Journey Explorations: Understanding the Significance of Outdoor Experiences in a University Setting

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Abstract

Outdoor major students within the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) complete a five-day bush-walking journey as a compulsory aspect of their year two course. This journey provides an opportunity to develop knowledge by learning through experience. Thus, it is crucial they are designed and delivered in a way that provides students with a meaningful experience that relates to both course and graduate outcomes. Little is known about the lived experiences of these outdoor education students, how they perceive their journeys, nor what they gain and/or lose. The purpose of this study was therefore to obtain an understanding of how the outdoor major students perceive one of their journeys (with particular focus on relationships with self, others and environment), and to explore whether recommendations/modifications should be made to the current course design and/or delivery. A five-day bush-walking journey in the Kaimanawa Ranges (North Island of New Zealand) was examined by conducting a thematic document analysis on student journals and summative assessments (n = 28). The findings show that the journey had significant impact on students' perceptions of themselves, others and the environment. Perceptions of self were influenced by *developing perseverance leading to resilience*, *coping with new emotions, gaining an assurance of self* and *identifying strengths and weaknesses*. The key themes/sub-themes that influenced perceptions of others were *bonding over hardship, formation of a temporary community* and *the power of conversation*. Lastly, the key themes/sub-themes that emerged within the 'environment' category *were presence of nature, engaging the senses, obtaining new knowledge* and *escape from reality*. Whilst direct feedback about the course itself was limited, inferences were made surrounding the achievement of learning outcomes. Recommendations involving the concepts of 'down-time', cultural considerations and sustainable behaviours were proposed. The significance of this research to the outdoor education industry is that it accords delicate insight into a crucial period in potential future outdoor educator's lives that may have significant influence on relationships with self, others and the environment.

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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

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Signature:

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Chapter One: Introduction

Perhaps the best place to start the conversation about outdoor education in Aotearoa New Zealand is to talk about the nation's deep, historical, affinity to the outdoors. For many Kiwis, some of their fondest memories involve some form of learning in the outdoors; beach-going, family camping trips, fishing with friends, school trips, lakeside barbeques, trail walking. National discourses present Aotearoa as a rugged place for adventure, whilst being a clean, green and pristine environment for kiwis to connect with and be custodians of 'nature' (Wheaton et al., 2017). Queenstown, for example, has been labelled the 'adventure capital of the world' (Cater, 2006). National figures such as Sir Edmund Hillary and Sir Peter Blake have left legacies within the outdoor sphere whose impact and reach is immeasurable. Outdoor survivalist, Bear Grills, once said "I always considered New Zealand as the playground of the world..." (Stuff, 2011). Central to this deep affinity to the outdoors is the indigenous knowledge and culture that underpin Aotearoa New Zealand. Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa, derive a deep sense of cultural belonging and identity from feeling connected to their whenua (land) (Smith, 2004). As such, connections to nature and the outdoors are widely embedded throughout the roots of Māori people, with the natural environment being integral to their well-being (Durie, 1985; Selby et al., 2010). Māori see themselves as kaitiaki (guardians) of our land, and tangata whenua (people of the land) (Patterson, 2000).

In essence, it could be argued that the natural world is a part of Aotearoa's DNA (or whakapapa). A building block to this DNA that exemplifies the significance of the outdoors within New Zealand, is its position within the educational curriculum, or 'outdoor education'. Outdoor education has been a part of New Zealand schooling since 1849 (Boyes, 2012), and was formally identified in 1999 when the Ministry of Education confirmed its place in the Health and Physical Education department of the New Zealand curriculum (Zink & Boyes, 2006). Since 1999, outdoor education has adapted and shifted into various forms; activity-based, skills and competency focused, place-based, adventure therapy and dominant risk discourses (Cosgriff, 2008; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). As Potter et al. (2012) explain, this discourse is similar within tertiary education. Outdoor education research is relatively new when compared with other academic subjects (Potter et al., 2012). Historically, outdoor educators and practitioners gained knowledge and skill from experience working within schools and at outdoor learning/pursuit centres (Humberstone & Brown, 2006). Although there is now a wide range of programmes that aspiring outdoor educators can take (such as NZOIA courses, poly-tech programmes, bachelor degrees and professional development courses), the only consistency within these tertiary programmes is 'change' (Potter et al., 2012). Change in aspects such as programme content, how and where it's delivered, risk

management, philosophies, teaching capacity, and its depth and type of programme (Potter et al., 2012; Allison & Telford 2005). Whilst change is stimulating, important for programme development and progression, and exciting for outdoor professionals (Potter et al., 2012), how universities respond to such change (in terms of programme design, societal expectations and student experience) is crucial as to whether the change is relevant and impactful. This leads us to the setting of this study, a tertiary programme within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, where change is evident and impact is unknown.

AUT Bachelor of Sport and Recreation

Auckland University of Technology's (AUT) Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) is one pathway within New Zealand where students can obtain a degree specializing in outdoor education. The BSR's outdoor major is a development of an older outdoor education diploma. Since the transition from a diploma to a bachelor's degree, the way the course is structured and taught has drastically changed. Currently, the outdoor major is structured so that students enter the major following one year of compulsory papers that are very theory-heavy (although all students undertake one, three-day outdoor experience). The year two-three outline involves a mix of both core papers, outdoor specific papers and outdoor journeys/field trips. The outdoor specific papers involve learning about different types of natural environments, specifically lakes, rivers, islands, oceans, mountains and bush, as well as outdoor education histories, pedagogies and philosophies. As such, it is evident that students must engage in frequent theory work, which is a commonality in current outdoor education university programmes (in comparison to polytech/instructor pathways) (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). In contrast, the students enrolled in AUT's original diploma engaged in frequent practical outdoor experiences as the course encompassed a practice-heavy approach (the overall goal was to produce highly skilled outdoor instructors). Consequently, the transition from a diploma to a bachelor's degree, and the associated outcomes, saw a shift in the type of students the course attracts. AUT academic staff have since observed a decline in the experience level of students who complete the BSR outdoor journeys. This may be due to the fact that students do not enrol in the BSR to purely become outdoor instructors, and so therefore may view the journeys as 'add-ons' or a 'backdrop' to their learning. Herein lays the problem; little is known about the lived experiences of these outdoor major students, how they perceive the outdoor journeys, nor what they gain or lose from such experiences.

Defining the issue

As stated above, academic staff at AUT have observed a decline in the experience level of students who are undertaking the BSR outdoor major. As such, there is a disconnect

between the students entry experience and the type of experience offered. As Wattchow and Brown (2011) state, tertiary students may encounter minimal exposure to outdoor education practice throughout their schooling due to the programmes academic focus. As such, it is very possible for these students to be in the process of developing the expertise required to become an effective outdoor educator whilst simultaneously learning about outdoor education for the first time (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). In addition, these BSR students have limited timeframes and opportunities to develop experiential knowledge and obtain meaningful outdoor experiences, and often lack the equipment and expertise to consolidate skills in their own time. The major's outdoor journeys are an important aspect of the course as they provide rich experiences where students have the opportunity to develop knowledge by learning through experience. As such, it is crucial to understand how students perceive their outdoor journey and how they feel they develop (or otherwise) following such experiences. It is crucial that journeys are developed and designed in a way that provides students with a meaningful experience that relates to both course learning outcomes and graduate outcomes. This is important because of the well-studied personal and educational benefits that outdoor learning provide, as will be discussed in more depth within the literature review.

Obtaining an understanding of the lived experiences of students will aid in improving the experiences of future students. Nonetheless, being a university, it is also important that we constantly reflect on the courses we offer. How students perceive their learnings influences what they make of their university experience (Brownlee et al., 2009). With AUT's mission being "great graduates", and vision being to "create exceptional learning experiences" (AUT, n.d.), we believe that an appropriate and meaningful student experience is more likely to result in an enhanced achievement of the BSR graduate capabilities (leaders of self and others, effective communicators, cognisant of Māori knowledge, adaptive and innovative, critical thinkers, research literate, professional and ethical global citizens, knowledgeable in the field of sport and recreation), whilst positively contributing to the outdoor industry. How we construct outdoor experiences helps to not only shape behaviours and attitudes towards the natural world, which is poignant given the environmental and climate crisis (Brown, 2012), but also helps to retain students in the industry and beyond.

In conjunction with the need to reach a deeper understanding of how students perceive their outdoor experience, there is also a need to focus on these understandings in relation to 'self', 'others' and 'environment'. As will be discussed within the literature review, self, others and environment are important factors within the outdoor experience. Reaching a deeper understanding of these factors directly relates to the students development within the outdoor major, as multiple papers are structured within these three elements. In order to

maximize this development during these limited outdoor experiences, it's important to understand how the students themselves perceive such experiences to figure out if there are reoccurring themes within the subjective student experience. As such, the focus of inquiry, research question and research aims are outlined below;

Focus of Inquiry

The current study aims to investigate how students perceive a five-day bush-walking experience in terms of how they feel the journey impacts their relationships with themselves, others and the environment. This is so that, if necessary, recommendations can be made for future practice.

Research question;

How do Auckland University of Technology Outdoor Major students perceive a five day outdoor education experience and what are the impacts of these perceptions on their relationships with self, others and the environment?

Research aims;

a) To understand student experiences of an outdoor journey in relation to self, others and the environment.
b) To explore whether recommendations/modifications should be made to this outdoor course based on these reflections.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

What is outdoor education?

Outdoor education has been defined in numerous ways throughout its history. Since outdoor education encompasses different practices, programmes and perspectives all over the world, there have been many attempts to answer the question 'what is outdoor education?'. A common definition, is that of Priest (1986). Priest (1986) incorporates 6 focal points into his definition, stating that outdoor education is an experiential method for learning, primarily situated in the outdoors, is interdisciplinary and centred around relationships involving people and the natural world. Priest (1986) goes on to describe two branches of outdoor education; the first, adventure education relating to interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships; the second, environmental education relating to ecosystemic and ekistics relationships. Perhaps Priest's attempt to encapsulate both the aims and relationships, as well as the pedagogies of outdoor education, is the reason as to why his definition is so wide spread. However, as Quay and Seamen (2013) point out, Priests 'branches' present a divide between environmental relations and human relations, as well as between adventure relations and environmental relations. The implications of which presents 'outdoor education' as an umbrella term within a hierarchy where environmental education is separate and concerned with people and subject matter (knowledge/attitudes towards nature), and adventure education is separate and concerned with interpersonal relations. As such, Priests definition *"cemented method and subject matter as distinct categories"* (Quay & Seamen, 2013, p. 10). Within this realm, is the conversation about whether outdoor education is a method for learning, or a subject matter of its own.

The debate over whether outdoor education is a medium for learning or a standalone discipline has dated back half a century (Quay & Seaman, 2013). Sharp (1943) explains how incorporating the outdoors in the schooling system would improve the curriculum by providing a context for advanced learning that would not otherwise occur within the classroom. Smith (1995, as cited in Hammerman, 1980) stated that outdoor education is *"a means of curriculum extension and enrichment through outdoor experiences"* (p. 33). These perspectives suggest that outdoor education is merely a medium for learning and a context for curriculum enhancement. On the contrary, Donaldson and Donaldson (1958) defined outdoor education as "*education in, about and for the outdoors"* (p. 17), a phrase which became widely adopted within the literature; critiqued by some and favoured by others. Nevertheless, this definition suggests that perhaps outdoor education is a discipline of its own. More recent scholars, such as Boyes (2012), Dyment et al. (2018) and Potter and Dyment (2016), have

continued this medium verse discipline debate, with others such as Wattchow and Brown (2011) questioning whether the endeavour to find a universal understanding of outdoor education is a futile one. The variation in definitions and understandings, and indeed practice, emphasises the extremely subjective and contextual nature of the apparently broad term, 'outdoor education'. The commonality between definitions, however, is that 'outdoor education' lays within an outdoor setting. For the purposes of this study, there is no need to adopt a past definition nor create a new one, but rather acknowledge that the study is situated within a specific context and form of outdoor education (university outdoor education degree) that holds its own unique perspectives and practices.

The Benefits

The benefits of outdoor education are diverse and have been well explored within the literature. To very broadly decipher, the benefits have typically involved personal growth (Hattie et al., 1997; Britton et al., 2018; Richmond et al., 2018; Beames et al., 2020), enhanced social development (Hattie et al., 1997; Keeble, 2021; Richmond et al., 2018), environmental connection and awareness (Braun & Dierkes, 2017; Braun et al., 2018; Sandell & Ohman, 2013), and more recently, improved knowledge of and connection to culture and local histories (Sabet, 2018; Wheaton et al., 2020; Wheaton et al., 2021).

Personal and Social Development

Personal and social development have long been considered a key result of outdoor education within the literature (Britton et al., 2018; Brookes, 2003; Hattie et al., 1997; Richmond et al., 2018; Sibthorpe & Jostad, 2014; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Personal development, or as Brookes (2003) asserts 'character building', and social development, remain foundational to outdoor education theory, practice and promotion (Brookes, 2003). Largely determined by empirical evidence, self-confidence, self-awareness, perseverance (resilience), self-leadership and realization of potential have been noted by various authors as being fundamental aspects of the personal benefits that are derived from outdoor experiences (e.g. Hattie et al., 1997; Britton et al., 2018). Similarly, social skills, belonging, community, group cohesion, social connectedness and community are common social benefits explored by researchers (Hattie et al., 1997; Keeble, 2021; Richmond et al., 2018). Richmond et al. (2018) in particular, demonstrates how enhanced social connectedness was the main outcome of a particular outdoor education programme. For these students, the outdoor experience facilitated social bonding, where shared challenge, shared sense of belonging and being away from home were key influencers. Futhermore, Sibthorpe and Jostad

(2014) introduced their study by assuming a critical aspect of outdoor (adventure) education programmes is the socially constructed group that is formed by participants. The authors then went on to create a social system model that allows researchers and practitioners to understand the processes that underpin this participation motivator (Sibthorpe & Jostad, 2014). This research supports Wattchow and Brown's (2011) claim that social development (in combination with personal growth), continue to dominant outdoor education as motivation for participation (and advocacy), and as a fundamental component of practice.

More recently, Beames et al. (2020) analysed the long-term impacts of an outdoor education programme and concluded to find three dominant themes; first, students felt a powerful and enduring shift in personal and social growth; second, students became accustomed to giving things a go; third, enhanced personal confidence and resilience. All three themes, were found to be transferable; they could be used when facing new challenges beyond the context of the programme. However, this assumption that personal/social benefits are able to be obtained during an outdoor experience and then transferred to other settings, has been critiqued by several authors (Brookes, 2003; Brown, 2009; Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

In addition, as found with all forms of exercise, outdoor education possesses a large range of physical health benefits. Twohig-Bennett and Jones (2018) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis analysing greenspace exposure with health outcomes. The authors found that increased greenspace exposure is associated with decreased heart rate, diastolic blood pressure, salivary cortisol, cholesterol, risk of preterm birth, type II diabetes and mortality as well as an increase in self-reported health. Similarly, a systematic review conducted by Britton et al. (2018) found that exposure to blue spaces (such as waterways, oceans, rivers, lakes) resulted in an array of health benefits, especially for mental health, psycho-social well-being and physiological well-being.

Environmental connection

While authors such as Hattie et al. (1997) focus primarily on personal and social development, there are also well-established environmental benefits of outdoor education. The most significant benefit being the fostering or re-establishment of connections to nature, which, as research shows, has the potential to encourage engagement in positive environmental behaviours (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Braun & Dierkes, 2017; Sandell & Ohman, 2013). For instance, Palmer and Suggate (1996) found that participating in outdoor activities through all ages of life was the most important and influential factor in establishing positive attitudes towards the environment; 'education' being the second. Similarly, Kals et al. (1999)

looked at the emotional aspects of environmental behaviour and found that amongst other factors, positive past and present experiences with the outdoors are strong predictors of environmentally friendly behaviour. These findings are supported by more recent studies such as that of, Braun et al. (2018) who found that early-life participation in a range of outdoor activities significantly influenced one's environmental beliefs, values and attachment to places. This finding, that childhood experiences have significant influence over one's environmental beliefs and attitudes, has become well established in the explorations of the relationships between outdoor education and environmental behaviours (e.g., Braun & Dierkes, 2017; Chawla, 2006; Ewert et al., 2005).

Sandell and Ohman (2013) developed a model that helps explain the connection between outdoor education and environmental concern. By taking into account the subtleties of outdoor education and environmental concern, as well as landscapes approaches (the what and why of participation), the authors found five main environmental education paths for outdoor recreation. Path 1 looks at how outdoor contexts are used as a basis for discussion/experiences about the relations between people and nature (referred to as a 'bridge'). Path 2 involves how passive adaption to the landscape (passively contemplating, studying and coping with the landscape's elements) can result in a feeling of wanting to protect animals, plants and places from human impact. Path 3 relates to an activity that is subordinate to the landscape (at the same time as one utilises/changes said landscape – e.g., fishing) and its potential to foster a nature conservatory perspective. Path 4 focuses on activities that are in line with the intrinsic values of outdoor experiences, which can foster a more radical environmental perspective, involving both environmental politics and sustainable development issues. Lastly, path 5 is concerned with transforming the motives of outdoor education from participating as a means for different purposes, to participating for the intrinsic values the experience offers (which would transition back into path 4). Whilst taking into account subjective connections to nature and the importance of clarity for practice, this study provides some explanation for the interconnection between outdoor education and environmental concern.

To add to this, Braun and Dierkes (2017) acknowledged these subjective connections and found that how outdoor education programmes are designed (duration and intensity) can influence how one develops (or otherwise) a connection to nature. Here, the authors concluded that the longer and more intense the programme was, the deeper the connection formed. In the following year, Braun et al. (2018) looked at the environmental benefits (attitudes, knowledge, and behaviour) of an outdoor education programme, focusing on demographic variation. Although outdoor education was positively related to all measures of environmental

connection, there was variation in geographical location, age, gender and rural/urban living. Geographical location and rural/urban difference were the most significant factors concerning shifts in environmental behaviours, amplifying how determinants (social, economic, natural, historical) can be drivers for individual/community attitudes and behaviours. The above studies emphasize that the inter-connections between participation in outdoor education and pro-environmental attitudes/behaviours are multifaceted and vary depending on context, geographical location and programme design.

Whilst it is evident that developing a connection to nature is beneficial for the health of our planet, it also presents its own benefits to us as people. Pritchard et al. (2020) explored these benefits, focusing on eudemonic well-being. When participants felt more connected to nature, there were developments in personal growth, self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose in life/meaning, positive relations with others and environmental mastery. This could be one of the ways by which the previously discussed benefits to personal and social developments occur. Furthermore, a study by Capaldi et al. (2014) found that those who are more connected to nature tend to experience more feelings of happiness (such as vitality, positive affect and life satisfaction) than those less connected to nature. Berman et al. (2008, 2012) and White et al. (2013) came to similar conclusions in their studies, focusing on green urban areas, cognitive functioning, well-being and mental health/illness. Bratman et al. (2019) has gone as far to say that nature experience is a determinant of mental health.

Cultural and local histories

In recent literature, there has been a shift away from outdoor experiences that predominantly focus on personal and social development, towards ones that include cultural and local histories (e.g., Bell et al., 2015; Bryce et al., 2016; Severinsen & Reweti, 2021; Wheaton et al., 2019; Wheaton et al., 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Wheaton et al. (2019) examined a Māori worldview within the context of costal blue spaces. The authors highlight how the way in which Māori experience nature significantly differs from western perspectives. They explain that Māori have a strong connection to the natural environment, as it is central to their identity, culture, tradition and well-being. Since the natural world is integral to their worldview (Te Ao Māori), Māori derive deeply spiritual and cultural benefits from partaking in outdoor activities. Severinsen and Reweti (2021) explored one of these activities, waka ama. Waka ama is an integral part of Māori people as it is enriched in the history and traditions of their ancestors. The authors found that as a result of connecting to the natural world through waka ama, participants strengthened their spiritual connection to their ancestors and tradition whilst grounding cultural identity. They also felt a sense of place

in their community as well as enhancing all four dimensions of hauroa (spiritual, physical, social and mental/emotional). These studies are supported by Sabet's (2018) discussion about recent trends in outdoor education practice, where he states that incorporating indigenous knowledge is becoming increasingly prominent.

There is now a consensus that culture and ethnicity can have an influence on how people conceptualize their outdoor experiences and the differences in what benefits are obtained and to what intensity. It's important to comment on the fact that these benefits are not only important for indigenous populations, but for everyone (Wheaton et al., 2021). Eurocentric notions of how nature relates to humans only represent dominant western perspectives. This becomes problematic when research informs practice recommendations as they are only representative of one particular world view and not of others. In addition, as Wheaton et al. (2021) explain, through the use of indigenous knowledge systems, we are able to locate long-term sustainable use of natural resources. This in itself has significant implications for both individuals and society, which is poignant in the current global climate crisis.

One of the ways outdoor education can provide cultural and local benefits is through place-based pedagogy. Despite being previously overlooked within the early literature, there is now a growing body of research that recognizes the role that 'place' has on influencing learning in outdoor education (e.g., Brown, 2008, 2012; Deringer, 2017; Tan & Atencio, 2016; Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Zink, 2005, 2011). The concept of 'place' is not restricted to a particular geographical location, but rather locations of lived experiences and meaning. Within this realm, integration of elements of both nature and culture create a unique 'place-footprint' where said footprint has the potential to influence what is taught, what is learnt and all the processes that occur in between (Brown, 2012; Relph, 1976; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). As Wattchow and Brown (2011) conclude, *"becoming and being place responsive offers opportunities to enrich the lives of our students, our communities and our places"* (p. 400). It enhances wellbeing through fostering sources of identity (both individual and communal) and belonging (through connecting to locale) whilst developing deep place-responsive connections and motivation to act sustainability for the natural world (Bates et al., 2019). As Brown's (2012) study points out, these wellbeing enhancements and actions to act sustainably can be fostered through discovering/appreciating new places in local environments, opportunities afforded by connections and familiarity, and in context story telling (about the locale). This discussion is further supported by Sabet (2018), where he states that a place-based education is a current trend in outdoor education.

The literature explored above demonstrates that outdoor education is overwhelmingly beneficial for students in numerous ways. This provides a strong case for the inclusion of outdoor experiences within the BSR, particularly for outdoor major students. As such, the literature suggests that there is an expectation to encounter an improvement in areas such as self-esteem, social and communication skills, self-confidence, one's connection to the natural world and possibly cultural and place-based benefits. Whilst it's easy to present these benefits in a way that seems promising for any individual partaking in outdoor education, it should not be looked over that they may not be felt by all. Lived experiences are subjective and whilst this literature presents commonality, we should not part from the fact the outdoor experience is different for each individual.

Self, Others, and Environment

As demonstrated, outdoor education literature has focussed on personal and social development as well as environmental connection (i.e., self, others and environment). The terms 'self', 'others' and 'environment' have been used by educators to categorise and describe the aims of outdoor education for some time (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The notion that participants will learn something worthwhile about themselves, their relationships with others and the environment has typically been sought after as the purpose of outdoor education. Gair (1997, as cited in Wattchow & Brown, 2011) provides an explanation of these terms. 'Self" relates to enhanced self-awareness and self-concept; a direct result of positive, challenging and adventurous experiences. 'Others' is concerned with group development and cohesion which are formed by various social structures that are a result of physical challenge and emotional stress. Lastly, 'environment', or 'nature', refers to the place where relations with self and others develop, whilst creating environmental awareness and behaviours.

These concepts (as explained by Gair, 1997) date back to 1975 where they originated at the Dartington conference, convened by the United Kingdom Department of Education and Science. This was the first attempt at systemically identifying and categorizing the different goals and process that underpin outdoor education (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993; Nicol, 2002). Following that, Mortlock (1984, as sited in Nicol, 2002) uses the three dimensions to argue that all outdoor educational actions should heighten awareness of and foster respect for self, others and nature, with an emphasis on the balance between all three elements. This concept prevails in the 21st century, where Hales (2006) acknowledges that the goal of outdoor education should be a 'critical understanding of self, others and the environment'. Quay (2020) also stated that the focus of outdoor education (alongside environmental education) is to build relationships with self, others and the natural environment. In their teaching and

learning resource document about outdoor camps, Outdoor Education New Zealand (2018) state that their guidelines provide ideas for camps that connect children to self, others, and nature. In essence, many scholars have expressed the relevance of these aims/dimensions in describing outdoor education. Its presence within the literature demonstrates resilience and emphasises the theoretical frame behind experience in outdoor education. Both Wattchow and Brown (2011) and Quay (2020) have gone as far to say that they have become the 'mantra' of outdoor education.

Despite the continued use of self, others and environment within both contemporary practice and literature (as described above), Quay (2013) argues that we should look beyond this approach. He explains that the position of self, others and environment within philosophical discussions of outdoor education demonstrate reflective thinking. In doing so, self, others and environment are viewed as relations by which we critically assess the balance between them retrospectively. Quay (2013) describes this as a cause and effect relationship, where 'one-track thinking' occurs, resulting in a 'transactional' process (p. 148). Whilst stating that this reflection is (somewhat) needed and is (somewhat) important within outdoor education, Quay (2013) explains that it overlooks emotional feeling and lived experience. He argues that thinking affectively (rather than reflectively) would be more concerned with 'be-ing, living experience, in its simple wholeness' (p. 150) rather than assessing balance between relations. However, since 'self, others and environment' were incorporated within the context of the outdoor experience that this study examines, this particular structure has been employed.

Student Perspectives

The use of qualitative methodologies to understand the benefits and experiences of outdoor education is a recent phenomenon (Collins, 2020). As a consequence, the exploration of these potential benefits has lacked participant voice and perspective. Hence, student voice has continuously been dismissed as a viable research method (see; Dyson, 2006; Graber, 2001; McKenzie, 2000; Brown, 2012; Zink 2005). Instead, external attributes such as observations and demonstrations have been used to determine and make sense of the student experience (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Additionally, Zink (2005) found that on the occasion where student comments are acknowledged within research, they often get identified as 'flippant' and are not taken seriously. By doing this, it overlooks the complexities of students comments and fails to unpack what these comments convey in terms of human experience. To further this, multiple authors have noted that the higher education sector favours research into 'hearing student voice', however, is primarily focused on student retention and assurance

rather than learning and processes (Brooman et al., 2015; Hemming & Power, 2021; Seale, 2010). This relates back to Zink's (2005) discussion, where she highlights the importance of understanding these processes and experiences, rather than assuming that the benefits of participation are coherent with the expectations of the experience. As Dyson (2006) concludes "*obtaining authentic voice is the first step towards gaining authentic student representation"* (p. 342).

Whilst research on student voice and perceptions has been limited in the past, there is a growing body of literature that argue that there is much to gain from student's perspectives of outdoor experiences (e.g., Beames & Ross, 2010; Brown, 2012; Dyson, 2006; Hemming & Power, 2012; Seale, 2010; Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Zink, 2005). More specifically, as Brown (2012) states, are how these perspectives can be used to inform programme design and implementation. As such, student journals, writing reflections and interviews are increasingly being employed as viable methods in the outdoor education field (Brown, 2012; Ferreria, 2020; Morse, 2014; Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Wattchow & Higgins, 2014;), being used to both reflect on practice to make meaning of experiences and enlighten the wider field. The current study will add to this growing body of research, with specific interest on how student perceptions of outdoor experiences can be used to potentially modify programmes within a university setting.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Methodology

The methodological approach used in this study is qualitative interpretive descriptive. This design has an emphasis on generating meaningful understandings of phenomena within the human experience and behavioural world (Thorne, 2016). It acknowledges both the constructed and contextual nature of human experience, and the possibility of shared realities (Thorne et al., 1997). Derived from the desire to answer complex experiential questions (Thorne et al., 2004), a qualitative interpretive methodology seeks to extend and deepen understanding of subjective perceptions in order to evolve disciplines. Such understandings are then able and capable of yielding practice recommendations and implications (Thorne, 2016; Thorne et al., 2004; Thorne et al., 1997). Applying this methodology to the proposed study allows it to capture themes and patterns within subjective student perceptions, how they engage with each other, and how these entities can be used to produce recommendations for future practice.

Despite qualitative interpretive being derived from nursing research, a recent study showcases how the methodology can be adapted across health professions. The study explicitly states that qualitative interpretive *"…is applicable to qualitative inquiry across health professions when a study aims to capture the subjective experience of a population and intends to use this knowledge to inform practice"* (p. 337) (Thompson et al., 2021). Although outdoor education as an industry would not be classed as a health profession, the outcomes of outdoor education have clear health implications.

A qualitative interpretive methodology (within an interpretive paradigm), assumes that knowledge is socially constructed rather than objectively determined (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Thorne, 2016; Pascale, 2011). This epistemological perspective informs the current study as knowledge is grounded in experience (Pascale, 2011). In order to understand this experience (to obtain knowledge), we must first understand the meanings in which the experience occurs (Pascale, 2011). As Crotty (1998) argues, 'meaning' within this realm, is not discovered, it is constructed. Therefore, the epistemological assumptions driving this study are positioned around understanding student meaning in order to understand student experience. Further, it shapes how the researcher (myself) interacts with the research participants reflections. Qualitative interpretive (within an interpretive paradigm) is based on interacting and building relationships between the 'knower' and the 'known' and acknowledges the influences of one another on the research outcomes (Thorne, 2016).

Closely related to these epistemological assumptions, is the ontological position of qualitative interpretive; the belief that multiple realities exist (Crotty, 1998; Thorne, 2016). Here, realities are a product of social processes and are therefore socially constructed. As a result, multiple realities can be explored and understood by researchers. In saying this, in order to uphold the axiological foundations underpinning this methodology, the researcher must demonstrate and exercise reflexivity. Reflexivity involves analysing and examining beliefs, values and practises within the research process (Rettke et al., 2018). As Finlay (1998) argues, this means being constantly self-aware of the position of the researcher within the research environment. This proves important within the current study as it values experience and understanding. These epistemological, ontological and axiological foundations of the qualitative interpretive methodology have been reflected throughout the entirety of this study, informing all stages of the research process. By demonstrating reflexivity and being aware of the research environment, the chosen approach allowed for knowledge to be constructed through an understanding of the multiple realities that exist within the BSR outdoor major by capturing patterns and themes within the subjective student experience.

Research Design

In alignment with qualitative interpretive methodology, the original design of this study was non-emergent and involved multiple data sources (i.e., methodological triangulation). Multiple data collection methods are often used within interpretive descriptive studies to enrich research findings by offering multiple data sets (Noble & Heale, 2019; Thorne, 2016). This particular research design can prevent biases from arising and allow a greater exploration and explanation of complex human ways. Thus, the use of a document analysis (primary data set) and semi structured follow up interviews (secondary data set) were planned to help understand and further explain the complex nature of student experiences whilst enhancing research adequacy. However, due to the consequences and time restrictions of the Covid-19 outbreak within the Auckland region, triangulation of multiple methods was not possible. Therefore, only a document analysis was undertaken as a part of this dissertation. Despite this, Bowen (2009) proclaims that a document analysis is a credible and useful stand-alone research method especially when conducted within an interpretive paradigm. Compared to other qualitative research methods, the process of a document analysis is non-reactive, provides data stability and can obtain a richer coverage of data (Bowen, 2009). Thus, providing theoretical justification for the use of a document analysis as the primary source of data within this study.

Research Participants and Setting

The participants of this study were recruited from AUT's BSR Outdoor Major. Ethics for this research was received on December 1st 2020 (reference number 20/383). All students who were enrolled in the 2021 Maunga-Ngahere (Mountain and Bush) course were invited to participate. Maunga-Ngahere (Mountains and Bush) is a level 6 (year two) paper that aims to develop knowledge and skills of a mountain and bush environment. The paper incorporates geological, ecological, and Māori concepts as they relate to land-based environments whilst critically analysing how mountain/bush pursuits can develop human nature relationships. The learning outcomes (LO's) of Maunga-Ngahere (Mountain and Bush) are to; 1) critically reflect on how a journey can develop human/nature connections and lead to an enhanced understanding of self, others and environment; 2) describe geological and ecological concepts as they relate to mountain/bush environments; 3) practice safety and professionally in given contexts; 4) compare and contrast cultural considerations related to mountain/bush recreation in Aotearoa; and 5) present work to an academic standard.

Maunga-Ngahere culminates with a 5 day outdoor journey in the Kaimanawa Ranges (central North Island of Aotearoa). Therefore, students do not know each other going into the journey. The purpose of the journey is to consolidate the knowledge acquired in the classroom and to provide an experiential setting to develop relationships with self, others and the environment. Students experience multi-day tramping, navigation, overnight tenting, camping on stoves, and 'bush-bashing' amongst other teachable moments. The tramp is roughly 50-60 kms over 5 days. Being practiced within the anglosphere, Maunga-Ngahere, alongside the other outdoor papers, are delivered within a post-modern Western construct.

As a compulsory task of the Maunga-Ngahere journey, students are instructed to write a daily journal entry to reflect on significant moments that occurred during the day, combined with their connection to nature. These journal entries comprise Part 1 of the students first summative assessment. Students then use these entries to formulate the summative part of the assessment (Part 2), which is to 1) critically reflect on how/or whether the journey developed relationships with the specific local environment and 2) explain how the journey led or did not lead to an enhanced understanding of themselves and others. With student consent, both parts of these assessments were then anonymised and transferred to a qualitative software platform. The total number of analysed documents was 28, comprised of 12 journal entries and 16 reflective assessments. The use of these reflections as the primary source of data for this study aligns with qualitative interpretive methodology (Thorne, 2016; Bowen 2009) as it seeks to understand how context plays out *"in individual experience to the extent that it can be known, and acted upon"* (Thorne, 2016, p. 190). Thus, the documents being analysed reflect upon raw and direct individual experience, providing valuable data about the learning experience.

Data analysis

Data analysis utilized a thematic approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). This was a reflective thematic analysis, with a primarily inductive approach and experiential orientation. In keeping with the methodology, a primarily inductive approach means the analysis was driven by the data, interpreting and making meaning of such data, with an experiential orientation giving 'voice' to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). The analysis worked through the 6 phases of thematic analysis in a non-linear sequence. Initially, there was an emphasis on familiarising with the data, which was followed by non-linear movement between generating initial codes, constructing prototype themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012).

Chapter Four - Findings

The primary objective of this study was to obtain an understanding of how the BSR outdoor major students perceive an outdoor journey, to ultimately make recommendations for future practice (if necessary). The question I sought to answer was *"How do BSR outdoor major students perceive a five-day outdoor education experience and what are the impacts of these perceptions on their relationships with self, others and the environment?".* The following section aims to answer this question, and is structured within the categories of 'self', 'others', 'environment' and 'recommendations'. Within the first three categories, the findings are presented as themes and sub-themes that directly relate to that particular category. The themes describe a broader conceptual idea, whereas sub-themes have been used to further identify notable insights within its particular theme. To ensure that these themes and sub-themes remained reflective of the data, they were examined and validated by the research supervisor. The 'recommendations' category is structured in conjunction with the courses learning outcomes. The participant ID and gender are listed directly after the quote (e.g., 001MN, F). Table 1 presents an overview of themes and sub-themes.

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes emerging from student journals and summative assessments

Category	**Theme**	**Sub Theme**
Self	Perseverance leading to resilience	Coping with new emotions
	Gaining an assurance of self (perspectives & potential)	Strengths/weaknesses
Others	Bonding over hardship	
	Formation of a temporary community	The power of conversation
Environment	Presence of nature	Engaging the senses
	Obtaining new knowledge	
	Escape from reality	
Recommendations		

Self

Theme 1 - Perseverance leading to resilience. During the five day outdoor journey, one of the more common themes that arose from the data within both documents (the reflective assessment and the journal entries), was that students developed perseverance which ultimately lead to developing resilience. Firstly, students were able to develop a significant level of perseverance from pushing through both physical and emotional stress:

> *"I felt like I really broke down some physical and mental barriers walking up this huge hill, I was running low on energy and most likely dehydrated, but I pushed through and go to the top of the ridge! I felt so accomplished and filled with adrenaline."* 005MN, F

> "*The tramp personally was beyond hard. It took everything within me to pull through my pain at the top of Urchin after my breakdown, and to not give up on myself…. This hill was the biggest challenge I have ever put myself through. It physically affected me because of all my injuries being inflamed and causing me serve pain and the additional pain due to the extreme fitness required to get up such a steep mountain after four days of intense tramping. It also mentally challenged me, as my mind was shattered and it was becoming harder and harder to stick with a growth mindset. I knew how much further we had to go event after the peak was reached which made the climb a whole degree worse."* 017MN, F

Students noted that changing their mindset and altering their thoughts was crucial in being able to persevere through the challenges they were facing:

> "*It was a big learning experience of perseverance for myself as there were many times where I wanted to stop and give up. I was carrying a similar mindset to where I was before the trip and it is something I had to change."* 002MN, F

> "*About 45 minutes into the tramp my anxiousness and apprehensiveness had disappeared. I realised I could totally do this. I felt my whole mindset shift from 'how am I going to get through this' to 'I can totally do this and enjoy the company of these people'."* 003MN, F

> *"Changing my perspective and attitude towards being on a long journey, while carrying more weight on my back was definitely a challenge at the start. Most of the time I made sure to embrace situations that I was put it in, but I can honestly say on the first day I almost reached breaking point."* 023MN, F

From continuing to persist through the physical and emotional challenges, students were able to develop a level of resilience. Students were able to do this by shifting the way they dealt with their hardship/struggles:

> *"I tried so hard to change my mindset from a fixed one when it got tough and I really wanted to give up, to a growth one to keep pursuing, I did this by changing the way I*

> *self-talk. I would constantly be telling myself to 'not give up' 'one step at a time' and honestly it helped so much."* 017MN, F

Similarly, students perseverance lead to resilience by increased awareness and acceptance of their own emotional state:

> *"On the second night, I injured my foot and had become very emotional by the thought of struggling to walk the following day. However, I realised that my emotions may be exaggerated in the moment as I was sore and tired from the long day."* 007MN, F

> *"This journey taught me that the more you learn to focus on what is happening now the more you can control your bodys response to these thoughts and feelings. When I sat and accepted where I was, I immediately felt a sense of relaxation, and began to focus on my feelings."* 018MN, F

Additionally, students described becoming more comfortable with voicing their feelings, emotions and hardships, which was an important part of their ability to persevere and develop resilience. It appears that students quickly learnt that vulnerability was not something to be afraid of. By being vulnerable and voicing their concerns, it allowed them to bounce back from their struggles and withstand adversity. Whilst talking about how they struggled with their emotions and thoughts on the first few days of the journey, one student commented:

> *"I learned to voice my concern, pain and feelings to the leader or group in the days that followed."* 018MN, F

Describing their experience on the fourth day of the tramp, one particular student proclaimed:

> *"Now that I have experienced that, I look back and it makes me realise how important it is to reach out to your peers when you are in need. Sometimes you have no energy left for yourself, so it is important to ask for help when you do need it."* 017MN, F

Sub Theme 1 - Coping with new emotions. As a result of the demands of the journey, students described having to cope with new emotional stresses, concerns and difficulties. Within this sub-theme, two main emotions were described; anxiousness and a fear of being a burden. Both of these new emotions were felt in a physical sense and a social sense. Students described them arising due to the unique setting they were in, and, by the end of the tramp, had developed into an array of positive emotions. Anxiousness in particular was prominent in the lead up and beginning of the tramp:

> *"Heading to the Kaimanawa Ranges was a new experience for me and initially I was unsure what to expect. I felt nervous going into such a wild place with new people…"* 023MN, F

> *"I realised I was worried because I did not think I had the physical or social abilities needed for the trip. I was sure I would slow the group down and find my pack too heavy to handle. Some of the group already knew each other, were older or very experienced in tramping so why would they want to chat or become friends with me?"* 003MN, F

Students had concerns relating to their physical performance (fears of not having a high enough level of fitness to keep up with the group) as well as concerns about their social performance (fears that they weren't contributing enough to the team), voicing that they were ultimately afraid of being a burden to the group:

> *"There was an overwhelming feeling of disappointment on myself, that it was not only affecting me but the whole groups adventure. It was an unfamiliar group of emotions that I was going through."* 001MN, M

> *"I had a strong belief that I did not need help and I was able to push through the first day, but it got to point where I eventually could not and had to accept that I was the weakest link in the group. This was not a pleasant feeling…"* 001MN, M

> "*I felt disappointed in myself after doing this [not offering to help fetch water from the stream] as I felt like I was not contributing enough to the group or that I was not stepping up to the plate and being a leader."* 005MN, F

Theme 2 – Gaining an assurance of self. Throughout the course of the five-day journey in the Kaimanawa Ranges, students described gaining an assurance of themselves. Within this assurance of self, two main areas of growth were described: perspectives and potential. Perspectives refers to grounding old perspectives whilst creating new ones. An expansion of student's thoughts and feelings about themselves, their career choices and their value/belief system, was attributed to the journey. 'Down time' was considered an influential aspect of expanding these perspectives. It appeared that time spent alone/separate from the group was significant in these moments of reflection;

> *"We all got to walk back apart and in silence and this reflection time was really good for me. I was thinking about what will change when I go back into my busy, fast paced reality. I felt like I had had a spiritual refill. Also a confidence boost. I also just overall felt more grounded and more okay with my personality."* 003MN, F

> *"Having that quiet time at the river gave me an opportunity to reflect on the last few days and it has shown me that my decision to choose outdoor education as a career was the right choice, especially since my passion has only increased since."* 012MN, F

Not all grounded perspectives were positive perspectives. Some students felt like the journey emphasised feelings/traits with negative connotations. These findings surfaced in the student's

reflective assessments once they had had time to process the journey and reflect on the processes that occurred:

> "*This experience reinforced internalising my problems and pushing myself physically isn't healthy coping mechanism. This situation lacked self-awareness because I didn't recognise how bad I was feeling, and let it go until my body couldn't cope. In future I won't let it get to this point by speaking up."* 022MN, NA

> *"One of my goals throughout the trip was to become more confident within the group. I feel I achieve this in some ways but definitely not in others… when it came to speaking purposively in front of the group such as the lecturette, I still struggled. This comes from self-doubt and scared of judgement from peers."* 010NMN, F

Whilst the journey appeared to cement previously held perspectives, it also led to the creation of new ones. Whether these perspectives related to intrinsic factors about themselves or about factors they would like to focus on moving forward, the journey seemed to be a safe environment to foster this, contributing to their overall personal growth:

> *"Enjoying this group and trip so much helped me to accept myself more. I had been myself this whole trip and had made friends. I've always been unsure if being an introvert means I have less fun and less connections. But this trip showed me that I could be me and still enjoy a group of people I did not know without trying to be someone I'm not."* 003MN, F

> *"It allowed me to recognise that I need to fill my days with more things that spark my soul on fire, yet that challenge me at the same time. The tramp pushed my limits, and I learned that with challenges like this, it is where I grow the most."* 017MN, F

The second main area of growth within the theme 'gaining an assurance of self', relates to the student's realisation of their potential. With students finding the journey to be one of both significant mental and physical stress (and overcoming such stress), they were able to come to a realisation of their own physical and mental capabilities:

> *"I can now overcome any situation as long as I work hard and set all my energy towards it. I realised that I have such a strong mental capability and now I know this, I will not let all the little things that used to wind up and toll on my days affect me as much anymore."* 017MN, F

> *"What I did not know about myself at the start of this journey is that I can push myself to extreme levels of heights and challenges. I had no idea the journey would be as hard as it was, but wow did it do me good! I have a whole new level of limits that I can push myself to and I really do believe that I am so physically and mentally strong, and can seriously dig deep when it gets tough."* 014MN, F

Students mentioned that this new found confidence in their abilities and potential can be transferred back into their daily lives:

> *"I realised how busy I was going to be in the next couple of weeks. I was feeling a lot more grounded though and ready to take on life back home differently and with more confidence than what I had before this journey."* 003MN, F
> *"I think when you push yourself outside of your comfort zone, as this journey did for me, although it can be beyond challenging these types of experiences allow you to tremendously grow and also find new parts of yourself. It is with these findings, I can now take this with me through life and realise that I am a lot more capable of doing anything than I used to think I was. I can overcome any situation as long as I work hard and set all my energy towards it."* 017MN, F

Sub Theme 2 – Strengths and Weaknesses. Gaining an assurance of self through grounding perspectives and realising potential is closely interlinked with student's ability to identify and recognise their own strengths and weaknesses as a direct outcome of the outdoor journey. Through this identification of strengths and weaknesses, it appeared that students displayed a level of emotional intelligence as it requires self-awareness. The physical demands of the journey (duration, intensity, length) meant that students had to remain aware of, and be able to regulate their actions, thoughts and emotions when demanding situations arose if they were to progress through the journey efficiently. It is within this space, that students' strengths and weaknesses were recognised:

> *"While reflecting back on moments where I was frustrated with negative thoughts has allowed me to be aware of my emotions, strengths, and weaknesses and know that I am not perfect, but by being more self-aware I can manage my emotions and feelings."* 022MN, NA

> *"Throughout the different challenges we faced, I've come out with a better understanding of my strengths and limitations, the way I interact socially and with nature, as well understanding what the important things in life are to focus on."* 012MN, F

> *"The journey to the Kaimanawa Ranges helped me reconnect with my purpose, revealed my strengths and exposed areas for me to grown in. It led me to realise that my level of self-awareness is a never-ending journey and can always be worked on, even if I think I have it right."* 002MN, F

When discussing how they felt they weren't contributing enough to the group, one student wrote:

> *"However, as I reflect and have gained feedback, I have come to realise that I was contributing to the group with my strengths which I found was meal prep, cooking and checking up on people and how they were going. In the future, I hope to step out of my comfort zones more while also playing on my strengths as they help the team to function well."* 005MN, F

Relatedly, one student discussed a scenario where they thought they were acting on one of their strengths, but it turned into the student struggling themselves:

> *"A low moment I had today was when I had offered to help with another's members bag as well as carrying my own and pushed myself too hard, leading me thighs to start cramping up near the last 100 meters. The disappointment is mostly in the fact that I overestimated my own physical fitness and could have led to even more injury that could have delayed the group as we progressed."* 012MN, F

The commonality between these two students' comments is that they were able to articulate their strengths and weaknesses and take meanings and learnings from it.

Others

Theme 1 – Bonding over hardship. A common theme that influenced students' relationship with 'others' (their peers), was how they bonded over facing obstacles together. It appeared that students' connections to others grew through support and motivation that was both received and given in times of mental and physical stress. Students described that these stresses were a result of the strenuous demands of the journey, which consequently brought the students closer together. As such, the students' experience of the journey was not merely constructed by the individuals, but also through the influence and connection of others:

> *"Throughout the journey, there were many times where we leant on each other for strength and comfort. Either this was while walking, during the evenings at camp or supporting the other group. I noticed on many occasions how others stepped in to help without being asked."* 014MN, F

> *"I was faced with adversity when my legs were not functioning as usual, and I was feeling indescribable emotions as to letting the group down. However, it was in these times that I felt an intimate connection with the rest of the group."* 001MN, M

> *"There were lots of jobs to be done – tents, cooking, water. This forced us all to communicate and work together. There had been a lot of uphill so we had to communicate when we wanted breaks and water stops. I think this helped us bond as a group. Completing our first day was something positive we had all accomplished together – positive emotions. I think this sped up how fast we felt comfortable with each other"* 003MN, F

Bush-bashing in particular seemed to have a great deal of impact on the group's social development. Since the activity involved off-trail uphill walking, they had to place a lot of trust in one another to ensure they were going in the right direction whilst no one got hurt:

> *"You could hear chatter the whole walk up this rough terrain, people making sure others are well supported and that they were not struggling. At the top of this ridge the group felt accomplished and was able to recognise the efforts of each of the team members. I believe this was a real turning point for the deep connection of the group."* 005MN, F

> *"The third day of our tramp was the day where I learnt the most about our group. It was the day we bush bashed for through thick forest and along rivers, generating a 12-hour day of tramping. Everyone including myself, was starting to struggle mentally, but since we all felt comfortable around each other it was much easier to keep motivated and maintain morale throughout our hardship."* 011MN, M

Some students were surprised at how helpful and supportive other members of the group were, even when they were struggling themselves. This led to feelings of gratitude and feeling more connected to one another:

> *"Things were slippery and the ground fell beneath us. We continued on for what seemed like ages over fallen trees, rivers, muddy banks and rocks. We all fell over half a dozen times, our butts were wet and legs muddy, but what really surprised me was how positive everyone was despite this. There were so many kind people offering hands, their poles and guiding you thought the tricky bots, I was so grateful and proud of the group. We all really bonded over it."* 014MN, F

This particular student then went on to say:

> *"When you are put in situations like the one today you build such real, deep connections and trust with each other in such a small amount of time because you have to if you are going to make it through."* 014MN, F

Theme 2 – Formation of a temporary community. Similar to bonding over hardship, the formation of a temporary community was significant to how the BSR students perceived their outdoor journey. This temporary community was fostered through the development of group awareness and social skills expressed by the students within their journal entries and reflective assessments. This looked like having an awareness of the different feelings and emotions that were being experienced within the group (both physically and mentally), finding ways to both support them and make vital group decisions with said feelings in consideration. By doing this, a level of trust and companionship was created between group members:

> *"Throughout the tramp there was times where I struggled a lot, but my group was aware of this and continuously asked me if I was okay and there were some days were my pack was taken off me to ease my pain and prevent me from getting more injured too. With my group being aware of how I was feeling and knowing that my pack was one of the heaviest, it allowed me to feel safe and comfortable enough to speak up and let them know when I was struggling."* 006MN, F

> *"Today was probably the toughest day for all of us, having to bush bash and river trace in the dark while moving as a big group, which usually slows down the pace. I had however, run out of social energy and was in a rather low mood, which some other members picked up on and checked in with me every once in a while. I really appreciated these small gestures and i hope to be as much as a support to them as they were to me."* 012MN, F

Enhanced group awareness and social skills meant that students felt supported by their peers, leading to feelings of trust and companionship. This led to unexpected friendships and emotional connections:

> *"I never thought I would make a group of friends that I care for quite deeply in such a short period of time, but when you meet the right people you just click."* 012MN, F

> *"The group formation had a high impact on enhancing my understanding and self-awareness of others. The group connected straight away and throughout the trip the connections grew stronger as we relied on each other more. The idea of being in such a close and intimate setting with a group of initially strangers to becoming close friends in a short space of time is so special and meaningful."* 005MN, F

> *"Friendship was not what I originally thought I would gain a lot of out of simply doing a tramp, but I couldn't have been more wrong, as I made new friends that I am able to trust and go on future outdoor endeavour's with, this means a lot to me as I know there a like-minded students around me, this also motivates me to continue my outdoor studies with a good team of both students and mentors around me."* 011MN, M

These friendships and emotional connections formed into a temporary community that helped students achieve the demands of the journey:

> *"The journey also led to an enhanced understanding of others in my group. We all had a strong sense of self-awareness and the bond we created of support and trust was so strong, and in moments where we were all at our weakest on day four climbing Urchin mountain, the support and community was unbreakable. We all had the realisation of how special and important our relationship are, and we also all understood that if those relationships had not grown, many of us would have struggles to get through the tramp's entirety."* 017MN, F

Some students had faith that the temporary community formed throughout the journey would be able to continue into their normal daily lives:

> *"It was so cool to see on the way home that everyone was tired yet (on the first little bit atleast) we were talking about cool memories we had from the trip and sharing photos and talking and getting to know each other still. I'm really confident that these friendships are going to last past this paper."* 005MN, F

> *"I have gotten to know each one on a personal level and have found interest in understating who they are and where they have come from. We all have the foundation levels of trust and friendship layed, meaning that when we all go back to university together, the environment is going to be so strong and amazing."* 014MN, F

Sub theme 2 - Power of conversation. The power of conversation was exemplified within the student's discussions, showcasing that it had a real influence on their relationship with their

peers. As students had only met the week prior to the journey, conversation and storytelling were tools utilized by the students to form bonds, feel comfortable with one another and as a coping mechanism for the physical and emotion demands of the experience. Evident within some of the student's comments that have already been presented, students used dialogue (e.g., words of encouragement and motivation) to connect, feel comfortable and support one another:

> *"I had some really good chats with some individuals. The chats got quite real with one girl and this put me at ease. I knew that if I had any problems on the trip I could tell her because of the trust we now had – or I had in her. I think this was a turning point for me."* 003MN, F

> *"[Talking about something they thought they did well on the journey]…being a friend who offered a listening ear. Being able to give them just a little bit of encouragement and support also served to motivate me, allowing me to keep up with the team, to run forward a little bit ahead to give high fives as they passed and giving them a few words of encouragement."* 012MN, F

In addition, it appeared that storytelling, conversation and humour were used as coping mechanisms to get through moments of high physical and mental stress:

> *"Every day there was plenty of time to walk and talk, which was great because it kept my mind bust and not focused on things such as how sore I was or how far we had to go."* 011MN, M

> *"I definitely feel like I am growing new friendships with a few members as we definitely know how to use humour together to help us get through our pain. I feel like I know the group members a lot better."* 017MN, F

When the physical demands of the tramp weren't high, students described being able to focus on the depth of conversation they were having with their peers. As they weren't focusing on persevering through challenges, they were able to share stories and have deep meaningful conversations:

> *"As today was a lot easier in terms of physical demands, it allowed us to really spend more time talking and chatting with one another, learning each others personalities and little quirks. We get along rather well, having a similar sense of humour and a good amount of banter to keep us entertained."* 012MN, F

> *"Chatting about our personal life around the campfire was such a moment for myself. Although it was a situation of speaking in front of people which I'm not fully comfortable with, I was able to open up and be myself around these people I had only meet the week before. It was an unreal experience that I will cherish forever."* 010MN, F

Environment

Theme 1 – The presence of nature. The force and presence of nature seemed to have significant influence on student's relationship with the environment. It was evident that the presence of nature resulted in both positive and negative relations towards nature. Such relations were fostered through experiencing new and unfamiliar landscapes, as well as adapting to unpredictable environments. It appeared that the unpredictable weather and changing landscapes provided harsh challenges that forced students to face both mental and physical challenges. As a result, students found the environment to be the cause of their pain and struggles:

> *"My relationship with the environment severely got tested. At times I hated the pain and exhaustion the environment put me through. The environment set off injuries in my knees and back to take a toll on my own physical and mental health for the rest of the journey. The environment did not let me off easy."* 017MN, F

Although students experienced negative emotions towards the environment's unpredictability, the changing environments positively enhanced students' connection to nature through awe, respect and learning to adapt:

> *"Throughout the journey my amazement at nature increased. I saw spectacular views of Ngauruhoe and Lake Taupo from a submit. From the same submit the next morning I could only see clouds in all directions. Ngauruhoe and Lake Taupo had completely vanished. Another day there was a sudden change of surroundings when the tree line ended. I learned how fast an environment can be transformed. This increased my respect and awe for nature. I came to understand that we had no control of the environment and had to adjust ourselves for nature."* 003MN, F

> *"On the five days we spent on our tramp I learnt a lot about the environment, and the heavy effect it can have on both physical and mental stature when enveloped in such a unpredictable scene…. Our mentors did warn us of the weather and how it can drastically vary due, but I was still stunned by the strong influences that nature had on myself and the rest of the group, both positive and negative."* 011MN, M

Similarly, students noted that their connection to nature developed through experiencing new landscapes that they were not familiar with. In this sense, students were intrigued and in awe.

> *"The landscapes I saw that day were amazing. There was a sudden change of surroundings when the tree line ended and we were no longer in the bush. It was something I hadn't seen before. This new experience fascinated me. I also saw an incredible sunset. It just made me fall in love with nature even more. It was very peaceful and beautiful."* 003MN, F

> *"The real turning point for my connection with nature occurred on the third day of our trip when we left the comfort of well-marked tracks and ventured into the paths*

> *less taken…. It felt exciting and scary at the same time walking through the bush, not knowing what was around the corner, but that is what brought us closer together as a group and the environment closer to us. It felt special because we walked on a journey that not many people could have said they walked on before because we chose the way by interpreting the environment."* 014MN, F

> *"There was a specific moment on the trip that this environment felt safe and I connected on a much deeper level. This was on the second day as we made our way down the hill and the terrain was changing every one hundred metres. I felt humbled and in awe of the vast beauty and magnificence of this environment. To experience this was powerful and gives me goosebumps every time it happens."* 005MN, F

One comment in particular articulates how the negative and positive relations experienced by students complimented each other to enhance their connections to nature:

> "*There have been many moments during this tramp that were really trying, but all I see out of all the hard work is that nature is fair. When we work hard, nature responds by giving us a beautiful view of the sunrise, good weather and the best environment to grow as a person. When we were at the peak of Mt Urchin, it was such a satisfying sensation."* 012MN, F

Sub theme 1 – Engaging the senses. A significant aspect of the connections to nature that were developed through experiencing unfamiliar landscapes and unpredictable environments is the activation of student's senses. It appeared that engaging the senses within these specific environments was crucial to the emotions that students associated with feeling connected to the natural world. This occurred through engaging with the different elements of nature, allowing students to feel, see, smell, listen to and absorb the environment they were in:

> *"I love the feeling of the elements on me and that's why I loved the idea of having a swim in the river on our last day with everyone. You couldn't be in a better place and have all the elements around you. I was so ecstatic after I had dived under; it was icy cold and took my breathe away. It was a bodily and also a spiritual experience to see and feel the fresh water it its natural beauty."* 018MN, F

> *"We went to the pillars of the Kurkes walk which had a beautiful swing bridge over the river. We stopped halfway and just listened and looked at the forest around us. It was amazing to hear the bird songs, and nature around us. I realised I wasn't taking it in as much when walking so it was good to take the time to stop and listen, and connect to nature."* 014MN, F

The sounds and sights of nature, in particular, seemed to significantly resonate with students:

> *"The constant sound of the river flowing brings so much peace to me, and standing in the water just feels like I've been refreshed. After everyone had gone to bed, I went back to the riverbank and just built little rock towers and meditate."* 012MN, F

> *"...listening to the sounds of nature while on our walk was a good change as there was no focus on where to go or any time pressure, so I really got the chance to appreciate nature to its fullest."* 011MN, M

> *"I was able to have a really good reflection on the walk back to the van, where I felt like I was noticing more about the environment, landscape and bush when I was just opening my eyes a bit more and focusing on the details of the bush."* 005MN, F

Down time provided an opportunity to engage more of their senses. This allowed them feel and see the environment with a clearer lens:

> *"In the afternoon on day four, I was doing some writing alone by the river and had the opportunity to look around and appreciate the beauty of the river in front of me, and the forest behind me. There had been a lot going on every day and I knew I had not given myself enough time to stop and take in the scenery or listen to the voice of nature. I reflected on what I had experienced on this expedition and what it truly meant to me that I had changed, though at that point I could not explain how."* 023MN, F

> *"Today I saw the environment in a new way since I wasn't focused on the pain I was in due to a light pack. I was able to embrace what was there. The sounds of the birds, insects and trees blowing through the breeze. I took it all in."* 017MN, F

> *"Since we already made it back to vans last night, this meant that today we only had planned a small day walk which meant just a day pack. This made me appreciate the environment so much more whilst doing the pillars of Hercules walk as I could fully embrace my surroundings instead of constantly thinking about the weight on my back."* 017MN, F

Students recognised that in these moments of tranquillity is where they felt most connected to nature:

> *"I have realised that my connection to nature is mainly when I stop and actually take it in. I find I am not good at taking it on as walk and am focused more on my walking, breathing and any aching from the pack."* 014MN, F

> *"After 5 minutes of silence to appreciate the sounds wildlife and what nature means to us, I came to the conclusion that I need to do this more often at home. It brought me so much peace and joy and I felt so enlightened and strong for acknowledging these feelings. I now have more respect for the outdoors and the sensations it brings. He harshness of the terrain reveals the life its lived, the experiences it been through and the protection it provides to so much wildlife and animals."* 018MN, F

Theme 2 – Obtaining new knowledge. Students' connection to the environment was enriched through developing and obtaining new knowledge specific to the outdoors. The majority of students noted that their instructors would point out different elements of the natural world, what their purpose was and what they can be used for (e.g., specific plant

species, moss, navigation). It is evident that gaining this knowledge significantly influenced the way students thought and felt about their connection to the environment:

> *"My mindset towards the outdoors became more positive and open minded. By becoming more knowledgeable, I was comfortable in my surroundings and developed a deeper love for the outdoors."* 007MN, F

> *"The knowledge has increased my appreciation greatly as well. I was grateful we had areas like the Kaimanawa's before our trip as it was a place to escape and enjoy the views etc, but my now better understanding of where I am going and what I am surrounded with makes me even more grateful than I thought.* 010MN, F

> *"During previous outdoor trips, I was always taught about different plants, trees and nature but I was never in the mindset to really absorb that information and actually learn it however this journey was different."* 010MN, F

Engaging students with natural surroundings from the start of the journey seemed to be the most effective way of engaging students with their environment. Relatedly, learning about these elements (plant species, tree species etc) led to students feeling a sense of safety and belonging to the current environment they were in:

> *"As the journey proceeded, I gained knowledge about many different plants, what their names were and their uses such as Old man's beard being suitable to help with fires and this really intrigued me to continuously learn. Doing this, I was not only learning about things that could genuinely help me in the outdoors but also, I felt a lot more welcomed and engaged with the nature that I was tramping in."* 010MN, F

> *"It was amazing to have learnt so much about the different types of plants and their different uses throughout the Kaimanawa ranges. Seeing them every day and being able to recite what we had learned was quite fun for all of us, especially myself as it made me feel quite proud to have remembered the information and be able to recognize the plants. In having knowledge of the environment around me, it made me feel a lot more comfortable as if I was at home in the bush."* 006MN, F

> *"These skills [being able to identify different plant species] allowed me to become more confident in the environment I was in. I did not feel stressed about being in the bush and instead felt safe and comforted by my surroundings."* 007MN, F

Theme 3 – Escape from reality. A common theme that connected students to their environment and enhanced their relationship to nature was the journeys' ability to be an escape from reality. Students described feeling disconnected from the stresses, commitments and influences of the modern material world. It's evident that this disconnection fostered connections between students and nature by providing an environment where there are no restrictions, limitations or outside 'noise':

> *"I was very happy to be in the bush and away from the city. For one week, I was able to leave behind any commitments and things that had caused me stress at home. It also felt refreshing to not rely on my phone and to disconnect with the rest of society. I was able to admire my surroundings more and pay attention to the world in front of me. The views of mountains, rivers, and bush were beautiful, and something I could not see every day. They made me feel appreciative of the country I live in and grateful for the experience I had."* 007MN, F

> *"From spending 5 days out in the wilderness, I really appreciated and enjoyed just being disconnected from everyday life, there was no stress, no phone notifications, and I didn't have to think about anything else. It was a brilliant opportunity to simply disconnect and recuperate for a bit, which is exactly what I wanted to gain from this journey."* 011MN, M

Not only did the disconnection between students and their normal daily lives influence their relationship with nature, but it also positively enhanced their well-being whilst reflecting on life back home:

> *"I was able to make a connection to the outdoors without the distractions of the urban world. One week of being separated from modern technology and chaos made a positive effect on my wellbeing."* 007MN, F

> *"The fifth day I discovered how peaceful nature is if we take it in. It's a place where you can put life into perspective and discover what's important. Getting caught up on things that don't matter in the bigger picture like school, university, and jobs impacts your health. It isn't worth it if it's costing your mental, emotional, or spiritual health. This environment is ideal for reflection because there are no outside distractions and societal expectations."* 022MN, NA

For some students, escaping reality also meant escaping the judgement and expectations that were prominent in their lives back home:

> *"Away from normal society, cities, technology and many other things, the feeling is in some way overwhelming. To get away from things you deal with and do every day can be challenging and so different but for me it is such a positive thing. It is so rewarding to be able to fully be yourself without the judgement of the world and without having to follow certain expectations. It once again makes me appreciate what these areas can really do, especially for your mental and emotional health."* 010MN, F

> *"On the flip side I feel very much at peace and satisfied since we have been spending so much time in nature and away from the influences of modern life, such as social media. My belief is that how we present ourselves in the normal world is different to when we are placed in nature, as we have nothing to hide behind, no social media and no judgement to hide from."* 012MN, F

Recommendations/modification's

The learning outcomes (LO's) of Maunga-Ngahere (Mountain and Bush) are to; 1) critically reflect on how a journey can develop human/nature connections and lead to an enhanced understanding of self, others and environment; 2) describe geological and ecological concepts as they relate to mountain/bush environments; 3) practice safety and professionally in given contexts; and 4) compare and contrast cultural considerations related to mountain/bush recreation in Aotearoa. Although the writings used within this study only formally assessed LO1, inferences can be made about each learning outcome based on the students' reflections.

Evidence of LO1 can be seen within the categories, themes and subthemes listed above. Under each category, the themes and subthemes demonstrate how the BSR students developed an understanding of themselves, others and the environment, suggesting that LO1 was achieved. Similarly, evidence of LO2 can be seen within the theme 'obtaining new knowledge'. Here, BSR students learn new concepts about flora and fauna species, what their purposes are and how to identify them. Interestingly, students made almost no reference to their perceived mountains and bush competency, suggesting that development of hard skills was not considered of paramount importance compared to the experience of connection and meaning. Nonetheless, some inferences regarding safe and professional practice (LO3) can be made based on students' reflections. In saying this, there was little discussion on individual safety and professionalism, with students focusing more on collective decision making. For example, students reflected on scenarios where they had to collectively take into consideration the health and wellbeing of group members:

> *"We considered every aspect and made decisions by assessing the situation and looking at the outcomes that could possibly happen. By doing this it allowed us to create a good experience for **** where he didn't get injured more and it allowed us all to work together and be aware of how each other felt during this time as well, especially those who volunteered themselves forward to carry ****'s pack and some equipment."* 006MN, F

Similarly, there was little direct discussion of any learnings that relate to LO4. Except for one comment, cultural considerations were not mentioned when students were asked about how the journey enhanced understandings about themselves, others and the environment. However, there was one student who described feeling more connected to her faith as a result of the journey, stating that;

> *"Seeing how beautiful the environment was caused me to think about how I believed it was all created. I continued on to reflect on my faith and if I was living in a way that reflected this. I've also felt closer to my faith when in nature… I felt like I had re-established my connection to nature and my faith."* 003MN, F

Whilst inference can be made about the LO's of the course and what this means moving forward, few students provided direct feedback relating to recommendations/modifications of the journey. The two comments that did provide direct feedback on recommendations/modifications both related to how the journey was structured. One student described wishing they had spent more time with the other group:

> *"The only thing I wish we could have done different is spend more time with the other group. I am someone who takes a little more time to warm up and feel comfortable with people and so I didn't have enough time with the other group to make connections with them."* 014MN. F

Support of this feedback can be seen within some of the comments of other students:

> *"Tramping with the other group was an awesome experience as well as I got to talk to people, I hadn't had a chance to yet."* 010MN, F

> *"There was a very different social dynamic when we were with the other group. I felt less comfortable because I had not got to know them. However, walking in the dark with the other group was nice.... I didn't feel like I got on with the other group as easily as some members of mine. I started to think this was because I'm an introvert…"* MN003, F

Another piece of direct feedback from one particular student related to reducing the strenuous physical aspect of the journey so that the environment could be experienced more deeply:

> *"I think for me something that would have enhanced the experience would be by taking our time more. I found that my group was very focussed on getting to the daily destination and would do so very fast that I often didn't have the time or energy to look up and appreciate my surroundings because I was too tired, sore or focusses on not tripping up."* MN017

Support of this feedback can be seen within the comments of the themes 'gaining an assurance of self', 'engaging the senses', and 'the power of conversation'. All of these themes showcase comments that relate to moments of less physical and mental stress, or 'down-time', allowing students to focus on other aspects of the journey which possessed their own learnings.

Chapter Five – Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to obtain an understanding of how the BSR outdoor major students perceive an outdoor journey, and to explore whether recommendations/modifications should be made to the current outdoor course. Chapter Four (Findings), presents and highlights the key themes and subthemes relating to the research aim under the categories of 'self', 'others', 'environment' and 'recommendations'. Overall, this study has demonstrated that a five-day outdoor journey in Aotearoa had significant impact on outdoor education students' perceptions of themselves, others and the environment.

To summarise, students' perceptions of themselves grew as they developed perseverance leading to resilience, whilst dealing with new emotional stresses, concerns and difficulties. The journey allowed students an opportunity to expand their perspectives about themselves and their physical/mental potential. Through this, they were able to identify areas of strength and weakness within themselves. The journey influenced students' relationships with others through the hardship they faced as a collective, and the temporary community that was formed as a direct result. At the core of this is the power of conversation and its ability to act as a tool to form bonds and be a coping mechanism for the demands of the experience. Students' perceptions of the environment expanded through experiencing unfamiliar landscapes and adapting to unpredictable environments. By experiencing such conditions, student's developed respect, intrigue and appreciation towards nature, specifically through the activation of their senses. Obtaining new knowledge specific to the outdoors was another key theme, allowing students to develop a sense of safety and belonging with nature. As a direct result of the journey, students described feeling disconnected from the stresses, commitments and influences of the modern material world, allowing them to develop deeper connections to nature.

Self

A new perception of self

The BSR students began their journey in the Kaimanawa Ranges with pre-formed perceptions about themselves, their perspectives, and their mental/physical capabilities. These perceptions were constructed based on the student's previous life experiences and interactions with their surroundings (see; Beames, 2005). The conditions of the outdoor journey meant that students went through a series of processes that both confronted and challenged these pre-

formed perceptions, such as shifting mindsets and altering thoughts. These processes therefore encouraged self-reflection, allowing for growth and learning to occur; students learnt to persevere through their struggles whilst grounding and expanding perspectives. As a result, students noted that they had a new found confidence in their abilities and that they had greater capability than they had previously thought. In essence, the journey contributed to the construction of a new perception of self for the BSR students.

Using the Wilderness Experience Pathway Schema (WEPS) (Ashley, 2017), we can make sense of the processes the BSR students encountered on their journey. Ashley (2017) developed WEPS in an attempt to explain the causal mechanisms behind psychological responses to wilderness experiences. This multidimensional framework proposes a five stage sequence of events. Phase one, the 'Entry Phase', explains that although we enter the wilderness leaving behind our 'routines and stresses' of modern living, we also bring the characteristics of our persona with us. Our values, beliefs, fears, phobias, attitudes and motivations that have been constructed by previous life experiences stay with us and have to potential to influence the way we perceive, act and respond to wilderness stimuli (Ashley, 2017). Here is where the BSR students enter the journey with their pre-formed perceptions about themselves and their capabilities. Phase two, the 'Encounter Phase', refers to our encounters with the characteristics of the wilderness. In the context of the journey, this is where students interact with the constant changing, challenging and unfamiliar landscapes of the Kaimanawa Ranges. Phase one and two lead to the 'Senses Phase' which is concerned with heightened senses and the corresponding triggers of such activations. Phase four, the 'Evocation Phase' relates to the physical, affective and cognitive responses to the previous two trigger phases. The Senses Phase and Evocation Phase seem to be where the BSR students encountered adversity yet were able to overcome and deal with it successfully. As suggested by Blumer's (1969) discussion on symbolic interactionism (an approach used to understand human interactions through the meanings placed on physical, abstract and social objects), this is where modifications are made to interpretations of what a 'challenge' is. As such, these challenges are now seen as something students are capable of dealing with. By overcoming adversity, the students explained that they could now face other challenges outside of the journey with a new level confidence. Beames (2005) also came to similar conclusions, using Blumer's (1969) framework to explain how participants on a 10-week outdoor expedition to Ghana gained significant mental resilience and a greater understanding of self. The final stage of WEPS, the 'Benefits Phase' relates to the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual benefits of wilderness experiences. Such benefits are felt both immediately and in the future (alike the findings within this study). Moreover, the WEPS does not assume a linear progression, but rather a complex cyclic orientation that will differ between each subjective

wilderness experience (Ashley, 2017). As such, it can be assumed that the BSR students intense realisations about self are a product of the reactions and responses to an array of wilderness stimuli. Due to the multidimensional nature of the journey, I speculate that the students within this study indeed encountered a cyclic orientation, whereby the five phases overlap with the potential to re-enter and progress at differing levels.

Whilst these realisations seem highly significant and life changing, the characteristics of the journey may explain why students described such a profound transformation. The journey is designed so that students walk 10-12 kms per day for five days. There are two hill climbs where students ascend 300-400 meters over 2-3 kms, whilst carrying 15-20kg tramping packs. As such, the journey involves periods of high intensity exercise and is very physically demanding. In combination with this, the inexperience of the students may also give reason to the extent of personal growth experienced. For most students, it was their first time partaking in an outdoor journey of this kind. Placed in an intense and unfamiliar environment with little prior experience and skill meant that students were pushed out of their comfort zones and into a bodily space they may have never entered before. As a result of being in this space (or 'emotional state'), students experienced new emotions, thoughts and realisations about themselves. As such, the design of the journey, combined with the experience level of the students, heavily influenced the personal growth experienced by the students within this study.

In addition, it is evident that students went on a rollercoaster of emotions; some moments were experienced positively and some moments were not. It appeared that it was the balance between the two that students were able to learn more about themselves. The highs and lows of the journey complimented each other; it seemed that without one or the other, the journey may not have been as transformative for some. For example, students described having fears of being a burden to the group, both physically (fears of not having a high enough level of fitness to keep up with the group) and socially (fears that they weren't contributing enough to the team). As the journey progressed, the students learnt to voice their fears and ask for help when needed. Overcoming these fears and finding strategies to combat them allowed students to develop a level of self-awareness as well as feelings of support and belonging. Richmond et al. (2018) came to similar conclusions in his study of adolescents within a high school context. Cory-Wright (2019) also found that when negative emotions occurred during an outdoor education programme, they were more often than not associated with significant learning (e.g., emotional regulation skills). This demonstrates the benefits of the BSR outdoor journey as an educational experience as opposed to simply a recreational one.

Self – What's Missing?

As highlighted within the literature review (Chapter Two), the personal growth obtained by BSR students is echoed throughout research (Britton et al., 2018; Brookes, 2003; Greenway, 1995; Hattie et al., 1997; Harper, 1995; Richmond et al., 2018; Sibthorpe & Jostad, 2014; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; Walsh & Golin, 1976). The literature review also recognizes the recent body of research that proclaims there are immense cultural benefits of participating in outdoor education, particularly within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand (Severinsen & Reweti, 2021; Wheaton et al., 2019; Wheaton et al., 2021). Although this study was conducted within Aotearoa, there was no evidence (except one occasion) of any cultural development or connection. The one consideration that was mentioned related to religion; the pristine, unfamiliar landscapes encouraged reflection about how nature was created. However, despite the fact that culture embarks within all three categories (self, others and environment), the remainder of the students within this study did not seem to make this connection. As such, this study does not add to the emerging body of literature that connects outdoor education practice to cultural considerations.

Others

A new perception of others

As seen within Chapter Four (findings), students described experiencing significant social development, detailing powerful feelings of connection to their peers. Trust, companionship, support, friendship, connection and genuine care was created between these students, with group awareness and social skills at the core. Interestingly, it is evident that all three themes within the 'others' category are interconnected. *Bonding over hardship* contributed to the *formation of a temporary community*, processes which were only possible due to the *power of conversation and communication*. Understanding the mechanisms and processes behind these interconnected themes can help us make sense of the social development experienced by students. Below, this is explained in terms of the structure of the journey as well as by comparing and contrasting past research.

Journey structure and social growth

The literature review highlighted that increased social growth and connectedness were expected outcomes of this outdoor journey (see; Hattie et al., 1997; Keeble, 2021; Richmond et al., 2018). As such, bonding over hardship and formation of a temporary community (the two main themes that arose from students' reflections) were anticipated findings. Since

students entered the journey having only met each other a few days prior (it occurred at the start of the semester), explanation for these themes can be seen within its specific structure. For most, the thought of completing the journey with strangers was a daunting one; students had to establish connections to build trust and companionship from scratch, whilst simultaneously working through the technical and practical challenges imposed by the journey. These challenges required immediate action; students had no choice but to cooperate together and unite as a collective. Referred to by Beames (2005) as 'interpersonal gain', these continued actions began to foster a level of trust between students, particularly through the development of group awareness and social skills. This trust was the foundation to creating bonds and emotional connections between students, which ultimately led to the formation of a temporary community. In essence, student perceptions of the journey were not merely constructed by the students themselves, but also through the significant influence and connection of others.

Risk and social growth

The perceived risk and challenges of the journey appeared to be significant in fostering connections between students. Bush-bashing (travelling off-trail) in particular, fostered a significant amount of trust, suggesting that activities with high risk and autonomy have the most potential to enhance social connections. This is consistent with a large body of research (e.g., Ewert & Garvey, 2007; Priest & Grass, 1997, 2005, Liddle, 1998; Lucker & Nadler, 1997). Although this research is dated, it remains relevant as the promotion of risk still permeates current outdoor adventure education pedagogy (Brown & Fraser, 2009; Reed & Smith, 2021). The literature emphasizes that situations with high levels of perceived risk are favoured towards enhanced social growth and development (among other outcomes). Similarly, Huston et al. (2012) explored how a 13-day outdoor education programme influenced senses of community among undergraduate university students. The student's in the current study's ability to bond over hardship through unity, support and trust can be related to Huston et al.'s (2012) findings around 'challenge'. Here, challenge (and perceived risk) was found to enhance group cohesion and unity by providing a backdrop for building trust/support in order to achieve a shared goal. Similar to the students in this study, 'challenge' or 'hardship' within this context could be seen as a tool to facilitate social connection. As such, the perceived presence of risk and challenge within the journey provided a highly stimulating environment where students were forced to exit their comfort zones and rely on their peers for support and motivation; they had entered a space of growth.

In contrast, recent scholars have challenged this notion of perceived risk, suggesting that situations with less perceived risk may in fact allow for greater social understandings (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Brown & Beams, 2017; Brown & Fraser, 2009; Leberman & Martin, 2002; Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005). In support of this, students within this study concluded that 'down-time' was also an important factor contributing to their enhanced connection with their peers. Moments of reduced physical stress and less perceived risk facilitated meaningful conversation between students; it created a safe and inclusive space for deep dialogue. These findings support the body of knowledge that champions for low perceived risk activities as a way to forge meaningful connections and relationships. Therefore, this study is coherent with the contention that both high and low-risk environments have the potential to enhance social growth. Perhaps there is an optimal level of risk and challenge that can promote relationships and bonding, and this is consolidated and deepened with an opportunity to reflect during low-risk, downtime moments.

A bridge between self and others

The findings of this study indicate that themes within the 'self' category overlap with themes within the 'others' category. For instance, it seemed that students were able to develop new understandings of themselves (whether this be new perspectives, realisations or strengths/weaknesses) through the relationships they built with other members of their group. The supportive dynamic of the group allowed students to build trust, persevere through challenges, rely on one another and communicate their feelings freely. In turn, this yielded resilience, confidence and self-concept. Support for this finding (that students are able to grow perceptions of self through the growth of connection with others) can be seen within the works of Neill and Dias (2001). Here, the authors found that perceived social support was positively associated with the growth in resilience during an Outward Bound programme. The perceived presence of a supportive network seemed to enhance the participants' capability to cope and deal with obstacles at hand. Similarly, Beames (2005) proclaims that an explanation for an enhanced awareness of others can be due to an enhanced sense of self. In the context of the BSR students, we see that social support aided in their motivation to persevere and bounce back from challenges faced. For example, the social support offered to those whom were injured (e.g., words of encouragement, carrying their tramping pack) enabled the students to regulate their emotions, ease their injuries and persevere through their struggles. Although research demonstrates that social support can be a predicator of resilience (e.g., Neill & Dias, 2001; Shellman & Hill, 2017), additional research would need to be conducted to determine whether one (i.e., resilience) would have been able to be as effective without the other (i.e., supportive network), within the context of the BSR journey.

Neill and Dias (2001) and Beames (2005) examined programmes run by outdoor education companies, however, similar results are also found in higher education contexts. When examining the perceived outcomes of a university outdoor education programme, Shellman and Hill (2017) found significant increases in perceived resilience and social support. This programme had a strong focus on creating a sense of community, and the authors noted that the increase in perceived resilience experienced by their participants may have been influenced by the high levels of social support expressed between group members. It is possible that a similar process occurred for the students in this study. Whilst self-reflection and perseverance aided in constructing a new perception of self, another influencing factor could have been the presence and support of others. It should be noted that the students within Shellman and Hill's (2017) study were not outdoor education students specifically, rather students from various departments within the university.

As stated by Brookes (2003) and Brown (2010), the assumption that outcomes obtained in outdoor settings can be transferred to other settings is central to outdoor education theory, research and promotion. There were multiple moments where the students in this study stated that they believed they were obtaining both personal and interpersonal skills that would be transferrable to situations beyond the journey. Personally, the students believed they could now work through the daily tasks of modern life with a new level of confidence (which they previously did not have). They also believed they would now be able to persevere through any challenges they faced with the ability to bounce back efficiently (resilience). Interpersonally, students believed that the connections they felt with their peers would still be as significant once they returned back to university. They also described feeling like they would be able to utilize the social skills they acquired within their group in situations with their friends back home.

Support for the transfer of outcomes and long-lasting benefits of outdoor education are prominent within the literature (e.g., Allison & Stott, 2021; Beames et al., 2020; Wigglesworth & Heintzman, 2021). Referring back to the WEPS, Ashley (2017) claims that benefits of wilderness experiences are felt both immediately and over time. Beames et al. (2020) also support claims that personal outcomes obtained within outdoor pursuits (in particular, resilience and personal confidence), are transferrable and can be utilized when facing new challenges beyond the context of the pursuit. Additionally, Wigglesworth and Heintzman (2021) support claims that interpersonal skills (in particular, collaboration and social skills) can be transferred back to modern life, whereas Smith et al. (2010) suggest that the community formed in outdoor experiences is simply a temporary one.

Whilst there is a growing field of research that looks into the lasting effects of outdoor journeys, this research has tended to focus on experiences that are rich in duration and intensity (Allison & Stott, 2021). For example, Beames et al. (2020) examined the influence of a 10-week expedition to Ghana by conducting interviews 6 months after the journey had finished. Similarly, Wigglesworth and Heintzman (2021) examined the perceived significant life impacts of a 13 week long summer outdoor education course at a Canadian university that occurred over 20 years ago. Whilst the findings for both of these studies provide convincing support for the long-term transference of benefits and skills obtained during outdoor experiences, the extended duration of the outdoor experiences, as well as the wide variety of activities offered, may have impacted the enduring strength of the results. It is possible that shorter experiences may not have such long-lasting transferrable benefits (Allison & Stott, 2021), despite providing immediate 'feel-good' outcomes.

Whilst the research presented suggests that the students may be able to transfer their outcomes, a small but growing number of scholars challenge these assumptions (e.g., Brookes, 2003; Brown, 2009, 2010; Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005; Wattchow & Brown, 2011), suggesting that the student's belief that they would be able to transfer outcomes was a futile one. For example, Brookes (2003) argues that character building on a mountain (e.g., enhanced resilience) does not simply imply that the same character trait can be utilized within other contexts (such as a workplace setting). He proclaims that these behaviours are not predicators of future behaviours. Additionally, Brown (2009, 2010) reflects on this concept of transfer, and suggests that it is timely for outdoor (adventure) education practice to shift its focus from the acquisition of potentially futile transferrable knowledge towards creating communities that are enriched with understandings of and experiences with social interaction and connection. Therefore, while the students in this study may believe the benefits experienced will transfer beyond the journey (e.g., new confidence, new sense of community), this may not necessarily be the case. Future research should follow-up with these students to confirm whether or not they were able to apply their learnings in other contexts long-term.

Environment

The Wilderness

As Wattchow and Brown (2011) state, different outdoor education approaches offer different outdoor education outcomes. The BSR outdoor journey is very much situated within the 'venture into the wilderness' approach of outdoor education and therefore possesses its own unique outcomes. Wilderness experiences as they relate to the Romanticism era are

situated on the foundation that venturing into the vastness of nature provides solitude, fulfils the human spirit, connects us to the natural world and enhances perceptions of self and others (Perc-Stephenson et al., 2019; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). BSR students had to travel approximately five hours in order to reach the start of their journey, which is surrounded by 77, 348 hectares of mountain ranges consisting of native forests, shrublands, tussock grasslands and large river systems (DOC, 2012). The environment that the students were placed in was very unfamiliar and foreign to modern living. It was through experiencing these wilderness environments where students exerted positive responses (awe, respect, intrigue and learning to adapt) that enhanced their connection to nature.

The beauty and aesthetic of nature

It appeared that gaining a sense of nature's beauty (by experiencing unfamiliar environments) was a significant factor contributing towards the student's connection to nature. Whether this was obtained by reaching the summit of a mountain, climbing along a ridgeline or overlooking river systems, students described heartfelt feelings of awe, respect, intrigue and great appreciation for nature's beauty. By establishing an emotional connection to nature, these feelings strengthened the relationship between student and environment. According to Zhang et al. (2014a), engagement with nature's beauty is positively associated with connections to nature. Similarly, research into nature connectedness and well-being also emphasize that engagement with nature's beauty is an important emerging influential factor (Capaldi et al., 2017; Richardson & McEwan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2014b). The support from past research suggests that the aesthetic landscapes, such as the Kaimanawa Ranges, may give partial explanation to the connection between BSR students and nature.

The senses

A large aspect of the student's ability to connect to nature (through experiencing nature's beauty) was by engaging the senses. This sensory information triggered a series of emotions for the students, providing an experience that deepened their relationship and connection with the natural world. Sights and sounds in particular seemed to have the most influence throughout students' reflections. Being able to visually and auditorily witness nature's beauty provided a bodily experience where interactions with nature were heightened and an emotional connection was formed. Rather than being a passive observer, students became actively engaged with their natural surroundings. The theme 'escape from reality' also has relevance here as escaping the stresses, commitments and influences of the modern world allowed students to recognise and appreciate their surroundings by heightening their senses.

Venturing into the wilderness eliminated the background noise of society, allowing students to acutely engage with their surroundings.

The notion that engagement with nature via the senses positively enhances nature connectedness is supported by numerous scholars (see; Ratcliffe et al., 2013; Lumbar et al., 2018). The emotional connection that is fostered as a result of heightened senses give reason to this increased connectedness, with Mayer et al. (2014) claiming that emotional connections to nature are a major determinant of nature connectedness. Based on this claim, we might assume that the students in this study felt more connected to their environment after experiencing positive emotions associated with nature engaging the senses. Although sight and sound were significant for these students, touch and smell have been found to be more influential in Lumbar et al.'s (2018) study, suggesting that there is a relation between nature connectedness and all of the senses. The inclusion of gardening within Lumbar et al.'s (2018) study may give reason as to why touch and smell (rather than sight and sound) were more influential.

Taking into consideration the above literature, it is evident that the students experienced a series of engaging processes that developed a connection to nature. We can suggest that this process began with students witnessing nature's beauty, and, as a consequence, activating their senses (sight and sound in particular). Engagement with the senses triggered a series of emotional responses (e.g., awe, respect, intrigue) which established an emotional connection towards nature. This emotional connection enhanced students overall nature connectedness, establishing this outdoor journey as one that facilitates human nature relationships. Thus, I encourage continued actions to engage students in their senses and suggest that outdoor instructors are perhaps made conscious of this so that said actions can be maximized.

Acquiring knowledge

The acquisition of new environmental knowledge was a key factor that, according to the students, influenced their perceptions of their relationship to nature. 'Knowledge' within this context refers to basic ecological concepts, such as the identification of flora and fauna species and how they are useful for human survival in the mountains. Engaging students with these natural elements from the beginning of the journey seemed to be effective in the exertion of positive emotional responses (such as comfort, safety, appreciation and intrigue) that were felt throughout the course of the journey. There is some overlap here, between the acquisition of knowledge and the theme 'engaging the senses' as interactions with this new knowledge

involved utilization of the senses. It was this regular engagement and knowledge acquisition that provided students with a sense of comfort and safety within an unfamiliar environment.

Students acquired this knowledge through the explanations from their outdoor instructors. Simple explanations followed by activities and actions (e.g., reciting information, physical touch, identification, making fires) was central to connecting students with their environment. As facilitation has a large influence on the outcomes of outdoor education programmes (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002; Mckenzie, 2000), how these instructors facilitated the acquisition of this knowledge (including the dialogue used and approach taken), may have influenced how the student's perceived their connections to nature. For example, although the majority of students described feeling more connected to nature through obtaining new knowledge, there were a few students who did not mention it at all. This could be a result of facilitation differences between instructors. Some instructors may have regularly identified different flora and fauna species whereas others may not have. With this being said, the student's comments revealed that they perceived their experience to be fairly autonomous, with little mention of specific direction from the outdoor instructors. The only significant instruction (albeit education) from the instructors were these explanations of flora and fauna species. Therefore, although research states facilitation may influence student outcomes, in the context of the BSR journey, this was not a prominent feature in students' reflections.

Whilst there is a large body of literature that examines the acquisition of knowledge with increased pro-environmental behaviour (e.g., Frick et al., 2004; Otto & Pensini, 2017; Steg & Vlek, 2009), it appears that there is little research that examines the relationship between nature connectedness and the acquisition of knowledge specifically. However, as Otto and Pensini (2017) state, findings suggest that environmental knowledge and connectedness to nature are only weakly interrelated, with speculations about whether they have a significance influence on one another (Kaiser et al., 2008; Liefländer et al., 2013; Roczen et al., 2014). For example, Roczen et al. (2014) speculate that existing knowledge about nature may trigger an appreciation for nature (possibly through fascination) and vice versa. This appreciation for nature may be a foundation for establishing an emotional connection to nature, which is positively associated with nature connectedness (Mayer et al., 2014). Therefore, there may well be a potential link between the acquisition of knowledge and connections to nature (as experienced by the BSR students).

Environment – what's missing?

Interestingly, no change in behaviour/attitude towards environmental concern was evident within the students' reflections. Despite literature suggesting that outdoor education programmes can facilitate this change (e.g., Braun et al., 2018; Braun & Dierkes, 2017; Sandell and Ohman, 2013), the findings of this study do not support these claims. Students described 'feeling' more connected to the environment, however the only evidence of behaviour change was continued participation in outdoor pursuits. There was no mention of protection nor conservation. With this being said, it is important to consider the fact that this study was conducted within the frame of the Maunga-Ngahere (Mountains and Bush) learning outcomes when making these reflections. For example, if the purpose of Maunga-Ngahere (and the associated learning outcomes) does not involve the development of pro-environmental behaviours, it would be presumptuous to assume this would be a definitive outcome of the journey. If we achieved our goal of establishing a connection and understanding for the environment, even if this does not include acknowledgement for environmental concern, then the learning outcomes and perceived 'success' of the journey are achieved.

Additionally, there appeared to be a lack of acknowledge for 'place' within the student's reflections. Whilst it is evident that students established a more grounded connection to nature as a whole, specifics about the Kaimanawa Rangers as a 'place' were not discussed excessively within the journals/assignments. As such, it seemed that students viewed the Kaimanawa Ranges a resource for personal and social development. Perhaps the wilderness setting gives reason to this lack of acknowledge for 'place'. We can assume that students had never been to these particular ranges before (due to geographical remoteness), and therefore the probability of students returning may be slim. Establishing place-responsive behaviour in these situations may prove difficult, as explained by Wattchow and Brown (2011) .

Theory relating to all three categories

Although described briefly within the 'others' category, echoed throughout all three of this study's categories (self, others and environment) is the contrast to the concept of the 'comfort zone'. The comfort zone within outdoor education theory and practice suggests that in order to generate meaningful learning, participants should be pushed out of their comfort zones in order to experience dissonance and disequilibrium (Brown, 2008). It is situated on the belief that participants will respond and overcome these stresses, resulting in positive outcomes such as growing as a person (Brown, 2008). This notion has been embedded through outdoor adventure education philosophy for decades and still permeates programme design to this day (Reed & Smith, 2021). However, in contrast to this theory, the BSR students

described significant growth in their relationships with themselves, others and the environment in moments of reduced physical stress and risk, i.e., from within their comfort zones. Students described experiencing deeper reflections about themselves as well as being able to have more meaningful conversations with their peers when they were not faced with adversity. Similarly, students were able to actively engage more of their senses in moments of 'down-time', which ultimately deepened their connection to nature. There is a large body of literature that supports these findings, particularly in relation to challenging the comfort zone approach and risk discourses (e.g., Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Brown, 2008, 2010; Brown & Beames, 2017; Brown & Fraser, 2009; Davis-Berman & Davis, 2002; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The findings within the current study build on the discussions of these scholars, emphasising a more educational avenue to foster growth and learning.

Whilst the conclusion has been made that the current study adds to the body of knowledge that challenges risk and comfort zone discourses, it does not take into account the learnings that the students acquired from perceived physical stress/risk (or existing their comfort zones). Students developed resilience whilst establishing connections with their peers and an appreciation for nature as a result of being pushed outside of their comfort zones in an unfamiliar environment. As such, it can be assumed that the BSR students benefited from both exiting their comfort zones and moments of 'down-time'. This supports previous claims to not entirely remove this concept from outdoor education, rather view it as a metaphor for learning instead of a dominant practice (Brown, 2008).

Research findings in relation to Maunga-Ngahere (Mountains and Bush)

The findings of this study were based on student reflections submitted as a part of a university summative assignment. Part 1 of the assignment (journal entries) asked students to reflect on 1) significant moments during the day, and 2) connections to nature. Part 2, the reflective assignment, asked students to reflect on; 1) how/or whether the journey developed your relationship with the specific local environment, and 2) explain how the journey led or did not lead to an enhanced understanding of yourself and others. It appeared that students focussed very much on the direction of these instructions. For example, although no cultural considerations were explained when discussing how the journey enhanced relationships with self, others and environment (despite having potential to embark on all three), this may be because there were no specific instructions to include any cultural considerations within the assignment. As such, it is possible that students obtained significant learnings in scenarios that weren't considered to be a part of 'self', 'others' or 'environment'. Thus, it could be argued that the BSR students' perceptions of self, others and environment are fairly narrow. Perhaps

there is opportunity to broaden the scope of the assignment/journey and weave in all of the learning outcomes so that these perspectives are not so siloed.

Chapter Six: Recommendations and Limitations

Recommendations

The second aim of this study was to explore whether recommendations/modifications should be made to the outdoor course based on student's reflections. Whilst this study demonstrated that a five day outdoor journey in Aotearoa had significant impact on outdoor education students' perceptions of themselves, others and the environment, it also showed potential areas where learning could be enhanced. As such, I propose a handful of contextual recommendations that align with the course learning outcomes intended to benefit the university and future cohorts of Maunga-Ngahere (Mountains and Bush), whilst also aligning with suggestions from the literature. The purpose of the recommendations is to interweave aspects of all the learning outcomes into the journey to broaden students' views of self, others and environment.

Inclusion of down-time and stress (LO1)

The first recommendation is to increase moments of 'down-time' (or moments of reflection) and decrease moments of physical stress. With the journey's current 'venture into the wilderness' and 'comfort zone' approach, it's very apparent that experiential learning via the exertion of stress in an unfamiliar environment significantly outweighs moments of 'down-time'. Shifting this focus to include learning through reflection and serenity recognises that moments of high stress and moments of low stress both facilitate optimal learning experiences (such as the findings within this study). These moments of down-time have a holistic nature, where students have the potential to learn and appreciate the interconnectedness of being (e.g., personal, social, cultural, and environmental entities). It should be noted that I am not recommending the exclusion of physical/mental stress, but rather I am championing for a more balanced approach. For example, this may involve choosing a different, less intense, trail in the Kaimanawa Ranges. As well as being supported by findings within the current study, this recommendation is also supported by the work of other scholars (e.g., Brown, 2008; Brown & Fraser, 2009). The inclusion of more 'down-time' is the foundation to the following recommendation; inclusion of cultural considerations.

Inclusion of cultural considerations (LO4)

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there's a consensus to move towards a more bicultural way of being (Wheaton et al., 2021). Additionally, one of AUT's strategies is to embed Matauranga Māori more broadly across all courses (AUT, n.d.). As such, there should be a

change within the BSR journey so that students are able to connect cultural considerations with their experiential learning. Thus, the recommendation proposed is to incorporate such cultural considerations into the structure and purpose of Maunga-Ngahere, as it is currently only implemented within the last summative assignment. Considering the natural world is integral to Māori culture and tradition (Durie, 1985; Selby et al., 2010), incorporating cultural considerations into the journey and subsequent assessment has high relevance within the context of Aotearoa. These considerations may take the form of indigenous knowledge specific to the Kaimanawa Ranges (i.e., educating about the significance of mountains/bush for Māori culture) or activities/discussions that involve reflections about culture in general. These would potentially occur in moments of 'down-time' where students are able to focus on the learnings without outside distractions. As explained in the literature review, incorporating indigenous knowledge into outdoor education practice is not only important for the indigenous community, but for everyone (Wheaton et al., 2021). This implementation would encourage the students to begin thinking about the concept of culture, if not relevant to Māori specifically, perhaps to their own culture and heritage. Hopefully when asked about significant learnings about self, others and environment, students are now able to make these cultural connections. Thus, contributing towards LO4 whilst moving towards honouring elements of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Orange, 2015).

Sustainable behaviour discussions (LO1, LO2)

Perhaps more an invitation to discuss, rather than an inherent recommendation, is whether it is worth implementing educational experiences about sustainable behaviours into the BSR journey. Arguably, as outdoor educators we have an obligation to educate about how to protect the outdoors (the benefits of which have been discussed previously). Within the context of the journey, I firmly believe that the outdoor major students would benefit from learning sustainable behaviours. Not only do these behaviours have a relation to nature connectedness (Otto & Pensini, 2017), but they also relate to both LO1 (by enhancing human/nature connections) and LO2 (through acquiring new knowledge on how to act sustainably). Relating these behaviours towards mountains and bush concepts (i.e., conversation of mountains ecosystems), would also increase the educational aspects of the journey. This recommendation would only be practical if the outdoor instructor has sufficient subject matter knowledge, so there may be practical limitations associated with this. However, I champion for these discussions to commence.

Limitations

A key limitation in this study is that only one assessment item was analysed within one academic paper. As briefly discussed, it appeared that students focused heavily on the instructions of this assessment item and the papers specific learning outcomes. If a different assessment item was used, or a different journey was analysed, a different set of findings about the course may have arisen. Additionally, another limitation faced within this study was student's ability to convey their thoughts and learnings into written words. Whether students were able to articulate the 'right words' to represent how their perceptions were influenced throughout the journey could have potentially impacted the results. It was evident that students were able to go into depth about how the journey influenced their perceptions of self and others, but it often took a lot of reading between the lines in order to gain an understanding on how their perceptions of the environment were influenced. It is therefore possible that students' perceptions were influenced by additional aspects of the journey which were not conveyed in their journals/assignments. Perhaps this is where the original follow up interviews may have been beneficial and provided research adequacy. Whilst the reflective journals and assignments provided enough information in order to answer the research question, follow up interviews would have provided an opportunity to unpack key findings, reaching a deeper level of understanding. Therefore, another limitation faced within this study was the inability to verify findings with study participants.

The participants of this study do not represent a diverse population. Outdoor education at a tertiary level is a very small field within the wider sports sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. As such, it could be argued that some of the findings within this study are only applicable to an Aotearoa New Zealand outdoor education context (cultural considerations in particular). In addition, as the study's participants were outdoor education students specifically, it could be said that they are more likely to write favourably towards outdoor experiences compared to that of general university students. Thus, limiting the ability to generalise these findings to a broader population.

Whilst there was great potential for various concepts to arise within the discussions of these findings (e.g., place-based pedagogies, leadership theories, learning theories, gender comparisons), this dissertation was confined to the concepts of 'self, others and environment'. Focusing on these discussions within this lens meant that potential explanatory concepts were overlooked. Nevertheless, the findings provide a foundation for future research to build on such concepts, which would lead to a more comprehensive and wholly understanding of the student experience. For instance, the concept of place-based pedagogy was only briefly touched on. It may be beneficial for future research to examine this concept within the context of the Maunga-Ngahere (Mountains and Bush) journey. The findings could shine light on how

our future outdoor educators perceive the concept of 'place' within a novice practical outdoor environment, and how this can be better established within a university setting.

Research significance and final thoughts

In summary, this study has demonstrated that a five-day outdoor journey in Aotearoa had significant impact on outdoor education students' perceptions of themselves, others and the environment. A qualitative interpretive methodology allowed this study to generate a meaningful understanding of these experiences by acknowledging the constructed and contextual nature of human experiences (Thorne, 2016). Students found this to be a transformative experience, where they encountered increased personal and social growth. The interaction between students and nature allowed an emotional connection to develop, ultimately enhancing overall nature connectedness. The findings also emphasize that moments of down-time and moments of high-stress were both significant contributing factors to the student's perceptions of their learning. In essence, this study gained an understanding of the lived experiences of these students, with particular orientation to their learning. Whilst the findings did not fully embody the anticipated variety of outcomes suggested by the literature (e.g., pro-environmental behaviour, cultural and local histories), for the most part, they were supported by past research.

In contrast to a large portion of literature, this study examined undergraduate sport and recreation outdoor education students rather than undergraduates from various disciplines. We can assume that some of these students chose this course based on their intention to become outdoor educators. Thus, we now have a baseline understanding of how potential future outdoor educators perceive their novice outdoor experiences. The findings accord delicate insight into a crucial period in these future outdoor educator's lives; a time that may have significant influence on the formation of individual values, morals and career aspirations. A major focus would therefore be to create an environment where these outdoor experiences foster beliefs and behaviours that are coherent with how we want the future of outdoor education to look. This study provides a foundation/beginning to fully encapsulating these experiences, and is therefore a small piece of a large sphere of understanding; the significance, of which, is tangible. It would be interesting to see whether these students remained within the outdoor education industry and how much influence these undergraduate journeys had on retention.

The findings of this study strengthen various existing bodies of knowledge. For example, this study adds to a growing body of literature which supports the use of student

voice as credible methods within outdoor education (as well as within the wider education sector) (e.g., Beames & Ross, 2010; Brown, 2012; Zink, 2005). Without these methods, a complete understanding of lived experiences would not be obtained. In addition, the finding that both high and low risk environments have great potential to enhance personal/social development strengthens the contrasting bodies of knowledge. It also champions for more research to be conducted to establish whether there is an optimal level of risk and reflection that promotes relationships and learning. As research informs practice (Mansfield, 2014), the findings of this study have the potential to influence the way in which outdoor education is practiced. It is important to acknowledge that these findings alone would not result in this influence, rather they would contribute to bodies of knowledge that have the potential to.

Whilst I have discussed that the findings of this study are significant for the outdoor education industry, the depth of this significance will vary depending on context. For example, the higher education sector would benefit from these findings as they provide insight into how undergraduate university students perceive their practical experiences. Perhaps this insight will encourage other higher education facilities to evaluate their own courses. This could allow them to obtain an understanding of how their own students are perceiving their experiential learnings, to establish whether modifications should be made. However, the impacts of these findings on the primary and secondary school sector may not be as significant. Whilst the findings encourage the continued implementation of outdoor experiences within the educational curriculum (due to enhanced perceptions of self, others and environment), they are not representative of primary and secondary students. As such, they cannot be generalised to this particular population.

It is important to continue open discussions surrounding what should be taught in the outdoors as well as the methods used to execute this. There are neither absolute certainties nor a singular correct way to teach, and different pedagogies are required for different contexts, goals and students. Accordingly, there is a need to maintain exploring the lived experiences of students in order to retain an understanding of their learnings. Future research should investigate whether the recommendations provided are practical and valued within the context of the AUT outdoor course. If BSR staff do wish make modifications to the course structure based on this research, I believe a sufficient starting point would be to revisit the course learning outcomes and philosophical underpinnings of the journey. Establishing a shared understanding for the ‘why’ of the journey will allow the staff to adopt a philosophical lens when looking at the findings of this study; the value of outdoor journey’s that support students learning in relation to understanding self, others and the environment.

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