



*Yearbook*, 2010). Furthermore, only 30% of Emirati students enrolled in federally-funded universities are men (Ridge & Farah, 2012). In short, the numbers of male Emirati graduates entering the workforce through the federal system of higher education are comparatively low as many fail to pass the Foundation program. This gender gap as illustrated by low higher education enrolment among male secondary school students has been identified previously by a number of both locally-based and international researchers (Abdulla & Ridge, 2011; Ridge, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Minnis, 2006; Hatherley-Greene, 2010; Dahl, 2010; Fields, 2011; Daleure, 2011; Hourani & Diallo, 2011; Ostrowska, 2011).

In light of this phenomenon, I therefore began to investigate the following two questions:

- Why do so many friendly and respectful male Emirati students come to colleges of higher education but not avail themselves of the learning opportunities that await them in one of the most highly resourced post-secondary institutions in the world?
- Why do so many male Emirati students appear to have low levels of intrinsic motivation for studying and learning in higher education?

In answering these key questions, I sought to describe and categorize the students' transitions as they leave their predominantly Arabic cultural life-world associated with Emirati families, community, and government schooling and attempt to enter the Western/English language culture associated with institutes of higher education in the UAE. Students were surveyed and observed, enabling me to use a diverse range of data, both quantitative and qualitative. Additionally I used data from previous research I had conducted a decade earlier in order to provide chronological comparisons of similar study groups.

Faculty were also interviewed and surveyed, which led to a set of emerging questions related to their role in cultural change, the appropriateness of learner-centred instructional methodology, and efficacious classroom management attitudes.

## **Background**

The traditional Arabian way of life, centred on the tribe and family, remained more or less undisturbed until midway through the 20th Century, when the discovery of massive oil reserves changed everything. A 'cultural tsunami' was unleashed in the 1980's as hundreds of thousands of unskilled and skilled foreign workers arrived to help extract the oil and develop the young country's infrastructure. The immigration of large numbers of workers from Asia, Europe and North America has produced an unforeseen impact upon the cultural identity of the local Emiratis – this is observed especially in the large urban centres of Abu Dhabi and Dubai where modern skyscrapers (including the highest building in the world, Burj Khalifa), Western hotels, night-clubs, and cinemas (showing Western and Hindi movies) co-exist with mosques, Quranic cultural centres, and camel-racing. Despite a robust Emirati birth rate especially in rural areas, by 2012 the population imbalance between the Emiratis and expatriate workers had reached the point where local Emiratis comprised just 11% of the total UAE population (*UAE population at 8.26m in 2010*, 2011). Considering how far the country has changed in a little over 50 years, it is not surprising that many Emiratis have mixed feelings about the pace of development in their country (Heard-Bey, 2004; Pearson, 2011; Salama, 2010).

### **Education**

In the recent past, most young Emirati children traditionally attended state-funded primary and secondary schools, staffed primarily by Arab expatriate teachers from Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt (Ridge, 2010). The teaching methodology employed in the schools naturally arose from the Quranic traditions still found throughout the Arab world: an emphasis on rote memorization, learning only to pass the test, and a strict code of behaviour that places the teacher, not the student,

firmly and often intimidatingly at the centre of the teaching and learning process (*World Bank MENA ECD Report*, 2009; Ahmed, 2011; Al Subaihi, 2011; Nereim, 2012).

Due to the sluggishness of the government secondary school system to modernize its teaching methods and improve the quality and effectiveness of teachers, over half of Emirati parents in Dubai now prefer to send their children to expensive private schools (Kenaid, 2011). Despite hundreds of workshops conducted by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to improve teaching methods and instructional approaches, little appears to have changed. This may result partly from the lack of mandatory teaching qualifications including a teaching practicum where teachers learn, practise and demonstrate modern techniques of learner-centred education (Ridge, 2010). Arriving from a motivation-sapping and largely uncaring/disinterested secondary school experience (Hatherley-Greene, 2012a), too many ill-equipped and ill-prepared young male Emiratis enter the colleges and universities of higher education with a strong sense of dread and an expectation of failure (Hatherley-Greene, 2012b; Ridge & Farah, 2012).

### ***Student Retention***

North American research student persistence and retention since the mid-1970s has been strongly influenced by the work of Tinto (1975; 1988; 1997; 2006) and, inspired by his work, many other researchers have contributed to this growing body of knowledge (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1979, 1980; Andrade, 2006; Anderman et al., 2006). We now know much more about the successful assimilation and integration of young college-age students into Western college life as well as the process and stages by which they gradually come to a decision to leave. Summarizing the research, it is evident that involvement, engagement, and integration are the key success predictors in a student's first year at college.

Involvement matters (Tinto, 1997), and appears to be a result of the student's energy and effort – and it matters most in the crucial first year of a new student's life at college. Astin (1984) defines *involvement* as the “amount of physical and psychological energy a student devotes to his college experience” (p. 528). Tinto found that increased involvement from the student increases persistence and improves learning outcomes (1997).

*Engagement* has more to do with the college environment providing diverse, relevant, and novel opportunities for students to become involved and participative, for example, by establishing clubs on campus. Finally, *integration*, or “a sense of belonging” (Tinto, 1997, p. 599) is a shared responsibility between the student and the institution. For a student to become integrated, they must first be willing to do so by adopting the norms and values of the college culture. In turn, the college must transmit and live its own norms and values so they are clearly and unambiguously received and adopted by the new students (1997).

In local student retention studies, Daleure (2011) completed a study of 294 male Emirati students at a HCT college and found that the key persistence factors at college were parental support, students' own dreams of continuing education, and the perceived quality of post-secondary education institutions within the UAE vis-à-vis study opportunities abroad; this supports many of Tinto's findings. Ridge et al. (2013) found that the process of dropping-out from government schools in the UAE is associated with low socio-economic background, poorly educated and/or uninvolved parents, and de-motivating school experiences marked by unsupportive teachers and disruptive peers.

### ***Research context***

This study took place at a male college in a rural location in the UAE, one of the Higher Colleges of Technology charged with providing post-secondary vocational education exclusively for the young Emirati men and women around the country. Established in 1988 in Abu Dhabi and Al Ain with four colleges (separate male and female colleges at each location), the system of colleges has now grown

to seventeen colleges (*HCT Catalogue, 2010*). The system currently offers over 19,000 students a range of career programs in Applied Communications, Business, Education, Engineering, Health Sciences, Information Technology, and General Education; almost all HCT programs are delivered in the English language.

The National Admissions and Placement Office (NAPO) co-ordinates all Emirati secondary student applications for the main publicly-funded higher education institutions in the UAE: UAE University, Higher Colleges of Technology, and Zayed University. Since 2007, all Grade 12 students in their final year of secondary school may make multiple attempts at the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA), which measures their level of English language and numerical competence (NAPO, 2012). The CEPA English examination consist of three sections: grammar, vocabulary and reading, and writing.

**Table 1: HCT Foundations English levels and their associated equivalencies, 2011 (NAPO, 2012).**

HCT Foundations	CEPA English	CEPA Writing	CEFR	IELTS Score	Exit Foundations
Direct Entry	180+	5.0+	B2	IELTS 5.0+	0
Level 4	170	4.0	B1+	IELTS 4.5	1
Level 3	160	3.0	B1	IELTS 4.0	2
Level 2	150	2.0	A2+	N/A	3
Level 1	140	1.0	A2	N/A	4
Pre-Fdns	<140	0-1.0	A1 - A1+	N/A	N/A

Table 1 illustrates the equivalencies between IELTS (International English Language Testing System), CEPA and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) which seeks to validate competencies across languages in the European Union (CEFR, 2012). CEPA-English is one of the important requirements for admission, as students with a high CEPA-English score (minimum 180) may be eligible to enter career programs directly. If an applicant obtains a CEPA score of less than 180 but greater than 140 (this was raised to 150 in 2012), s/he may be placed in a Foundation program in order to develop the minimum language and numerical proficiency required for successful study at undergraduate level. In 2010, less than 10% of Emirati applicants to higher education met the basic proficiency level of English level set at a CEPA score of 185<sup>1</sup>, permitting them to proceed directly into their first year of their career programs; thus, in that same year, over 90% were placed into Foundation programs (*UAE Yearbook 2010, 2010*).

These Foundation programs are provided at all three UAE federally-funded higher educational institutions to enable those students under 180 CEPA to improve their English language competency, English numeracy skills, computing, and personal and professional development skills. During the 2011-2012 academic year, Foundations in HCT was divided into four levels based on the level of English language competency measured by the students' CEPA scores. For the purpose of this research, Levels 1 and 2 were labelled as 'lower levels' (CEFR descriptors A1-A2 'extremely low to low English ability, beginner level') while Levels 3 and 4 were labelled as 'higher levels' (CEFR descriptors B1-B2 'emerging proficiency, intermediate level'). A level 1 student was permitted to take up to four semesters (two years) to reach IELTS 5.0, the minimum level for entry into HCT's undergraduate career programs.

## Cultural definitions

This research takes place within the realm of culture, described by Giroux as a landscape filled with multiple and heterogeneous borders where different histories, languages, experiences, and voices intermingle amidst diverse relations of power and privilege (2005, p. 145).

Attempting to assist visitors in negotiating journeys within this landscape, various researchers have proffered 'roadmaps' in the form of cultural models and definitions (Hofstede, 2001; Kroeber & Parsons, 1958; Goodenough, 1976; Aikenhead, 1996; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Though many definitions of culture have been proposed, I prefer Michie's (2011) interpretation:

the social environment in which an individual is raised and lives, [including] a range of concepts and beliefs that is accepted by individuals as defining their group identity. (p. 10).

In the pre-oil times prior to the 1950's, the transmission of Arabian Gulf culture (traditions, norms, values, beliefs, and world-view) from one generation to the next was typically passed on within the family, kin and tribal groups: generally, young people of both genders were encouraged to "behave like adults as soon and as well as possible" (Heard-Bey, 2004, p. 154). Feghali (1997) found that the three basic values most commonly mentioned in the literature on Arab cultural communication patterns more broadly include collectivism, hospitality, and honor:

The influence of [these] Bedouin values remains strong, despite the fact that around 90% of the population in the region presently resides in villages or cities" (p. 352)

Young Arab males have a higher status in the family compared to females and in the home, there was (and still remains) a high tolerance of young people's behaviour in the early years (Heard-Bey, 2004). Parenting styles are often closely associated with those traditional values reflecting Islamic culture: "respect for elders, good manners, good academic outcomes, and self-discipline" (Alsheikh, Parameswaran & Elhoweris, 2010, p. 8), resulting often in strict and authoritarian parenting to which Arab youth appear to respond positively (Dwairy & Mustapha, 2006).

In contrast, the new affluence associated with the country's oil-wealth has resulted inadvertently in the creation of a rentier society (Minnis, 2006), a symptom of which is a growing dependence of Emirati parents upon foreign housemaids and (often untrained) nannies in raising the next generation of Emirati children (Al Sumaiti, 2012). 1). In her report, Al Sumaiti found that

94 percent of Emirati families and only 5 percent of expatriate families employ maids and nannies to do housework as well as look after children. (p. 4)

She goes on to list the negative results of this recent social phenomenon, including harm to the child's maternal attachment causing possible behavioural problems (housemaids typically spend between 30-70 hours a week caring for children), erosion of the traditional Arab values usually passed down through parenting (untrained foreign nannies often have minimal Arabic-speaking skills and little awareness of Arab customs and values), and emotional trauma for the young child when the nanny's two-year contractual agreement ends and she returns to her home country.

When discussing the intercultural landscape, it is easy to adopt naïve and essentialist notions of cultural difference, to which the work of cultural researchers such as Hofstede (2001) and Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1998) has sometimes contributed, through the uncritical adoption of their dichotomized cultural dimensions and orientations such as individualism/collectivism (Holliday, 2011). Essentialist positions on human traits such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc, assume that these are fixed, while not allowing for variations among individuals or over time (Cupane, 2008). On the other hand, non-essentialist perspectives assume that the characteristics of individuals, groups and communities exist but that these characteristics are not fixed, varying as they do from individual to individual over time and space. Cultural dimensions and orientations may best be seen as cultural spaces within which people's identities are shaped, and which accommodate also

meeting points, crossing points or borders which individuals may approach or pass beyond into new cultural spaces.

### ***Cultural border crossing***

In Arab culture, nothing symbolizes the image of a border crossing more viscerally than a checkpoint at Ramallah or Gaza, whereas in Western culture, a border crossing might be likened to the Berlin Wall. Henry Giroux's (2005) cultural border-crossing metaphor provides an appropriate framework to study a people and a society that have moved developmentally from subsistence to an industrial-knowledge society in less than two generations. Giroux first applied the border crossing metaphor in the early 1990's as he sought to describe the hardships endured by students in North America whose race and culture were different from those of the dominant group. The concept was further refined and updated in his second edition published in 2005, but his description of the metaphor remains true and powerful:

... the concept of borders provides a continuing and crucial referent for understanding the co-mingling – sometimes clash – of multiple cultures, languages, literacies, histories, sexualities, and identities. Thinking in terms of borders allows one to critically engage the struggle over those territories, spaces, and contact zones where power operates to either expand or to shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups, and places. (Giroux, 2005, p. 2)

Aikenhead (1996) used Giroux's metaphor to describe the cultural journey experienced by young Canadian science students as they crossed from their known sub-cultures of peer groups and family into the sub-cultural world of science education with its own language, norms and customs, beliefs, world-views and group-think. His view is that students' understanding and learning is perceived as a cultural event – students do not learn in isolation from the cultural elements that make up the learning experience. These elements include the norms, customs, attitudes and values, beliefs, expectations, world-view and conventional actions of a group (Phelan et al., cited in Aikenhead, 1996, p. 7). Similarly, Mulholland & Wallace (2003) described the border crossings of teacher trainees' "lived experiences of learning to teach" at an Australian university into the sub-culture of the often harsh reality-check of a teacher's first year teaching (p. 882). We can extend Giroux's metaphor of the cultural borders and their crossing by conceptualizing individuals as travellers crossing cultural borders, the ease of which is largely determined by the congruence between individuals' pre-formed world-views and the cultural space into which they are crossing.

### ***Border crossing experiences***

The difficulties experienced during cultural border crossings may be conceptualized as 'hazards' and the degree of difficulty with which a border crossing into a cultural space is achieved may be categorized as smooth, managed, hazardous or virtually impossible (Cobern & Aikenhead, 1998). The ease of crossing a cultural border is dependent upon the congruence between the world-view of the border crosser and that prevalent in the 'borderlands' – the area between the familiar 'safe zones', where the perspective/culture of the border crosser and that of the new landscape they are approaching begin to interact, dove-tail, mix and blend (see Figure 1).

A student's world-view enables him or her to "gauge the plausibility of any assertion" (Cobern as cited in Aikenhead, 1996, p. 4) or as Aikenhead nicely summarizes, "world-views are culturally validated presuppositions about the natural world" (Aikenhead, 1996, p. 4). Border crossings need not be problematic, as most adults change their behaviours in quite subtle ways as they move from one social context to another. The unifying lubricant that smoothes and facilitates these border crossing experiences is a common culture, particularly exemplified in the form of language: Giroux suggests that

how we understand and come to know ourselves cannot be separated from how we are represented and how we imagine ourselves. (cited in Pillsbury & Shields, 1999, p. 2)

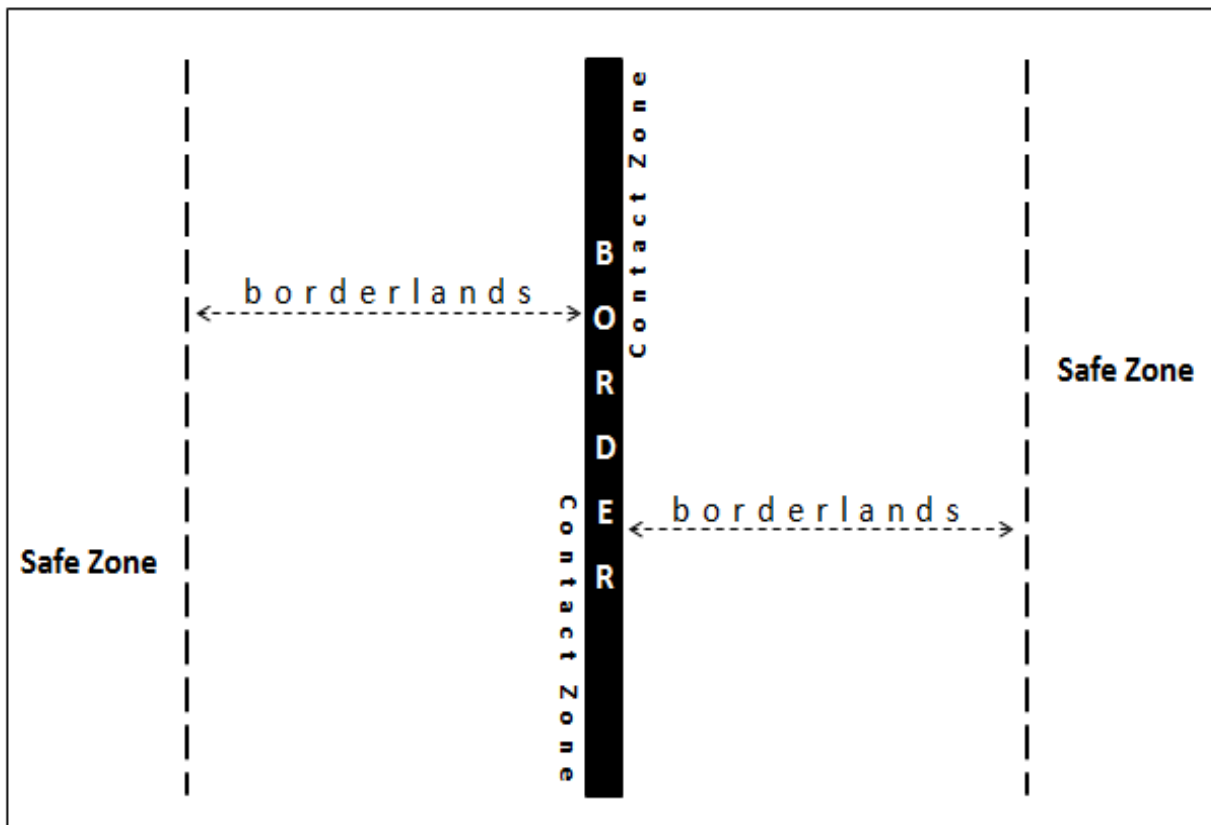


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the border crossing area including zones and barriers.

In Phelan et al.'s (1991) study, students with different cultural identities and 'ways of knowing' to those of Western science encounter obstacles to learning, engagement, and ultimately, enculturation. These learners typically reported border crossing experiences ranging from smooth to impossible. In their research, which was later expanded by Costa (1995), students' border crossing experiences were categorized into four transition experiences based upon the congruency between their world-views and those of science (see Table 2). Students with world-views similar or congruent to that of the new cultural landscape in which they found themselves experienced smooth transitions; students whose world-views were different were able to manage their transitions though the degree of relative difficulty and ease varied; students whose world-views were diverse (beyond 'different' and bordering on 'difficult') experienced hazardous/difficult transitions, with the result that several did not successfully (safely?) negotiate the crossing, and finally, those students with highly discordant world-views increased their resistance to transitions to such a degree that they found it impossible to transition at all (Phelan et al., 1991). As Hennessy (1993) puts it, "crossing over from one domain of meaning to another is exceedingly hard" (p. 9).

Table 2: Movements between different worlds result in different types of crossing (adapted from Costa, 1995; Phelan et al., 1991).

Movement between...	Type of crossing
Congruent worlds	Smooth transitions
Different worlds	Managed boundary crossings
Diverse worlds	Difficult boundary crossings
Highly discordant worlds	Impossible boundary crossings

As established by Costa (1995), Aikenhead (1996), and Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer and Scott (1994), learning is a cultural experience of acquisition, driven by the need for students to acquire a “new community of discourse, a new culture” (Driver at al., 1994, p. 11), not just in the area of science learning but in any area or context where the cultures of the students and the teacher differ. Cultural acquisition is a process of transmission (consciously or unconsciously) of ideas, knowledge and values from one group to another (Hawkins & Pea, 1987). This process can be supportive or disruptive according to whether the student’s world-view is similar or different to that of the ‘transmitting culture’ (Baker & Taylor, 1995). If the transmitting (new) culture is congruent or harmonizes with the student’s world-view, the new culture will support the student’s world-view as a result of enculturation – if the transmitting (new) culture is incongruent or is at odds with the student’s world-view, the new culture may disrupt the student’s world-view to such an extent that they replace their own culture with the new culture: a result of assimilation.

## Methodology

The research involved tracking over one academic year (2011-2012) a sample of 60 new Foundations students, who had been placed in four levels in the college (see Table 3) based on their English language competence as measured by the Common Educational Proficiency Assessment (CEPA). Almost 190 new students were registered and confirmed on the first day of the semester. However, due to high no-show and attrition rates, only 60 students completed the surveys several weeks into their first semester and then continued into the second semester.

**Table 3: Foundations student population by level, status and CEPA range, 4 September 2011.**

Level	Returning/ Promoted	Returning/ Repeating	New	Student Survey	CEPA Placement Range for new students	Total
Level 1	N/A	0	61	19	140 – 149	61
Level 2	13	11	70	18	150 - 159	94
Level 3	10	5	40	23	160 - 169	55
Level 4	38	5	18	0	170 - 179	61
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>60</b>		<b>271</b>

My approach can be compared to that of a bricoleur or ‘quilt-maker’, implying that each patch of cloth with its unique dimensions of different colours and textures contributes to the overall shape of the completed quilt. At various times, those patches of quilt were formed by adopting a post-positivist stance, enabling me to describe and explain general social patterns of behaviour through surveys based on the quality standards of researcher objectivity, construct/predictive/internal validity, generalisability, reliability, and triangulation. At other times, I created different patches from an interpretivist stance which facilitated an open, artful, and interpretive exploration of complexity through observation, case studies, interviews, focus groups, journals and student narratives based on the quality standards of immersion within the setting, member checking, listening and recording participants’ voices, making tentative and cautious claims, and respecting the process of understanding through emergence. The postmodernist patches remind us all at this point in the 21st Century to disrupt the presumed primacy of any paradigm by embracing difference, tension, and pluralism. Finally, I sought to uncover hitherto hidden and unequal relationships by adopting a critical stance that seeks to help those without power to acquire it (Willis, 2007), based



upon the quality standards of critical self-reflection and self-study, and displaying and ‘living’ ethics of care, fairness, and empowerment.

### **Border crossing index (BCI)**

Four categories of student border crossers were proposed – *smooth, managed, difficult, and impossible* – and a Border Crossing Index (BCI) was constructed from an analysis of student responses in a 50-item Student Survey. Translated into Arabic, the survey was adapted from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) which were developed by a US-based group of researchers led initially by Carol Midgley, who used goal orientation theory to examine the relation between the learning environment and students’ motivation, affect, and behaviour (Midgley et al., 1998). The student scales assessed student perception of the transition from high school to college, the motivation to learn, self-evaluation of persistence in learning, learner-centred teaching practices, and a self-assessment of their home lives including perceptions of their parents, high school experiences, and abilities. For example, question 21 under the section *Motivation to learn* reads: “When I find I can’t complete a task, I tend to give up and ask my friends for help.” Students are then asked to circle one of the Likert scale numbers from 1 to 5 (*Not at all true to Somewhat true to Very true*). The details of the methodology and process in creating the Border Crossing Index may be read in previously-published papers and book (Hatherley-Greene, 2012a; Hatherley-Greene, 2014). The survey was administered in the first few weeks of the first semester.

Based upon each individual BCI score, 60 first-year male students were placed into the four broad categories (see Table 4). Nearly a quarter of the students fell into each of the ‘difficult’ or ‘smooth’ categories, as might be expected if students were placed in a category at random (25%). The category ‘managed’ comprised over half the new students (52%) while the final ‘impossible’ category contained only one student who left within the first 20 days of the semester.

**Table 4: Proportion of students in each border crossing category.**

<b>Border Crossing Category</b>	<b>BCI Class Interval ranges</b>	<b>Frequency n=60</b>	<b>Predicted Proportions</b>	<b>Actual Proportion</b>
<b>Smooth</b>	40-33	14	25%	23%
<b>Managed</b>	32-24	31	25%	52%
<b>Difficult</b>	23-16	14	25%	23%
<b>Impossible</b>	15-8	1	25%	2%

The apparent difficulty and incongruence of the cultural border crossing experiences is highlighted by the fact that 72% of the 60 students reported in later focus group meetings (see below) that they were generally “confused and lonely” in their first week of college and 84% felt generally “troubled” because their home and college lives were so different – seven of the 13 Level 2 students who took part in the student focus group in March 2012 reported that they felt they were “entering a strange new world”.

This state of “normlessness” (Tinto, 1988, p.442) is best illustrated by reviewing the enrolment numbers by program level over the duration of the critical first semester (see Figure 2). Level 1 and 2 students ‘talked with their feet’, withdrawing in substantial numbers from college over this period. In comparison, the higher level students remained in college, successfully moving up a level at the end of the semester. Difficult cultural border crossings associated with lower level students also meant they were more likely to disrupt classroom lessons: 27.5% of lower level students compared to 15.5% of higher level students reported that they sometimes disturb the lesson when they get

























