not getting enough exercise or sleep (Soutter et al., 2014). Students with physical disabilities such as mobility, visual, and hearing impairment may have the added challenges of accessibility to their environment and information (Collins et al., 2019). Expectations of increased independence, pressures to succeed, and decreased support networks have been shown to challenge students' social and mental well-being (Bryant et al., 2022; Shillington et al., 2021). Students may be dealing with physical, mental, and social challenges whilst also managing learning challenges such as Aspergers, dyslexia, or other cognitive differences (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Financial challenges amidst a cost-of-living crisis can mean the difference between being warm and safe and eating or not (NZUSA, 2022). Add COVID-19 to this milieu of potential obstacles to student success (Cameron et al., 2022) and it is evident how complex and difficult the life of a student in HE can be.

Whilst the well-being and mental health of students in HE is gaining more attention in research literature (Binfet et al., 2021; Kinchin, 2022; Shillington et al., 2021), and hopefully universities, a specific understanding of what those challenges are, how the student is personally and academically affected, and how they themselves seek to ameliorate their challenges is less known. As Deasy et al. (2016) advocated: "what is required is much deeper understanding of the sources of distress for students in order to provide real and meaningful engagement in addressing them" (p. 190).

A student's success at university is contingent upon multidimensional factors that are often outside the control of teaching staff (e.g., teachers, tutors, lecturers, course coordinators, professors). These factors include individual motivation, peer groups, family support, and paid work (Nusbaum et al., 2021). The staff-student relationship is a critical factor, and one which teaching staff can consider and cultivate (Snijders et al., 2020). Teaching staff cannot control what happens within a student's family, but they can control their response when a student seeks help from them because of, for example, a family bereavement. In this article we seek to explore the multiple complex and embedded systems that a student inhabits to better understand when, how, and why students seek academic help from teaching staff at their university.

Literature

Aotearoa-New Zealand Context

In HE in Aotearoa New Zealand (henceforward Aotearoa) many students live precarious, unstable lives with approximately two-thirds of students frequently lacking enough money to afford food, pay bills, or receive essential healthcare services (NZUSA, 2022). As such, students can also be

hit harder by wider socioeconomic challenges that include financial stability, housing quality, and healthcare (Beban & Trueman, 2018). For example, a student is typically less financially secure than a working adult but may be working similar hours in addition to their study (Grimmond et al., 2020). For some students, their ability to continue studying is often dependent on picking up extra shifts at paid work, borrowing money from family or friends, or simply going without the necessities of life (NZUSA, 2022). In this context, paid work is not an additional opportunity to earn extra cash, it is an existential need to survive (Beban & Trueman, 2018). A student's need to work may also compromise their learning achievements, leading to lower grades than they may have otherwise achieved (Richardson et al., 2013). These stressors – and sometimes extra responsibilities – mean less time to focus on university studies, and increase a student's likelihood of experiencing physical, mental, and social health challenges (Nissen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, many students live in households that fail to reach health standards (Ade & Rehm, 2020). They frequently report experiencing dampness and mould in their homes and in some cases, students must choose between turning the heating on versus living in a cold flat to save money (Brabo-Catala et al., 2023). Student housing quality is an important indicator of numerous health outcomes, including sleep quality, mental health, and chronic illness (Clark et al., 2021). In addition, the housing crisis in Aotearoa has led to increasingly unaffordable rents (Walker & Huthwaite, 2023), exacerbating the cost-of-living challenges students face. For students living in rented accommodation, their rent takes up just over half of their weekly income on average (NZUSA, 2022).

The financial insecurity experienced by students, already compromised by a difficult housing and cost-of-living crisis, is further worsened by the sheer cost of affording university study. In Aotearoa, neoliberal educational policies have relocated the financial burden of tertiary study from the state to the student (Roper, 2018). The result is ever-increasing costs related to course fees, textbooks, and required materials (Stein et al., 2017), leading to the societal normalisation of taking out a substantial student loan to attend university (Roper, 2018). Thus, financial stress is embedded into the foundation of the university student experience. Additionally, Covid-19 increased financial stress for universities, staff, and students and the effects of this are still being felt (Cameron et al., 2022).

Each of these challenges can be further exacerbated for Māori students, the indigenous people of Aotearoa. For example, Māori students in HE have already faced a history of colonisation, racialised tracking, and scholarship inequalities. They then face continued marginalisation through entrenched institutionalised racism and inequalities, racial stereotyping, and fewer Māori role-models and worldviews embedded in their learning (Amundsen, 2019; Mayeda et al., 2022).

Tertiary students worldwide frequently find themselves in a precarious state, with myriad financial and living stressors that prevent them from devoting full attention to their studies. Being a student is complicated, and this complexity is reflected in the reasons students seek help from teaching staff. Beban and Trueman (2018) warn us that "the different burdens that students face in order to pay the bills and keep families together may only be visible to lecturers as annoying students who haggle for marks and extensions" (pp. 102-103).

Academic Help-seeking

Challenges in HE are to be expected and students understandably respond by seeking help from their teaching staff (Fong et al., 2023). Students can begin to manage their varied challenges

through academic help-seeking (AHS), which is an adaptive learning and problem-solving strategy and study skill (Brown et al., 2021; Li et al., 2023; Martin-Arbós et al., 2021), that helps students to learn, understand, and complete their course or programme requirements.

When the student is help-seeking as an active participant in their learning processes, AHS is an essential self-regulated strategy and skill that requires self-awareness, motivation, planning, management, metacognition, and self-reflection (Fong et al. 2023; Karabenick & Gonida, 2018). When seeking help, Karabenick and Dembo (2011) suggest students undertake the following eight steps:

1. Decide whether a problem exists.
2. Decide whether assistance is required or desired.
3. Determine whether to request assistance.
4. Choose the type of help you want.
5. Choose the person you want to seek help from.
6. Ask for help.
7. Get help.
8. Put the help to use.

This process is known as 'instrumental' or 'adaptive' help-seeking (Newman, 2008, p. 2) and should help the student cope with and overcome any current difficulties, reducing the discrepancy between existing and desired levels of learning and achievement (Fong et al. 2023). Non-adaptive help-seeking occurs when a student believes their teaching staff do not care about their subject or their students or when they believe that asking for support will not help (Newman, 2008). This absence of help-seeking interactions may disadvantage the student, both socially and academically (Ryan & Shin, 2011).

Contrastingly, when students constantly ask to have their problems solved by others, they are described as 'expedient' or 'executive' help-seeking (Butler, 1998, p. 631), whereby they "wish to receive answers to their questions without any effort on their part" (Li et al., 2023, p. 2). In this situation, the students are perceived as focussing on the outcome of the learning, not the process of learning itself (Fong et al., 2023).

Help-seeking behaviours of students in HE have been found to be both subjective and contextual, where some factors are more likely to impede effective AHS while others are more likely to promote it. Fears of stigma (attributed by the student or others) can include previous experiences of being negatively stereotyped due to age, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, and mental or physical well-being (Micari & Calkins, 2021). As such, stigma is of particular concern for students from diverse and underrepresented student populations who may already feel marginalised in HE (Black & Allen, 2019; Martin-Arbós et al., 2021). Students may feel embarrassed when they attribute their learning difficulties to a lack of ability or bad luck (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988), or when they feel they are being judged (Deasy et al., 2016). Students who experience stigma or embarrassment are unlikely to feel a sense of belonging within their institution or amongst the people in it (Gravett & Winstone, 2022; Walker-Gleaves, 2019). Sithaldeen et al. (2022) posited that universities may be somewhat responsible for "creating help-seeking hesitancy in students" (p. 71) when they promote personal responsibility, resilience, and independence over community, self-regulated behaviours, and fellowship. Students' performance results could be more an indicator of their poor help-seeking behaviors,

such as unawareness of the possibility of help, help avoidance, and help abuse (Karabenick & Gonida, 2018; Mbato & Cendra, 2019), than their academic ability.

Researchers have agreed that proactive support from teaching staff promotes confident attitudes toward AHS (Binfet et al., 2021; Deasy et al., 2016; Martin- Arbós et al., 2021). Walker and Gleaves (2016) suggested that teaching staff should try to understand their students' personal backgrounds, experiences, and contexts so they are able to anticipate when a student needs help. Such staff are relationship focused and are "motivated to do all that is possible to maximise a student's chance of success" (p. 67). Additionally, students must "perceive that they have permission to ask for help" (Black & Allen, 2019, p. 64), and it is the teaching staff's responsibility to boost that perception.

Students who undertake AHS effectively have positive learning trends, increased self-efficacy, and enhanced academic performance (Fong et al., 2023; Micari & Calkins, 2021). A positive experience with AHS has a strengthening and reinforcing effect, where a student is more likely to seek help again (Micari & Calkins, 2021). According to Sithaldeen et al. (2022), students who feel they can relate to, and have a connection with their university community and personnel, are more likely to seek academic help.

In recent years, AHS in HE has garnered significant research attention, and primarily focused on "whom to ask for help, how to ask for help, the outcomes of help-seeking, and the available resources for help-seeking" (Li et al., 2023, p. 17). However, the reasons why students in HE seek academic help have remained less extensively explored, and hence less understood.
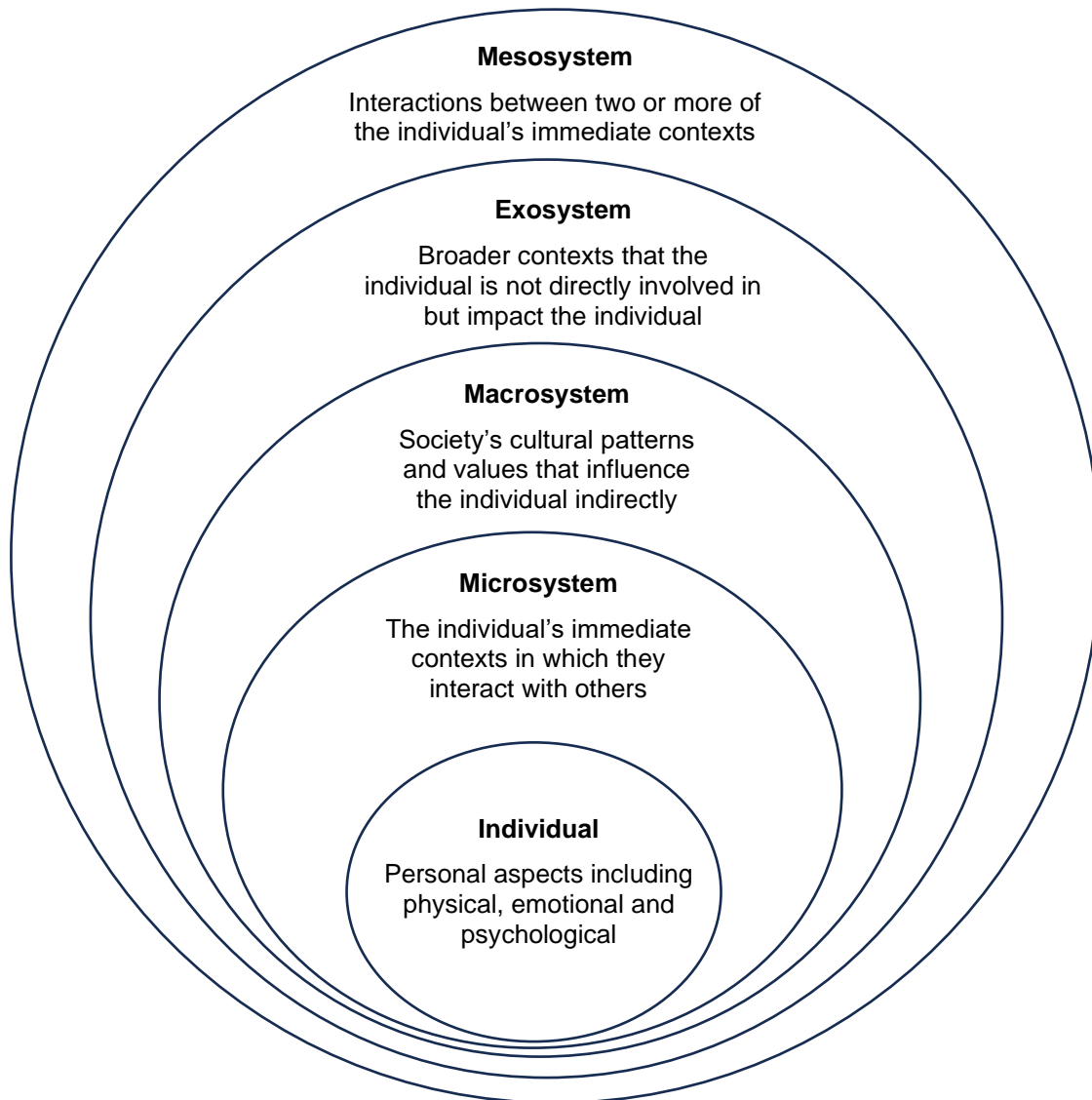
Method

Theoretical Framework

Our research explores the experiences of students in HE individually and across multiple systems. This required a theoretical tool that would enable us to explore the multi-dimensional factors of a student's life. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model describes human development as a process that occurs through dynamic interactions between individuals and environmental factors, providing an appropriate framework for analysing data across systems. There are three phases of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (O'Toole et al., 2019). We repurposed Phase 2 (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) because the individual and their development are considered within a system, thus enabling us to explore the direct and indirect factors that personally and contextually challenge students in HE across a range of immediate and wider contexts. This networked model views the ecological systems as "an overlapping arrangement of structures, each directly or indirectly connected by the direct and indirect social interactions of their participants" (Waitling-Neal & Neal, 2013, p. 722).

Limitations to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model have been identified. Christensen (2016) and Elliott and Davis (2020) noted that neither an individual's ability to influence their own success, their resilience, nor how individuals in a group could strengthen each other are explicit within the systems. However, our research focusses on AHS, the point at which a student recognises they cannot problem-solve on their own. They do require some resilience to reach out for help and AHS is in essence one individual in a partnership providing support to another.

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (adapted from Akaba et al., 2022)

Mesosystem
Interactions between two or more of the individual's immediate contexts

Exosystem
Broader contexts that the individual is not directly involved in but impact the individual

Macrosystem
Society's cultural patterns and values that influence the individual indirectly

Microsystem
The individual's immediate contexts in which they interact with others

Individual
Personal aspects including physical, emotional and psychological

Research Questions

The following research questions are explored:

1. What experiences prompted students in Higher Education to seek academic support?
2. In which ecological systems were students' experiences located and how were the systems and experiences inter-connected?

Students and Setting

Students (n=214) ranged in age from under 20 to over 40, with most aged between 20 and 24. They were predominantly female. The three most common cultural identities selected by students

in the survey were New Zealand European, New Zealand Māori, and Asian. Students were learning in seven different schools within the same faculty with the most studying in the School of History, Philosophy, Political Science, and International Relations. For more detailed information please refer to Tables A1 to A4 in Appendix A: Students' demographic data and setting.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Data were gathered through a Qualtrics survey. In November 2022 the survey was emailed to all students (n=4323) who had completed an undergraduate course in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) during that year. The FHSS was selected because it is one of the biggest faculties in terms of student population. As well as being shared by email, links to the survey were posted on FHSS subject Facebook pages and knowledge of the project was spread through word of mouth. Students were asked a series of four questions pertaining to their experiences of seeking help at the university and encouraged to give comprehensive (short paragraph length) answers. These questions asked for an example of a time they had sought help from teaching staff at the university, the effect of their help-seeking in their learning and course completion, how the interaction had affected their general well-being and interactions with others, and, if they described a negative interaction, for an example of one that was more positive. Four hundred and seventy-seven students responded to the survey, of which 215 were complete responses and therefore used for analysis. Many students who began the survey answered only the short-answer questions and omitted the questions requiring a short paragraph describing their experiences of kindness or unkindness at the university. Responses that did not answer the long-form questions were not included in our dataset.

Guided by Sithaldeen et al. (2022) our qualitative research design took a deductive approach as we wished to specifically explore the experiences that prompted students AHS and the positioning of those experiences in relation to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. Data was read and coded deductively (Braun & Clarke, 2021) for key words related to reasons for AHS. Initial codes were categorised within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems which provided the lens through which we further interpreted the data. The authors met to cross-check individual identifications of codes and to ensure all possible codes had been identified. In the last step of analysis, the final codes within each ecosystem were determined and thematised. The themes and related codes were discussed, and any questions or concerns were raised and debated until resolved. This process resulted in a "detailed analysis of a particular aspect of the dataset interpreted through a particular theoretical lens" (Braun & Clarke 2021, p. 331)

Table 1 illustrates how Bronfenbrenner systems were defined, and categories were classified into relevant systems by each author, who then met to discuss and reach consensus.

Table 1

Ecological system descriptions and examples used in this article.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system	Students' prompts for AHS	Examples of factors
Individual	Personal factors and responsibilities.	• Physical and mental well-being • Learning challenges
Microsystem	Factors and interactions within students' immediate contexts	University Life • Course prerequisites • Timetable clashes • Understanding course content • Assessment requirements and due dates • Assessment feedback • Online learning and technology • Final grade queries • Exemptions Family and Friends • Family and friends physical, mental, and social well-being • Terminal diagnosis and bereavement. • Childcare Living Arrangements • Flat-mates physical, mental, and social well-being • Living environment Finances and Paid Work • Work demands, extensive work hours, and financial pressures.
Mesosystem	Interactions between microsystems	• University life and family/ friends • University life and living arrangements • University life and finances/paid work
Exosystem	Wider contexts (at the university degree and policy level) that students do not directly occupy	• Programme/degree requirements and pre-requisites • Cross-crediting from other universities • Learning management systems

Macrosystem	Broad socio-economic, political, and cultural context of Aotearoa beyond the university.	• Extracurricular responsibilities • Cost of living crisis • Social justice system and crime

Findings and Discussion

Students in HE seek academic help from their teaching staff for a variety of reasons. The following sections examine these reasons through the analytical tool of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model. Our analysis demonstrates that the circumstances leading to students AHS are complex and multifactorial. In this section, students are referred to by the letter "S," and their quotes are referenced by the number they were assigned in the survey: for example, "S-24".

Individual System

The individual system includes students' personal factors, including physical and mental well-being challenges and learning challenges.

Figure 2

Examples of personal factors at the individual system

Students experienced physical and mental well-being challenges and learning challenges that prompted them to seek help from their teaching staff. Examples of physical challenges included "surgery" (S-27), "migraines" (S-35), "admission to hospital" (S-98), "glandular fever" (S-108), "concussion" (S-132), "broken collarbone" (S-150), "back injury" (S-164), and "I was sick" (S-214).

> I had surgery that I needed to have done and I was very sick. I was worried that I was not going to be able to complete my work. (S-27)

Major depressive episodes (S-7), depression (S-17), anxiety (S-123), and stress (S-142) were shared as examples of mental health challenges.

> I was dealing with depression and anxiety that was affecting my energy levels and focus during the year. (S-123)

Learning challenges included known and "recently diagnosed neurodivergence" (S-67) and "dyslexia" (S-126).

> I had been recently diagnosed and medicated with ADHD, so I was unsure what my new approach to Uni would look like, but they [lecturers] were very

understanding and asked me to keep them in the loop if I needed any additional help. (S-73)

Some individual challenges were anticipated. For example, S-30 acknowledged they "suffer from ongoing mental health issues" and S-49 explained they were "immunocompromised and get sick often". Other challenges were unanticipated:

> I felt that I needed an extra couple of days to complete an essay as I had a small procedure done that required anaesthetic, which had left me feeling more sick than I thought it would. (S-76)

Covid continued to be a personal obstacle: "I got Covid, it was really bad, I hadn't had it before" (S-87). Cameron et al. (2022) found that Covid exacerbated other challenges and this was also true for the students in our research.

> I was quite sick with COVID alongside suffering from some severe mental health issues and I just couldn't go to class. I reached out to a lecturer about this, and they helped me create a plan to complete my work. (S-174).

Students experienced both anticipated and unanticipated physical and mental health and learning challenges that caused them to reach out for academic help. For some, these challenges were concurrent, affecting several factors of their individual systems simultaneously.

Microsystem

The microsystem encompasses the immediate contexts occupied by students, namely their university life, family and friends, living arrangements, and finances and paid work.

Figure 3

Examples of contextual factors within the microsystem
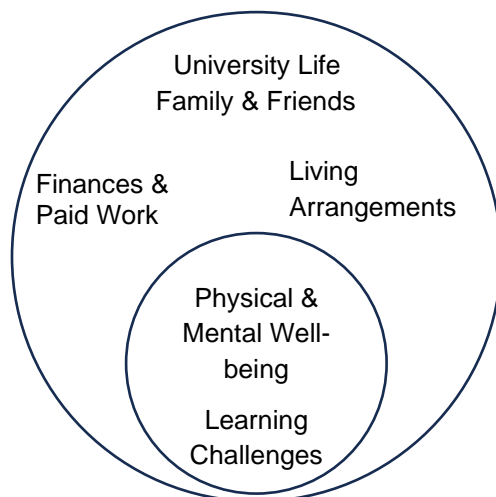
Within the microsystem, the predominant context which caused students to undertake AHS was their university life. Help was sought with enrolling, timetabling, understanding course content and assessment tasks, and finalising grades.

University Life

For some students, the AHS occurred before their courses started. Help was needed to approve course prerequisites, "I had some complications with my sign up to a course because there was a prerequisite of having to do two other courses, but I had only passed one" (S-29), and manage timetable clashes, "I had a clash of tutorials not being able to fit" into my schedule and so I contacted a lecturer (S-124).

Once courses had begun, students sought academic help when they did not understand the course content. S-116 contacted their lecturer when they did not understand "some of the things that were being taught that week". Academic help was also sought when students were unsure of the assessment requirements which they had "limited understanding of" (S-97) or to check they were "on the right track" (S-168). Assurances and feedback were also sought, to better understand course tasks and assessments.

> For the first mini essay/journal assignment, I emailed the lecturer asking for some feedback prior to the due date as I have been out of the education system for some time. (S-146)

During their courses, many students engaged in AHS because they felt overwhelmed with course requirements and assessments. For some, this was due to having multiple assessments due within a short time frame. For example, S-60 was "taking four different courses and I had two essays due on the same day from two sociology courses as well as two other assignments due that week from other courses". Others reached out due to challenges with "online learning" (S-15) and personal and university technology.

> My laptop suffered water damage and broke. I couldn't view lectures, work on assignments, or do readings during this time except for on my phone which made everything slow and difficult. (S-45)

At the conclusion of their courses, students sought academic help when they queried their final grade or needed academic exemptions to pass the course. For example, S-85 requested to "have a grading for a course reweighted" and S-9 inquired about "a delay in one of my grades" and "reassurance I had nothing to worry about".

> I looked over my final grades for one of my courses and noticed that my grade was strangely low. I emailed my lecturer requesting to know my grade for the final test assignment, as it hadn't been posted on blackboard. (S-191)

Family and Friends

Many of the challenges related to students' family and friends were unspecified. Examples included: "my family was going through some personal issues" (S-136); "I was overseas due to a family matter" (S-24); "I approached a staff member in regard to an extension, for family circumstances" (S-135); and "there had been a family emergency" (S-64). Specified examples of AHS included family members or friends being unwell.

> I approached my lecturer about my father being diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic and liver cancer which put me in a bad mental state for a very long time. (S-13)

In some situations, the student had responsibility for caring for family members. S-149 explained that

> "while covid isolation is probably helpful for some, I have three kids including two under four so this meant I had my kids at home for 10 days when they would normally be at kohanga reo" (early childhood education where all teaching and learning is delivered in Te Reo Māori).

The personal circumstances of some students were tragic (Walker et al., 2024).

> One of my family members had died tragically, I was beside myself but had a lot of assignments due around that time. (S-171)

> My mum went into hospice and subsequently died; I approached my lecturer. (S-184)

> I experienced the loss of a very wanted pregnancy. Dealing with the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health ramifications of this was very difficult. I was given every extension I needed. (S-59)

> I had to approach my lecturers about how a domestic violence incident that happened at home affected me, so they'd be aware. (S-131)

Living Arrangements

Some students sought academic help because of challenges associated with different living arrangements (university halls of residence, rented accommodation) and contextual situations at home.

> The hall I was staying in at the time was experiencing a lot of faulty fire alarms going off throughout the day and night for four days straight. It was distressing and tiresome to be woken up at 3:00am, 4:30am, etc with three assignments due. (S-57)

> My partner caught COVID, causing our flat to go into isolation, and this began a few days before one of my assignments were due. I emailed the lecturer for an extension as my house is very small and it would be difficult to focus with everyone else at home as well. (S-192)

Finances and Paid Work

Paid work was essential for many students, they could not afford to live, let alone undertake university studies, without it (Beban & Trueman, 2018). For S-89 this meant asking for "flexibility with due dates and attending tutorials", while for S-68, the nature of their paid work presented a challenge.

> I was quite impacted by COVID during the last term. I worked a job that put me in contact with a lot of sick people, and I often had to be very careful about attending lectures in person and safe COVID practices.

Within the microsystem, students' academic help-seeking was predominantly prompted by their university life. Challenges occurred before their course had begun, during the course, and once the course had concluded. Family challenges including illness and bereavement, living
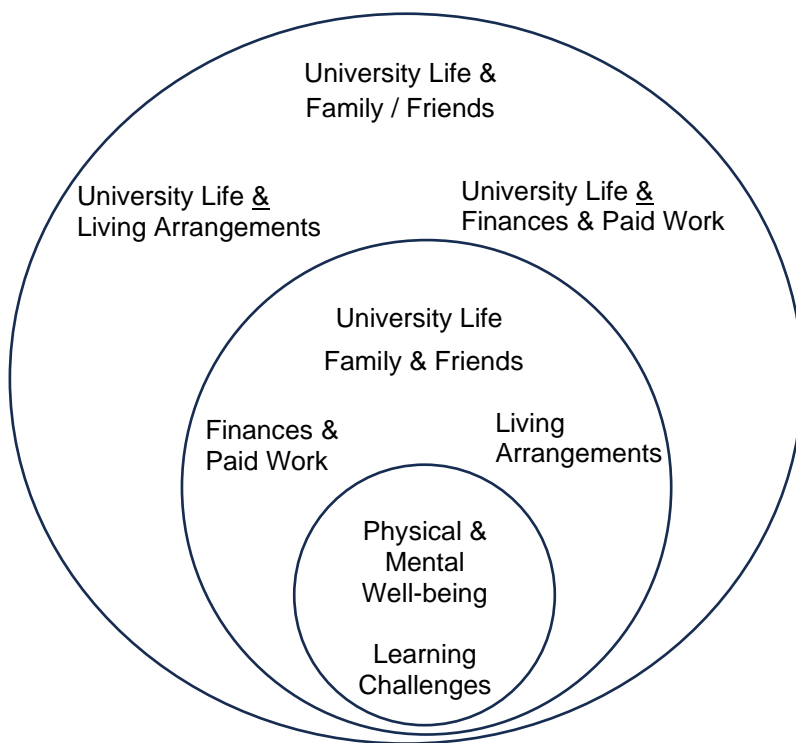
arrangements that were disruptive, and the need for paid work were also given as reasons for AHS.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem includes interactions between two or more microsystem contexts. Students in our research experienced challenges between their university life and family, financial circumstances and living arrangements, and paid work and university life. Examples of such interactions were chosen where students explicitly mentioned two interacting microsystem contexts in their survey response.

Figure 4

Examples of inter-contextual interactions at the mesosystem

University Life &
Family / Friends

University Life &
Living Arrangements

University Life &
Finances & Paid Work

University Life
Family & Friends

Finances &
Paid Work

Living
Arrangements

Physical &
Mental
Well-being

Learning
Challenges

S-72 described the challenge between their university life and family as "the unfortunate situation of attempting to balance my dire family life with uni life". Other students were affected by issues such as sexual assault and the general juggling of parental responsibilities.

> I emailed the lecturer and explained I had planned to do more [uni] work over the break but had a serious family situation come up that prevented that. I kept the terms very general but mentioned it involved sexual assault. (S-20)

> In trimester one, I approached my lecturer about the difficulties I was experiencing having no internet, juggling motherhood. (S-115)

Students' financial circumstances and living arrangements also hampered their university life. As S-154 explained "I was moving houses and in the process of starting a new job and I had two

tests (actually 1000- and 2000-word essays to be completed within a few days) and a 2500-word essay". For some, the balance between needing to have paid work and completing university work to their usual standard, was impossible to find.

> I had multiple assignments due over the same 3-day period and too much Uni
> work and paid work going on to complete them all to a high standard. (S-1)

S-99 experienced a combination of challenges within the context of their university life, well-being, living arrangements, and financial circumstances. Whilst their focus remained on staying up to date with assessment requirements, the cyclical nature and exacerbated stress of their challenges was evident.

> I was under considerable stress due to mental health issues, housing
> insecurity, and financial insecurity. This meant I was falling behind in where I
> needed to be with my essay for this course, which was worth 50% of the grade.
> Understandably, this caused me even more stress. (S-99)

The dual and sometimes multiple challenges students faced within the mesosystem illustrates the complexities they were experiencing across different microsystems and their need to seek academic help.

Exosystem

The exosystem includes wider contexts at the university and policy level that students do not directly occupy but are affected by.

Within the exosystem, students' challenges were related to the University systems and learning management system (LMS) and degree requirements. S-168 described this as "getting used to how the Uni systems work – especially as I was in my first year". An LMS technological glitch required S-70 to contact a lecturer to reassure them they would not be disadvantaged.

> While I was taking a timed test [on the LMS], it glitched and completely froze. I checked
> my internet which was completely connected, and I checked my keyboard and other
> hardware and was able to prove that they were all working fine. The issue was with [LMS]
> itself. (S-70)

S-100 had more general questions regarding "changing my classes or degree – would I have enough points if I dropped a course?" whereas S-58 had transferred from another university "and was stressed about cross-crediting my papers".

Within the exosystem, university systems and degree requirements were some challenges that students experienced. Whilst not directly occupying this system they were affected within it in ways that prompted AHS.

Figure 5

Examples of contextual factors within the exosystem
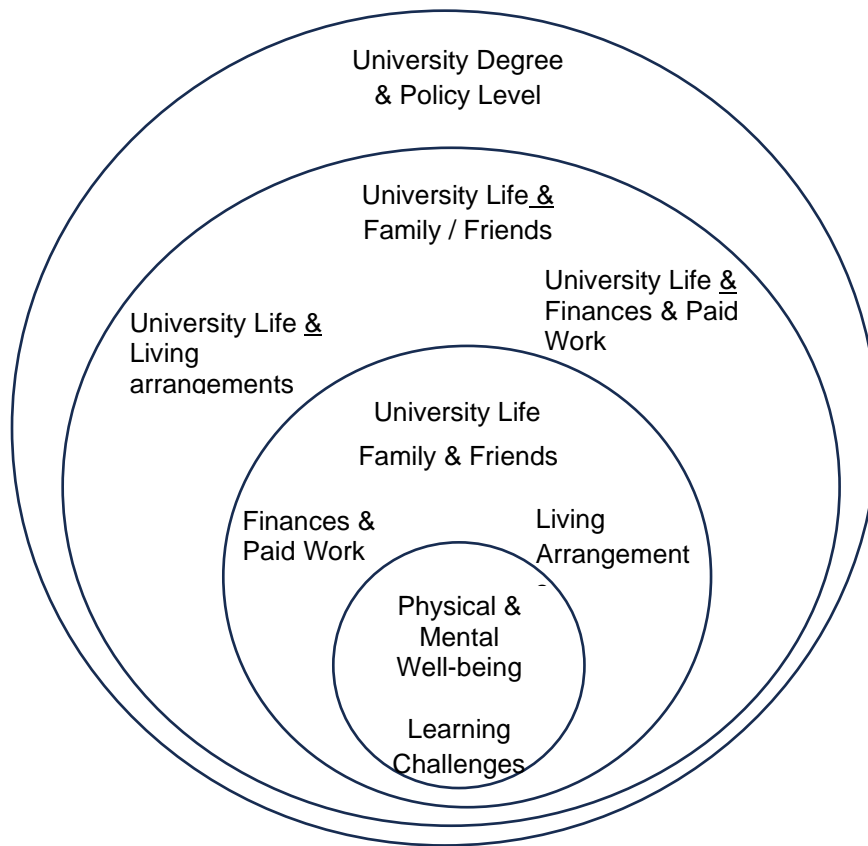
Macrosystem

This system encompasses phenomena within the economic, political, and cultural contexts of Aotearoa which prompted students AHS.

Within the macrosystem, the cost-of-living crisis and justice system processes were the main reasons students sought academic help. S-183 explained: "the other issue was work... Wellington rent is so expensive that it uses all of the student loan for some, so jobs are a must which put us behind in Uni". S-33 agreed that they "had to work 20+ hours a week to afford to live in Wellington". S-38 felt they had no choice but to take a "hiatus from this semester" due to the costs of living.

For S-49, the cost-of-living crisis was aggravated by their precarious well-being, which was worsened by their living arrangements (Brabo-Catala et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2021).

> I work two jobs alongside full time study to be able to afford to live in Wellington. I am also immunocompromised, and I get sick often, which was exacerbated by living in a mouldy, damp flat. These factors posed significant challenges for attending class and managing assessments. (S-49)

Additionally, some students undertook AHS because they were involved in legal situations, such as physical and sexual assault, and domestic violence. Under these circumstances, AHS requires both vulnerability and courage (Walker et al., 2023).

I was physically assaulted after a night out in town, which severely frightened me. I was very out of sorts for about two weeks, during which time I had some assessments due. (S-144)

I had to contact a member of staff for an extension on an essay after a busy few weeks of legal organisation and stress making a sexual assault complaint in my workplace. (S-84)

Figure 6

Examples of contextual factors within the macrosystem
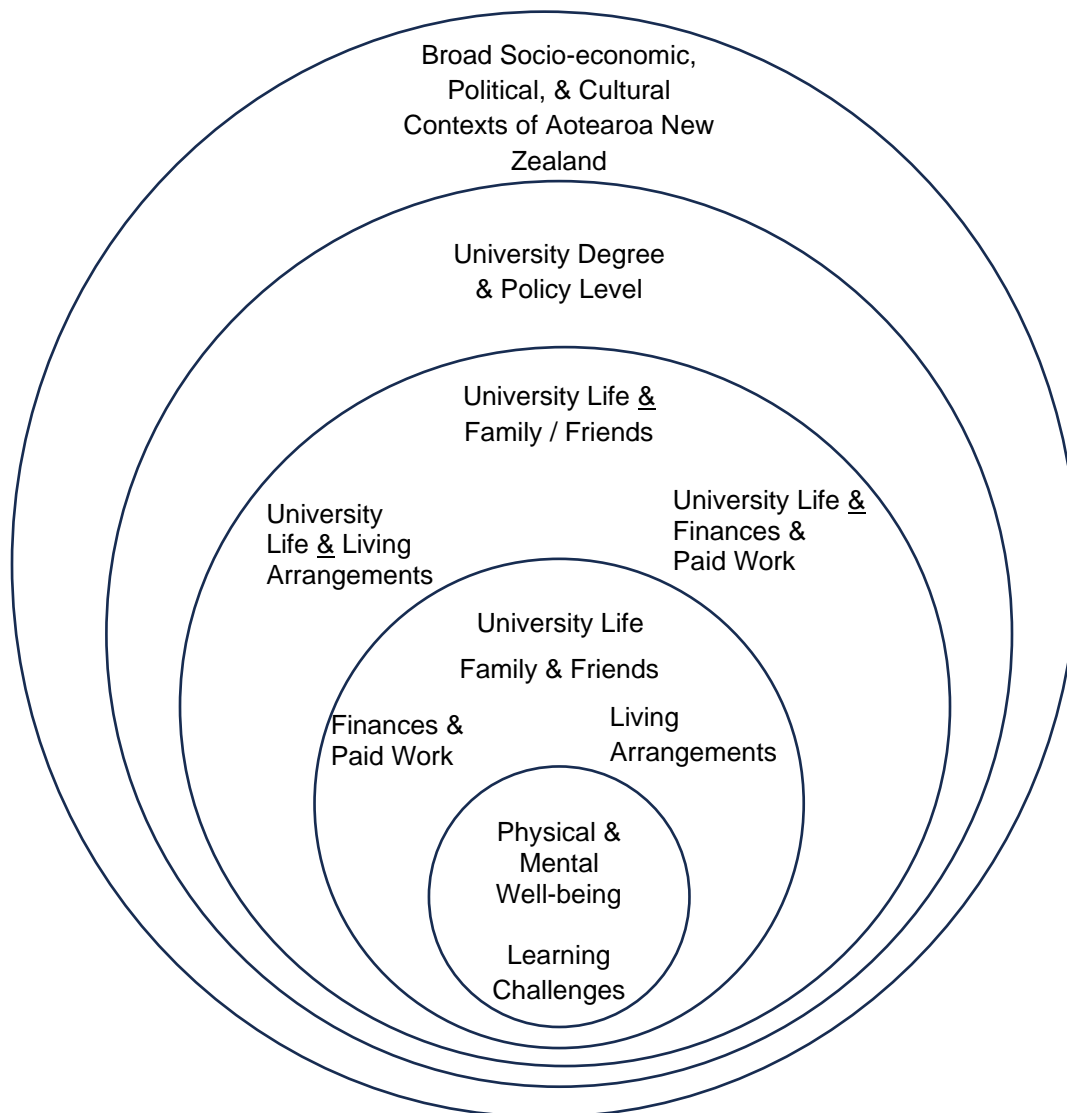
For S-118, the need for academic help was intensified because they were dealing with harassment while studying online from China (Fong et al., 2023).

> A horrible thing happened this semester when I was harassed by a threatening text message from a courier after I complained about him for not operating properly. I was very shocked and angry and scared by this… I felt seriously threatened. My mother and I called the police and I had to email my lecturers in New Zealand for help. (S-118)

Within the macrosystem, students were challenged by a cost-of-living crisis and situations where their safety had been compromised and they required legal help.

Conclusion and Limitations

Students in HE do not live or learn in a vacuum. Their home life, work life, and the wider political and economic state of the country all play a role in their academic experiences. The students in our research were doing their best to manage a variety of situations that affected them individually, within, and across different ecological systems. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems (1979) enabled us to gain insights and compassionately frame how students in HE live and learn, the challenges they experience, and the reasons they have for seeking academic help. In many examples, the challenges students have experienced have been exacerbated because of the impact across multiple systems. This enmeshment of factors is evident throughout the survey responses and reinforces the sheer range of diverse challenges students may face (Walker et al., 2023). Our data has demonstrated that students' well-being, personal safety, and financial security are precarious, even before they add the challenge of, HE study. These findings are reflected within various international contexts (Summer et al., 2023; Logan & Burns, 2021), suggesting that an ecological system approach is a useful framing for teaching staff across different tertiary settings. This approach emphasises relationships, environments, and cultural contexts and may counteract against a neoliberalist framework that tends to focus on individuals in isolation. Educators in HE are supported to look at factors that are beyond the control of students and adapt in ways to better support them.

One way students manage their challenges is by seeking academic help. They are not asking the teaching staff to do the work for them or to let them off doing the work (Butler, 1998), but rather to provide some time and space so they can recover, regroup, and meet their university requirements. For teaching staff, helping a student with an assignment or responding to an extension request are routine moments within a given day and yet their potential to impact students positively (or negatively) is profound.

Many students described the academic help they received from teaching staff as kindness. S-38 stated, "all of my lecturers were exceptionally kind in accepting my extension requests" and S-132 agreed that their "interaction was encouraging as I was met with understanding and kindness". For many students, the kindness they were shown was the difference between completing their studies or dropping out (Fong et al. 2023) and gave them confidence to seek academic help again (Micari & Calkins, 2021).

The role of kindness in facilitating student persistence (Tinto, 2017) is a recurring finding in international literature. Our research posits that an ecological systems approach helps illuminate the multitude of stressors that may impact student persistence and can help provide teaching staff with a compassionate, multi-contextual understanding of a student's situation – thereby enabling a kinder response. We suggest that the act of conceptualising students as situated within multiple

intersecting systems can help encourage compassionate interactions between students and staff. It serves as a reminder of the wider contexts our students exist within.

These students did not see additional help such as extensions of time as their right, but rather as an act of kindness from their teaching staff. Kindness from teaching staff as a response to student AHS will be addressed in a future paper.

Whist our research was designed with care to ensure rigor, it is important to consider possible limitations. First, we are only reporting on the experiences of AHS students who were prepared to share with us. For a myriad of reasons including stigma or embarrassment (Deasy et al., 2016; Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Walker et al., 2023), or fear of being judged or marginalised (Black & Allen, 2019; Martin- Arbós et al., 2021), students may have chosen not to respond to our survey. Additionally, those experiencing many challenges may not have had the time to respond, and some may not have recognised they needed help (Newman, 2008). Secondly, our participants are from the same faculty and as such the participants could be perceived as those more likely to seek academic help and the faculty as one more inclined to provide academic help. Thirdly, we did not gather data related to the participants' domestic or international study status. Participants' cultural identity data shown in Table 3 of Appendix A could imply some had an international enrolment and so this context will be considered in future research.

The students in our research, much like us or indeed any human, are leading complicated lives. The onus is on us as teaching staff to consider our students' ecological realities when they seek help with their studies. This research is a timely reminder that, while a staff member may merely see a student asking for an extension, they could be missing or ignoring the complex and challenging factors underpinning the request (Beban & Trueman, 2018). Students can overcome the challenges of HE by seeking help and teaching staff can be instrumental in reducing inconsistencies between actual and potential learning and achievement (Fong et al., 2023). However, staff need to better understand the types of stress and trauma students are experiencing (Deasy et al., 2016). We continue the call for students to be cared for "as people first and learners second" (Walker et al., 2024, p. 9).

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Appendix A

Students' demographic data and setting

Table 1

Students' ages.

Age bracket (in years)	Number of students
< 20	67
20-24	113
25-30	16
30-34	2
35-40	2
41 +	2
No information provided	12

Table 2

Students' gender.

Gender	Number of students
Female	150
Male	39
Gender diverse	11
Prefer not to say	2
No information provided	12

Table 3

Student's cultural identity

Cultural Identity	Number of students
African	1
Asian	12
Aotearoa New Zealand Asian	3
Aotearoa New Zealand European	123
Aotearoa New Zealand Māori	33
American	7

Australian	1
British	1
Canadian	1
European	11
Pacific Peoples	9
No information provided	12

Table 4

Schools within which students were studying.

School	Number of students
New Zealand School of Music	1
School of English, Film, Theatre, Media and Communication, and Art History	42
School of History, Philosophy, Political Science, and International Relations	67
School of Languages and Cultures	12
School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies	3
School of Social and Cultural Studies	49
Te Kawa a Māui School of Māori Studies	9
No information provided	31