

Off to a flying start

New tertiary students have a range of support services available to ensure things go smoothly. **Denise Montgomery** finds out that a little bit of hand-holding goes a long way



There was a time when the aim of orientation week was to join the most drunken public antic (gin and Weetbix in a city park anyone?). Such antics still go on but today's students pay a small fortune for each paper taken and tertiary institutions are run as businesses – failure can be costly. Universities want students to return, not bomb out, so they put every social service in place to make sure they do.

On March 4, around 40,000 students will appear on the University of Auckland campus – about the same as the population of Wanganui.

For first-year students it can be daunting. So while university study is all

about independence and self-directed learning, the first year is treated as a transitional step.

Marie-Jo Wilson, the University of Auckland's Campus Life Student engagement manager, says students should get off on the right foot by heading to Orientation Week and being assigned a personal UniGuide.

UniGuides are more senior students who look after newbies for the first semester, or longer if required. In 2012 more than 350 UniGuides were mentors for more than 2300 new students.

"UniGuides can do things as simple as arranging people who don't know anyone to meet before the orientation

concert on the Friday so they can all go together," says Wilson.

"It's peer-led so students aren't embarrassed to admit things like they've forgotten where the library is."

Auckland University arts students can also become part of the First Year Experience (FYE) programme, and be assigned a mentor.

Priya Sharma, 19, began a BA/LLB in 2012. The former Botany Downs College student joined FYE at Orientation and was taken in a group around the city campus, one of the four main campuses.

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the little things that I had no clue about when it came to being a student here."

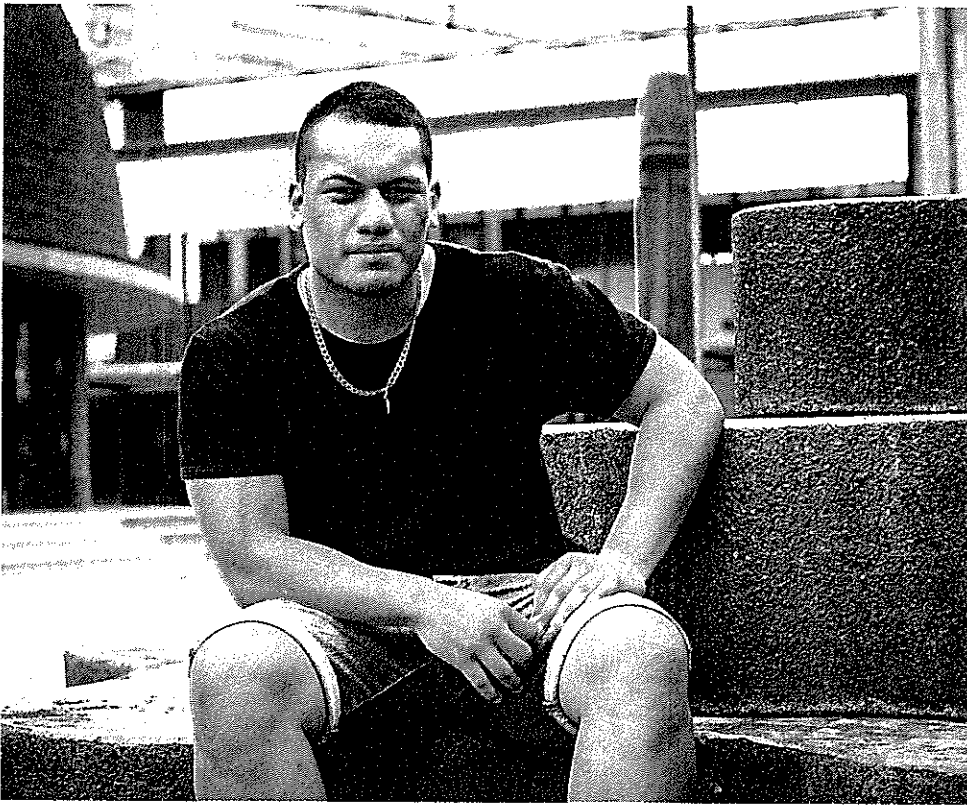
Sharma used her FYE mentor for much more than directions.

"I was fortunate to be allocated a fourth-year law student and I was the most annoying first year student! I sent him multiple questions every week even up to the end of year. I'm not that fluent with the website, I found it easier to have a real person."

This year she will repay the university by becoming a mentor herself.

CAROL CAMERON runs the FYE programme.

"We bring together support staff



Above: Taniela Napa'a is the first in his Tongan family to attend university. He advises all Maori and Pasifika students to take advantage of the Tuakana programme at Auckland University.

Left: Priya Sharma, a second year arts student at the University of Auckland made full use of her student mentor last year. This year she will be a mentor herself. Pics Ted Baghurst.

activities then you gain persistence and resilience and are more likely to do well academically.

"I mean really engage; make yourself known to your lecturer in discussions, join in, attend events, access the resources. You are paying to be here; take advantage of it."

Brittnee O'Brien, 23, is a sociology and criminology student and UniGuide leader.

"Students have a lot of questions in the first fortnight and you get a few more emails as assessments are due. They have similar concerns, like 'how am I meant to write all these essays that are all due at the same time'. I bring them together and say 'come on, we'll have a coffee and a chat about it'.

Being from Thames, O'Brien knows what it's like to arrive in a big city not knowing anyone. She lives in Grafton hostel, one of a number of accommodation halls Auckland University runs. Around 65 per cent of the university's 2000 beds are for first years. Student residential advisors (RAs) are on each floor – one for every 35 first-years.

Micheal Rengers looks after Auckland Uni's accommodation. His advice is to get involved early with hostel life.

"You can always pull back, but it's much harder to engage 6 or 7 weeks into the semester. The advantage of being new is that everybody around you is new."

For example, O'Rorke [Hall, in Wakefield St] has a Maori study group that's gone on for four years and is extremely popular. People ask to live in

O'Rorke because of it," says Rengers.

Like Massey and AUT, there's support for Maori and Pasifika students.

At Auckland Uni they are mentored through the Tuakana programme.

Taniela Napa'a is the first in his Tongan family to attend university. The 18 year old former Mt Albert Grammar student knew just a few people when he started in 2012, and had a lot to prove in his first year. He needed a B average in his science papers to get into Mechanical Engineering this year.

"Tuakana helped me pick relevant subjects, and helped me pass assignments and exams through extra tutorials and group sessions."

"The tutorial room is next to the Tuakana common room where you can hang out and make new friends. So I'd be back and forth between those rooms. If I needed a break I'd head off to the common room."

His biggest challenge was independent learning.

"Just organising my tuts and timetable, working out which are compulsory and others that are open. Tuakana helps with questions you may not have been comfortable asking in your regular tutorial.

"What I found was even with just a small question you receive so much back."

He says Pasifika students often have more family, church and sports demands. He managed it – Napa'a got the average he needed and will begin his four-year engineering degree this year.

He has advice. "I did well in my first semester and in the second I thought 'well that was easy I'll just lay back'. But I lay back for three weeks and I found myself falling behind so I headed back to Tuakana to catch up and stayed the whole year. I felt like I belonged there.

"I encouraged lots of people to come to the Tuakana room. Some didn't... I don't think they realised what it could offer."

Tuakana caters for Maori (7-8 per cent of Auckland University's roll) and Pasifika (9 per cent). Co-ordinator Catherine Dunphy says the aim is to improve student completion rates, which have been 47 per cent over the past few years. The key to that often comes from

"I thought because I'm from Auckland I know my way around the city and the university, I'd be fine. But it's not that; it's the little things that I had no clue about when it came to being a student here." - Priya Sharma, Auckland University student.

success in the first year.

Mentors are everywhere from the library to the health centre, across many faculties including science, engineering, arts and business.

"Whenever a student enters the University of Auckland they will get top notch advice support and service from Tuakana," says Dunphy, including a dedicated Maori and Pacific orientation day on February 25th.

Time management is a stumbling block for many first-years, especially mature students who may be juggling families.

"The outcome for your family, and community, is massive once you get your degree... so that's your goal," says Dunphy. "You're only here for a short time and we want to help you complete it in as short as possible so it lessens the financial burden."

The best tip she'd give is to go to everything.

"Be brave, open your mouth and talk to people. You do have to step outside your comfort zone because it's a big environment, but everybody else is feeling the same, not just you. Often the people you meet in that first six weeks will be your friends for life."

from Student Learning and the Library, along with tutors, the course co-ordinator, Tuakana, and FYE mentors – all in one easy-to-access location," says Cameron. "We offer help with understanding the question, finding and evaluating sources, referencing, essay structure, and incorporating course content."

It's already proving itself, with targeted learning sessions improving essay quality and submission rates.

FYE also encourages social connection.

"First years need to 'get amongst it'," says Cameron. "Research shows if you are engaged in out-of-classroom social

► AT AUT Alexx Hayward is a First Year Experience guide, while doing her bachelor of business.

"One of the most common issues is motivation... to get up and go to class or to finish assignments on time," she says. "Students also get worried in the first few weeks if they don't pass their first test or assignment. They can lose motivation so our job is to call them and ask if they are having any issues so they may be referred on to the student advisors."

She says students shouldn't work too many hours outside of university if they can help it.

"I would say no more than 20 hours work if you have 12 hours of classes."

If money is problematic, all tertiary institutions have financial advisors.

Hayward's advice is to make the most of all services AUT offers.

"At orientation, notice everything. After academic orientation you will get a student mentor and their phone number."

That mentor shows first-years around, explains how academic workshops and the library run, how to reference, or use AUTonline.

AUT's Academic Orientation for new students is on February 25, and the student association's O Week Festival runs from March 4-15 – two distinct events.

Hayward, 20, lives in student accommodation and undertook a study that showed students who live onsite often do better.

"You get to know more students, you have people to study with and help you out with any issues rather than go home and live with the family, especially if your parents haven't been to university," she says. "There might also be other distractions at home."



CAROL CAMERON runs the FYE programme at Auckland University and advises new students to join in, attend events, access the resources, "You are paying to be here; take advantage of it."

ANDREA DAVIES, campus registrar at Massey University, Albany, says if all students took advantage of Massey's Flying Start programme, they would be better off.

Massey Albany's orientation week starts February 18, and the two Flying Start sessions, on Monday morning and Tuesday afternoon, are well attended but not compulsory.

"Flying Start introduces first year students and prepares them for academic writing, what to expect from lectures, what tutorials are all about, speed reading, essay and report writing, and importantly about referencing.

"The feedback we get from students who go is that it's absolutely invaluable.

Flying Start gives them a good overview of academic writing as well as being a good opportunity to meet other people in the first week."

UniGuides, second and third years, welcome newbies at the official welcome on Tuesday February 19 and all new students are introduced to their colleges and programme leaders. Each UniGuide has around 20-30 students who they will hand out contact cards, and build a relationship with.

There are library tours, computer lab inductions and special evenings for Maori and Pasifika students to meet their support groups, including the Maori Student Association, Te Waka o Ngā ākonga Māori.

Top 10 tips for first years

- 1 Attend Orientation week – it's the best way to prepare for your first year.
- 2 Attend any Orientation workshops. You may think you know how to use a library but a modern library is more than taking out books. The librarians will stun you with their knowledge.
- 3 Be brave. Step outside your comfort zone and make social connections.
- 4 Look for groups who can assist you. Maori and Pasifika groups, international students groups, gay groups.
- 5 Join a club... or create one. Clubs are strong at Auckland, Massey and AUT and there are annual awards for best clubs. The range is enormous – at Auckland Uni there's even a Meat Eater's club, where students pay \$20 a year to meet and eat meat once a week.
- 6 Apply early for hostel accommodation. Pay close attention to the application dates (more than a year from when you plan to attend).
- 7 Use advisors, UniGuides, student services and First Year Experience mentors. They are there to help you.
- 8 If you are falling behind, contact your tutor or advisor well before the assignment due date. Get tips from a mentor or student services about how to manage your time. There's nothing wrong with asking for help.
- 9 Use Targeted Learning Sessions, Tuakana workshops, the Flying Start programme.
- 10 If possible, try not to take on too many paid work hours. It may not be worth the pressure you find yourself under trying to complete your coursework.