

# **Learning & Teaching Project Report**

## **Supporting academically at risk students: A proactive approach**

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## Background

This project arose from the concern for high failure rates observed in the MGMT 101 course. Approximately 25% of 1400 students in the yearly cohort are unsuccessful in this core BCA course. A sample of 50 MGMT 101 students who had failed the course was taken. In this sample 98% obtained a failing grade in two or more FCA subjects and less than 3% completed their undergraduate degree within 5 years. About 20% obtain an 'E' grade in each MGMT 101 cohort. Prior identification of students who had obtained an 'E' grade in the first trimester is possible because a large majority of about 85% of MGMT 101 students do not major in management and could have done other subjects in earlier trimesters. It is envisaged that a small percentage of at risk students will withdraw from the course when they are identified and asked to present themselves for a discussion on their past performance. The withdrawal of students with very low motivation, and where failure is imminent, is a positive outcome in optimising the allocation of teaching resources.

## Aim

The aim of this project is to reduce the failure rate by proactively identifying at risk students, ascertain the support they require and formulate strategies to achieve a better passing rate for this course. The project findings could also form the basis for implementing generic Learning and Teaching (L & T) strategies in support of academically challenged individuals and groups in their undergraduate studies.

## Methodology

It was made a mandatory course enrolment requirement for students who had obtained an 'E' grade in any core BCA course to present themselves for a discussion before the last day for MGMT 101 course withdrawal. The purpose of this discussion was two-fold. Firstly, it was to uncover the reason(s) for their inability to get through the earlier course(s). Secondly, the discussion provided an opportunity for at risk students to receive immediate one-to-one coaching which could then be followed through with early learning support intervention.

The project was piloted in Trimester 1 (2010) with an enrolment of 350 MGMT 101 students. In this phase 24 students presented themselves for the discussion. They were asked open questions to establish the main reasons for them obtaining a failing course grade. The reasons were analysed and clustered under broad categories. These categories formed the basis for a more structured discussion used in the main study.

The main study in Trimester 2 (2010) had an enrolment of 950 out of which 126 students presented themselves for the discussion. There were 21 students who did not present themselves as required and were withdrawn from the course. In this phase of the project the 126 students were also put through a structured process of:

- Identifying and establishing their academic goals
- Working out their present circumstances or 'current reality'
- Proposing realistic options moving forward
- Determining their immediate next steps

A further 190 MGMT 101 students who had obtained 'E' grades in non-core BCA subjects were identified but were left to carry on with the course without intervention. These students formed the control group in this project.

### Pilot phase

In the pilot phase open questions were asked to identify the main reasons for the students' inability to successfully complete a BCA core subject. The reasons given were clustered in four main reasons as illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Reasons for failing grades uncovered in pilot study (N=24)

<b>Prior education</b>	1. University requires increased independent study
	2. Decrease emphasis in sports & increased emphasis on academic work
	3. Different teaching methods (large lectures instead of smaller classes) resulted in decrease in interest in subject
	4. Effort required immediately at the start of the university term
	5. Increased workload as compare with that given in school
<b>Family reasons</b>	1. Social isolation away from family for the first time
	2. Family pressure intensifies because of financial & opportunity cost of studies
<b>Individual reasons</b>	1. Inertia from ineptitude (shyness)
	2. Pride (wanting to do it without help)
	3. Too much time spent on socialising and in sorting out relationship issues
	4. Poor choice of subject combination leading to: no linkages between subjects, poor timetabling and excessive workload
	5. Unawareness of problem until it was too late
<b>Disabling reasons</b>	1. Poor English language proficiency
	2. Excessive part-time work commitments
	3. Accommodation: search time and inappropriateness for study
	4. Do not know help was available

### Main study

The reasons for failing given by students in the pilot phase were collapsed into three main factors with a total of 10 items listed in Table 2:

**Table 2:** Reasons for failing grades used in the main study

<b>Factor 1 (F1): Prior education:</b>	1. University requires more independent study
	2. Increased academic workload
	3. Immediate effort required from start of term
<b>Factor 2 (F2): Individual reasons:</b>	4. Not wanting to seek help early
	5. Not knowing where to get help
	6. Family, socialising and relationship issues
	7. Poor decision on subject combination
<b>Factor 3 (F3): Disabling reasons:</b>	8. Poor English language proficiency
	9. Part-time work commitments
	10. Problems with accommodation

A discussion questionnaire (Appendix A) was designed and used to identify the main reasons for the students' inability to get through a core BCA subject. The 126 students who presented themselves for the discussion were also asked to rank the three most important reasons that contributed to difficulties with their studies.

The students were then taken through a process to help them identify their academic goals, their current situation, the options available and the steps they were going to take to address their difficulties. Facilitators were trained to take each student

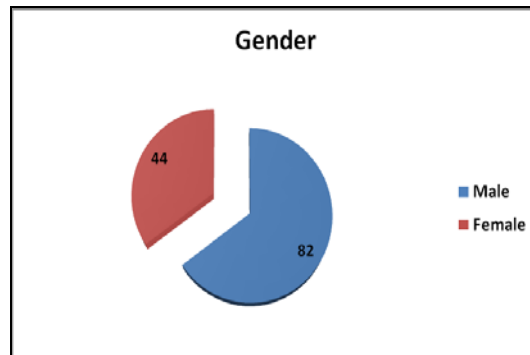
through the same process and to have the outputs recorded in the Partnership Coaching Guide form (Appendix B). The concluding section of this form required students to state what they intended to do to increase their chances of success in the MGMT 101 course. The students' tutors were informed and asked to pay attention to the learning needs of the at risk students and to 'shoulder tap' them when necessary.

Data analysis and results

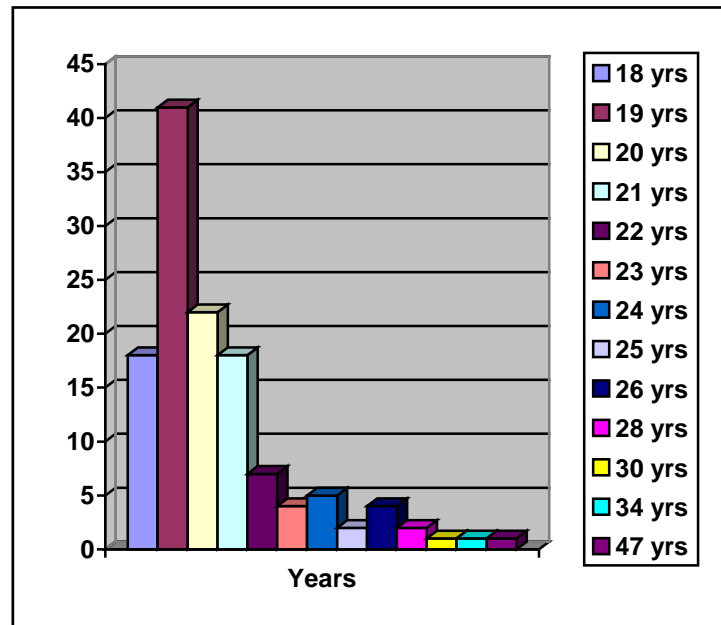
*'E' grader profile*

The gender and age distribution in Fig.1 and Fig. 2 show the number of students based on gender and age who presented themselves for the discussion. The majority of students were male (65%) and between the ages of 19-21 years (79%).

**Fig. 1 – Gender distribution (in numbers)**

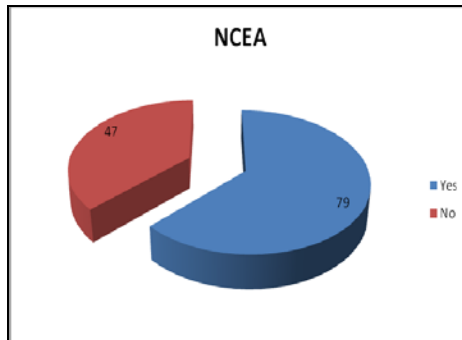


**Fig. 2 – Age distribution (in years)**



Consistent with this younger profile of students, 63% had their NCEA results on record upon entry to university. The numbers are in Fig. 3.

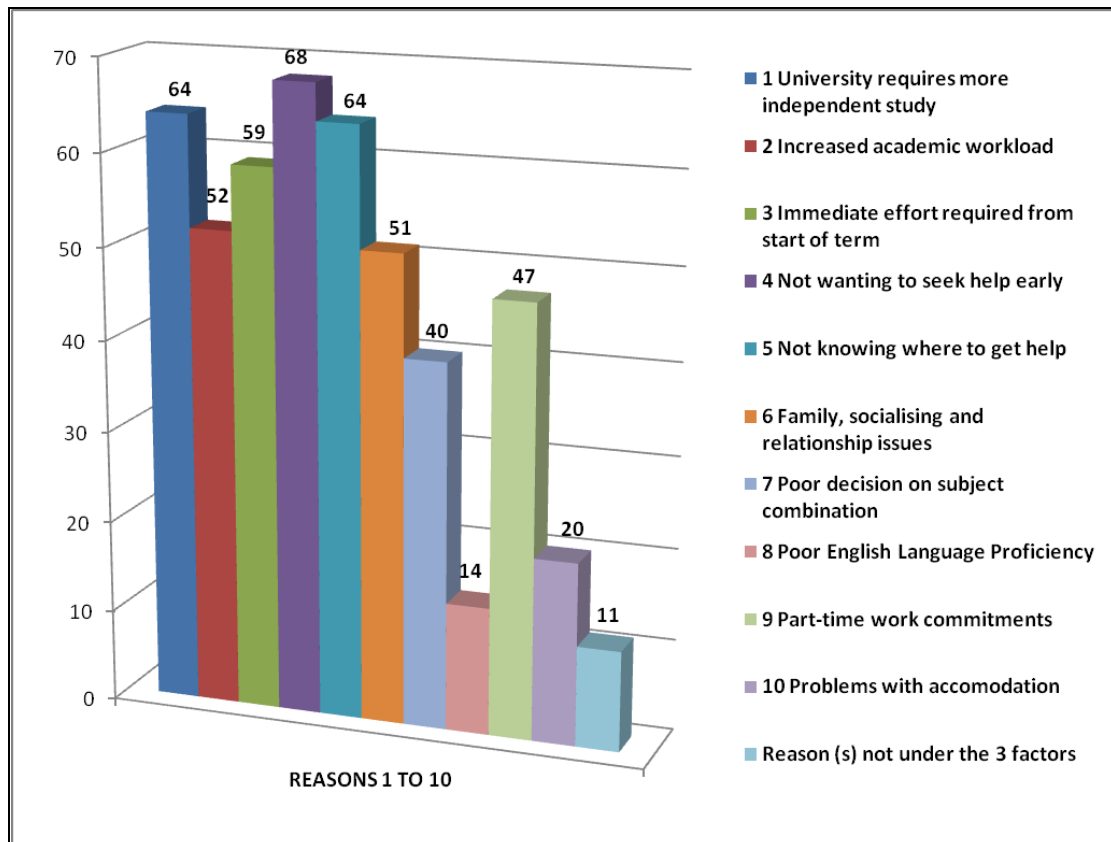
**Fig. 3 – NCEA submissions (in no. of students)**



*Reasons for failure*

Students were asked to indicate the three most important reasons for failing. Fig. 4 shows the frequency of reasons given for failing a core BCA subject. The 10 items in Fig. 4 relate to Factors F1 to F3 in Table 2. F1: Prior education (items 1 to 3), F2: Individual reasons (items 4 to 7) and F3: Disabling reasons (items 8 to 10).

**Fig. 4: Reasons given by students for failing a core BCA subject (no. of times cited)**



The three most frequent reasons given for failing a core BCA subject were:

1. Not wanting to seek help early
2. Not knowing where to get help
3. University requires more independent study

It emerged from the discussions that students coming into VUW were reluctant to seek help when they first faced difficulties. Many felt they should try their best to cope before asking for help. This behaviour was reinforced by the University's requirement for more independent study as compared with prior learning experience in secondary schools. When they realised they needed help many students reported that they did not know where to get help.

The fourth to sixth most frequent reasons given for failure were:

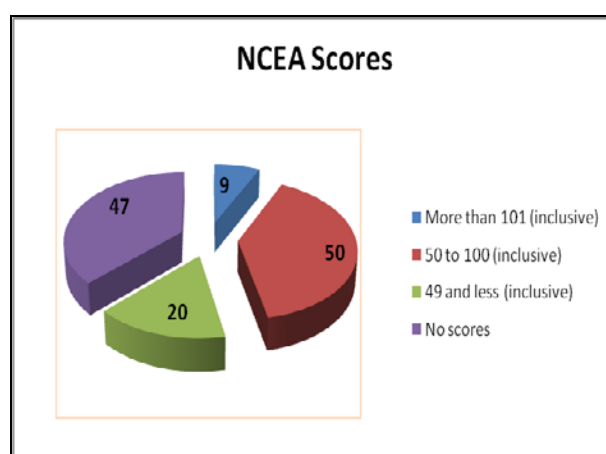
4. Immediate effort required from start of term
5. Increased academic workload
6. Family, socialising and relationship issues

Students entering the University from school reported they were unprepared for the requirement to put in effort from the start of the trimester. Prior experience in schools had been one where an increasing amount of effort was required towards the end of the year. The increased academic demands on them from day one of the trimester were unanticipated and many were unable to cope with this. The situation for some was compounded by staying away from home for the first time and having socialising and relationship issues.

The data revealed that all three reasons, under F1: Prior Education, were among the top five most frequently reasons cited for failure. The other two reasons were under F2: 'not wanting to seek help' and 'not knowing where to get help'.

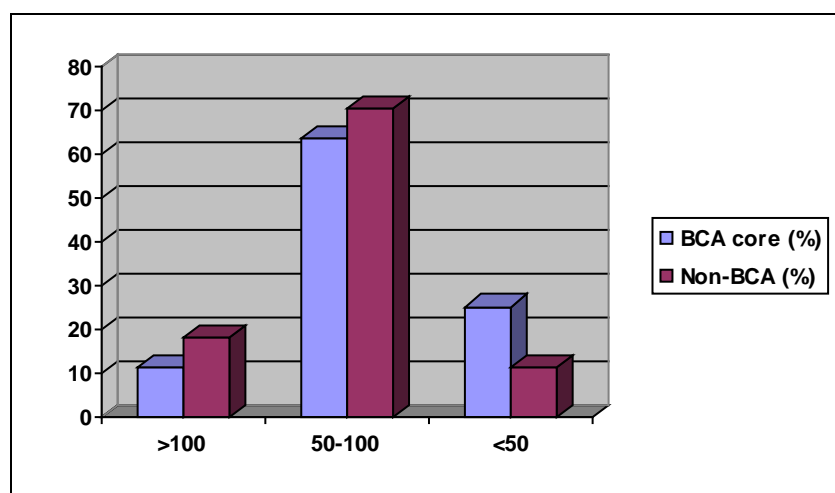
The importance placed on F1: Prior Education warranted further investigation. An analysis of the NCEA results submitted upon entry to university revealed that 89% had 100 or less level 3 credits and 25% had less than 50 level 3 credits. The breakdown is in Fig. 5.

**Fig. 5 – NCEA level 3 credits (in no. of students)**



The percentages of NCEA results show a normal distribution pattern of credits achieved by both the core and non-core 'E' graders. This is illustrated in Fig. 6.

**Fig. 6** – NCEA credits for core and non-core BCA ‘E’ graders (in percentages)



The seventh and eighth most frequent reasons for failure were:

7. Part-time work commitments
8. Poor decision on subject combination

Unfamiliarity with the demands of the different subjects resulted in poor subject choices. This was exacerbated for students who took on part-time work. Work often commenced before entry to university and there was a lack of anticipation that it will become a reason for poor academic performance.

#### *International students*

There were only 11 international students out of the 126 who participated in this project. The data did not show any predominant reason for securing an ‘E’ grade. The four reasons most frequently cited were:

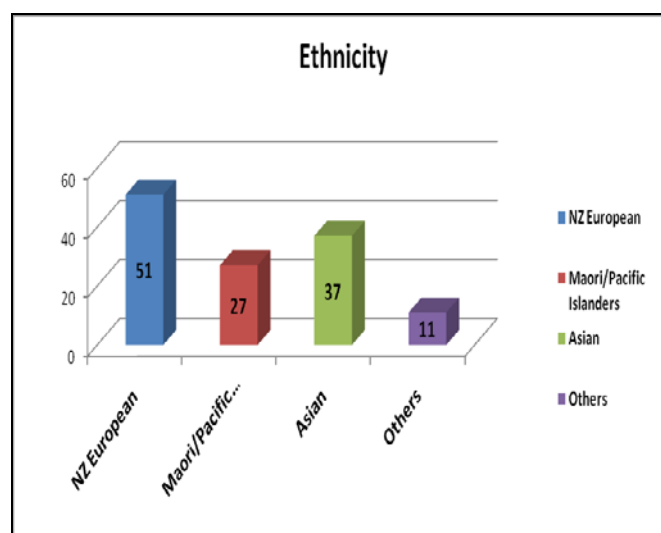
1. Immediate effort required from the start (first)
2. University requires more independent study (second equal)
3. Not wanting to seek help early (second equal)
4. Not knowing where to get help (second equal)

These reasons were amongst the most frequently cited by the larger group and did not distinguished international students.

#### *Ethnic groups*

Fig. 7 shows the ethnic distribution of ‘at risk’ students who participated in this project. NZ Europeans formed 40.5% followed by Asians (29.4%) and Maori/Pacific Islanders (21.4%). Other ethnicities accounted for 8.7% of the identified students.

**Fig. 7** – Ethnic distribution (in no. of students)



The three most frequently reported reasons given by students for failing a core BCA subject varied between ethnic groups. Table 3 shows “not wanting to seek help early” appearing in the top three list for all identified ethnic groups. While this was the most frequently given reason for the NZ European and Asian groups, “not knowing where to get help” was the most frequently cited reason for the Maori/ Pacific Island group. “Increased academic workload” was peculiar to the NZ European group and “family, socialising and relationship issues” was peculiar to the Maori/Pacific Island group. The list of reasons and the number of times they are cited by ethnic groups are in Appendix C.

**Table 3 – Top 3 frequently cited reasons for failing given by ethnic groups**

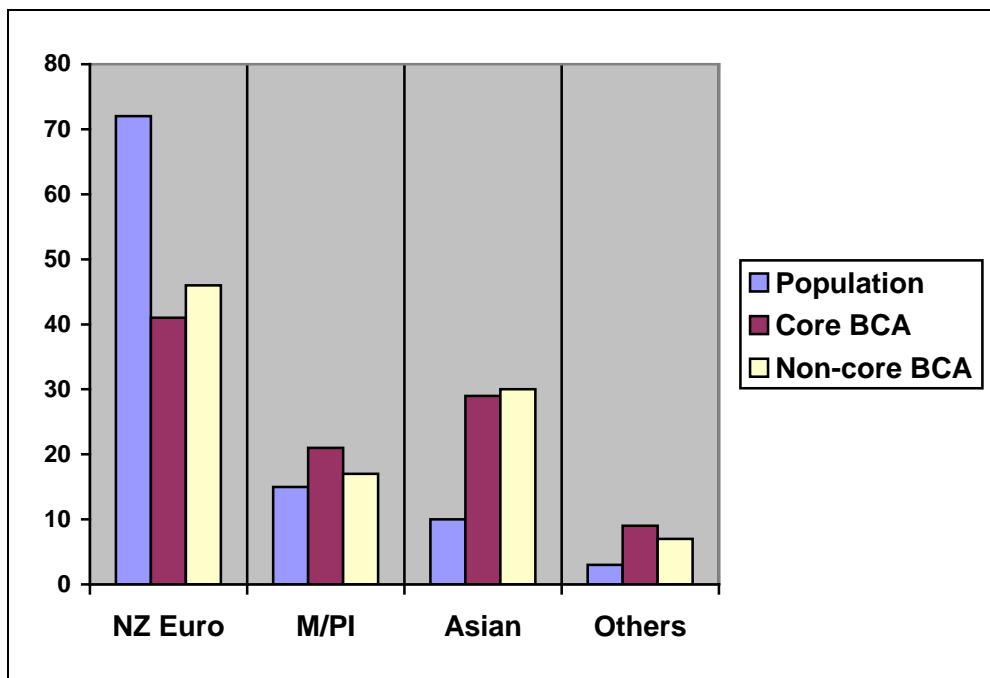
Rank	NZ European	Maori/Pacific Islander	Asian
1 <sup>st</sup> .	- Not wanting to seek help early	- Not knowing where to get help	- Not wanting to seek help early
2 <sup>nd</sup> .	- University requires more independent study - Immediate effort required from the start	- University requires more independent study	- Not knowing where to get help
3 <sup>rd</sup> .	- Increased academic workload	- Not wanting to seek help early - Family, socialising and relationship issues	- Immediate effort required from the start

The ethnic distribution for the University in 2010 was estimated at 72% for NZ Europeans, 15% for Maori/Pacific Island, 10% for Asian and 3% for others (Central Services database). In Fig. 7, a comparison of the ‘E’ graders’ ethnicity in both the core and non-core BCA subjects with that of the general student population revealed under representation of only the NZ European group. The negative variance in percentages were highest (-19.4%) for the Asian group.

**Fig. 7 – Student population and core and non-core BCA ‘E’ graders by ethnicity**



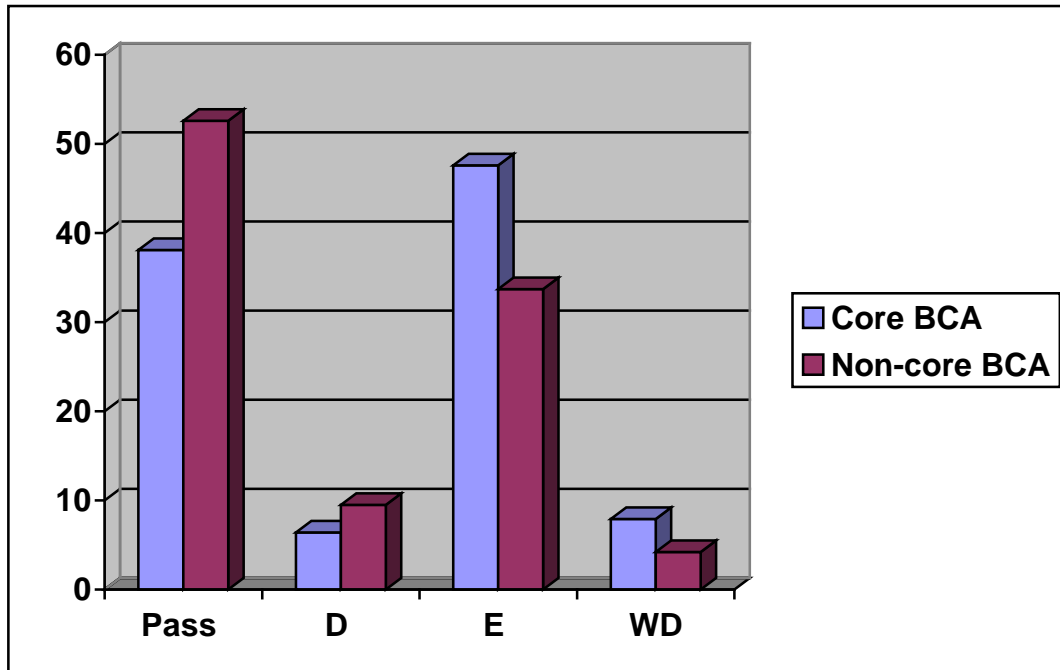
(in percentages)



#### *Course performance*

The requirement for 'E' graders in a core BCA subject to have a discussion as a condition for enrolment in the MGMT 101 course had the effect of reducing the number of students who felt insufficiently motivated to successfully complete the course. Apart from the 21 students who did not present themselves for the discussion and were consequently withdrawn, 8% of the 126 who did present themselves withdrew from the course of their own volition. The percentage of withdrawals from the control group was 4.2%. With the withdrawal of these 'at risk' students from the course the passrate achieved was 38.1% as compared with the control group's 52.6%. The D graders were proportionately lower amongst the core BCA group (6.4%) as compared with the non-core BCA's 9.5%. The 'E' grades for core BCA students were higher at 47.6% as compared with the non-BCA's 33.7%. The comparative course results are illustrated in Fig. 8.

**Fig. 8** – MGMT 101 course results for core and non-core BCA 'E' graders (as percentage of their respective groups)



#### *Conclusion and recommendations*

The results of the data analysis suggest students make a conscious choice of not seeking help early in their studies and are consequently unaware of where help is available when they realise they need it. The requirement for independent study reinforces this tendency. Although the development of an independent learning capability is paramount, more communication on the requirements of university study would ease the transition into higher learning. The expressed feeling of 'disconnection between secondary and tertiary academic requirements' is borne out by prior success in secondary school, measured in NCEA level three credits, having no apparent bearing on students obtaining an 'E' grade in FCA subjects. Students with better NCEA results would not necessarily require less help with their academic studies upon entry into university.

A proactive approach could be one of communicating and emphasising the difference between secondary and university academic requirements for 100 level courses to students who are predominantly direct entrants from secondary school. In addition, a lack of success in initial assessments could indicate a need for 'at risk' students to seek and obtain help with their studies as early as possible.

The over representation of Maori/Pacific Islander and Asian groups in the cohort of 'E' graders highlights the need for specific intervention strategies. It is surprising that in spite of learning support for Maori/Pacific Island students being ongoing and well advertised, 'not knowing where to get help' was the most frequently cited reason by this group for not doing well. Less has been done for the Asian group which now appears to have the widest 'E'-grader over representation amongst all groups.

The relatively poor performance of the core BCA 'E' graders is disappointing after they had been put through a process to encourage them to set realistic goals. Nevertheless, the pass rate would have been substantially lower had non-engaging students been allowed to remain enrolled in the course without the required pre-course discussion. The reasons for comparatively higher pass rate achieved and

lower percentage of 'E' grades obtained by the non-core BCA group could not be ascertained. In view of the results on course performance it is recommended that prior 'E' graders in the core BCA subjects demonstrate their commitment to complete a 100-level course of study by having an early discussion or assignment aimed at encouraging them to assess their commitment to successfully complete the course and, if necessary, either seek help for their studies early or withdraw from the course and enrol when they are more committed.

Student ID: \_\_\_\_\_

**Part 1: Discussion question**

**What are the reasons for not doing as well as you could?**

<b>Prior education:</b>	√ box that applies	Importance*
University requires more independent study	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased academic workload	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Immediate effort required from start of term	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other reasons:		<input type="checkbox"/>
_____		
_____		

<b>Individual factors:</b>	√ box that applies	Importance*
Not wanting to seek help early	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not knowing where to get help	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family, socialising and relationship issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poor decision on subject combination	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other reasons:		<input type="checkbox"/>
_____		
_____		

<b>Disabling factors:</b>	√ box that applies	Importance*
Poor English language proficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Part-time work commitments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Problems with accommodation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other reasons:		<input type="checkbox"/>
_____		
_____		

<b>Reason(s) not under the above 3 factors:</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
_____		
_____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**\*Rank three most important reasons that impacted your studies.**  
(1=most important, 2=second in importance and 3=third in importance)

## Part 2: Partnership Coaching Guide

### Goals

1. What are your academic goals? Learning and/or experience goals?
2. If you succeed, how would that make your life different?
3. What would you like to leave this meeting with?

### Current Reality

1. What are your assumptions?
2. What have you tried/not tried before?

### Options

1. If nothing is impossible, what might you do?
2. What else might you do?
3. Which of these options would you like to try?

### What's next?

(This section must be completed and signed off by the student)

1. What do you intend to do?
2. Within what timeframe would you like this done?

Student's name:

Signature:

