

# **Politics as creative pragmatism**

**Rethinking the political action of contemporary university students  
in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis reconsiders the political action and agency of contemporary university students in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although the twenty-first century has witnessed a global growth in student protest (Brooks 2017), there does not seem to have been a noticeable increase in political activism among New Zealand students, with critics variously labelling students as apathetic, selfish, distracted or disinterested (Green 2015; McClennen 2015). However, this thesis argues there is more to contemporary New Zealand student political action and attitudes than has been previously understood. The political attitudes of New Zealand students are examined through 70 in-depth interviews with students at New Zealand's eight universities, supplemented by observation in the period 2014 to 2015.

The thesis provides a conceptual framework of '3 Ds' for understanding the experiences of contemporary students that inform their political action: *desires* for different types of politics, *demands* of contemporary university environments and *doubts* in an era of political ambiguity. This framework challenges and extends dominant theoretical explanations of student political action in the early twenty-first century, specifically theories of agency, political economy and social network analysis.

In advancing a '3 Ds' framework, this thesis also identifies a particular form of political agency emerging among New Zealand students that can be synthesised and understood through a concept of 'creative pragmatism'. Creative pragmatism is a term advanced here to describe a 'realistic' orientation among students towards their social world, and their creative but cautious negotiation of political environments. The term also acknowledges a willingness amongst students to rethink how they engage politically, while retaining a strong ideal that a 'different politics is possible'.

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## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 An apathetic generation?

University students in the twenty-first century are confronting a series of challenges particular to their generation. As predominantly young people, students are part of a cohort that is facing dangerous environmental change, growing inequality, weakening democracies and ongoing economic turbulence (Hayward 2012). As members of universities, students are encountering a transformed landscape of higher education (Altbach et al. 2009). Greater numbers of students are attending university than ever before, but many are graduating with unprecedented levels of personal debt coupled with precarious employment prospects, especially in the predominately English-speaking democracies of the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Bauman 2012a; Dean 2015; France 2016).

In this context, the political action of university students needs to be reconsidered. There is a tendency within some academic and popular commentary in the Global North to compare twenty-first century students to their seemingly more radical counterparts of the 1960s, with current students often claimed to be relatively apathetic, lazy, self-centred or complacent (Neilson & Michael 2012; McClennen 2015; Walsh 2015; Case & Donnell 2016; Ellis 2016). Yet it is not appropriate to presume that contemporary students are apathetic, nor that they are politically indifferent. Current students are confronting a profoundly different environment to their predecessors, and their political action should be understood on its own terms within this context. Examining the political action of a new generation of university students also offers an insight into the political undercurrents that may yet come to prominence within established democracies. The years students spend at university are formative in shaping how they participate, both in the present and future (Binder & Wood 2013; Astin

1977). Reconsidering the political action of contemporary students helps to better understand how students will engage with and approach the challenges confronting these democracies.

Contrary to claims of student apathy, there appears to be growing volatility in contemporary student political action that suggests that there is more to student agency than previously anticipated. The twenty-first century has witnessed a global rise of student protest (Brooks 2017). From Germany and the United Kingdom, to Canada and the United States, to Chile, South Africa and Hong Kong, students have taken to the streets to challenge their respective governments (Cini 2017; Guzmán-Valenzuela 2017; Guzman-Concha 2012; Mehreen & Thomson 2017; Hall 2016). This student revolt has emerged at a time of growing youth-led dissent. While electoral turnout rates among young people have continued to largely decline in established democracies, there has also been an emergent insurgency politics, from support for challengers within mainstream political parties, such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders (Abbott 2016), to newcomer or outsider parties in Europe on both the political left and right (Wigmore 2014; Henley et al. 2016), to movements like Black Lives Matter (Garza 2014; Davis 2015), fourth wave feminist campaigns (Cochrane 2013) and the Women's March (Williams 2017). Students have been key members of these movements, including in the Spanish Indignados, Occupy and the French Nuit Debout (Mason 2013; Castañeda 2012).

Not all university students are necessarily engaged in this protest and resistance, however. At least in New Zealand, where this thesis is situated, there does not seem to have been a noticeable rise in student protest to the extent witnessed in other established democracies (Green 2015; Taylor 2016; Edwards 2016). This apparent lack of increase in protest is intriguing as New Zealand shares many features with other established democracies that have seen growth of student dissent, including a strong history of student resistance, declining youth voter turnout, rapidly escalating levels of student debt, rising inequality and growing housing unaffordability (Dean 2015; Godfrey 2016; Rashbrooke 2015; Kelsey 2015; Eaqub & Eaqub 2015).

Yet it is not possible to equate a lack of protest among New Zealand students to apathy. Over the past decade, a number of student-led organisations have emerged that have sought to challenge the political status quo, such as the climate activists of Generation Zero or the criminal justice advocacy project JustSpeak (Fowler 2014; Blake-Kelly & Whelan 2015). Here in Christchurch, seemingly 'apathetic' university students organised following the devastating Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 to form a 'Student Volunteer Army' that led 26,000 volunteers to help clean up residents' properties around the city (SVA 2016). This action was not born out of nowhere and suggests there may be an underlying civic engagement and agency among current students that is not well understood by researchers and practitioners.

## **1.2 Research aim and objectives**

In this conflicted era of perceived apathy and political volatility, this thesis aims to reconsider how university students are expressing their political agency in contemporary university environments in Aotearoa New Zealand. This thesis addresses four key objectives:

1. To document the attitudes of New Zealand university students towards political action and the political environment;
2. To analyse the experiences, challenges and tensions that inform New Zealand student political action as identified by students;
3. To critically interrogate theoretical debates of student political action from the perspective of students; and
4. To develop a conceptual framework to better understand how students are expressing their political agency and how it is informed by university environments in the early twenty-first century.

As suggested in these objectives, this thesis has both theoretical and practical intentions. A key theoretical outcome is to reconsider current scholarly debates of student political action from the perspective of students themselves. Student attitudes offer an insight into the hopes, impetuses and challenges that inform their political action. These

attitudes are not self-evident and cannot be assumed by researchers or commentators in accounting for contemporary political action. In analysing student perceptions of their political action and the political environment, this thesis seeks to evaluate in what ways and to what extent the stated attitudes of students support, challenge or extend existing theories of student political action.

On a practical level, a second intended outcome is to document and acknowledge the tensions and challenges of political action for a new cohort of university students in New Zealand. This intent develops from my experience as a student. I began university at the same time as the first signs of the global financial crisis were hitting the headlines, and over the years since became increasingly sceptical of what our current model of capitalism could offer, particularly within the constraints of a finite planet and with widening global and local inequities (Jackson 2009; Wilkinson & Pickett 2009). As a student interested in social change, I was aware throughout my studies that university students have long been identified as often being at the forefront of political and social transformations. Yet there seemed to be little in the way of 'traditional' activism on university campuses that dealt with these local, national and global concerns. Apart from a study exchange to Copenhagen during the 2009 climate negotiations, I went through my entire undergraduate study in New Zealand without actively participating in any major social or political movements. At the same time, the idea of political apathy did not seem to be a convincing explanation for the seeming lack of protest among students: I certainly did not feel apathetic, even if my actions might appear to be so according to traditional measures of political participation.

This research, then, forms part of a process of thinking through the challenges of political action for contemporary university students in New Zealand. Despite the rise of technologies that in many respects have enabled greater sharing of information than ever before, there are few occasions to take stock of the changing undercurrents of the student body, both within and across universities. As such, this research seeks to make explicit the emerging differences and tensions between students in their attitudes towards political action, but also to identify that which is in common among students.

An important caveat to note here is that this thesis considers New Zealand university students specifically. As a cohort, university students are not synonymous with young people, as many young people will not attend university and university students also include older participants who return to study. The findings of this study, therefore, do not encompass the attitudes of young people in New Zealand generally, or students at other tertiary institutes such as polytechnics or *wānanga*.<sup>1</sup> University students, rather than tertiary students more broadly, were selected as the subject for this research as universities have traditionally formed centres for student activism in New Zealand (Sharfe 1995; Green 2015), and traditions of activism can inform the likelihood of protest among students (van Dyke 1998). Focusing on university students was also a matter of feasibility, as including other tertiary institutions in the empirical study would thinly spread the time and resources available for this research. In the remainder of this study, the term student is used to refer to university students specifically.

### 1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis progresses in eight chapters. In Chapter 2, I present a critical review of theories of contemporary student political action. I consider three dominant theoretical approaches, which I describe as agency, political economy and social network theories. Agency theories seek to explain political action primarily by reference to the capacity of students to consciously act with intent to shape the social world (Henn & Foard 2012; Norris 2002, 2011; Dalton 2008). By contrast, political economy theories emphasise the ways student political action is informed by the social, political and economic environment (Giroux 2011, 2014; Mirowski 2013; Brown 2015). Social network theories provide a third approach by accounting for student political action via the density and nature of the connections among students (Crossley 2008; Crossley & Ibrahim 2012; Hensby 2013). I review the contribution of these theories to current understandings of

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<sup>1</sup> Tertiary education institutions in New Zealand that provide education in a Māori cultural context.

contemporary student political action, but also identify the key assumptions and challenges that underlie these approaches that are examined in the empirical study.

Chapter 3 then explains and justifies the research approach and methods adopted for this thesis. Methodologically, this study takes an interpretively underpinned iterative approach towards research, and I justify why this approach was employed. I then detail the data gathering and analysis methods selected to investigate student political action in New Zealand. This thesis documents and analyses 70 in-depth interviews with university students at New Zealand's eight universities in conjunction with observation, carried out in the period 2014 to mid-2015. I discuss the processes used for data collection, including the approach used to generate a sample that exemplified the student body in New Zealand as a whole, and the procedures used for ethical practice. I then detail how analysis was undertaken and research validity achieved.

Chapters 4 to 7 form the body of this thesis. In these chapters, research analysis and discussion of literature are combined, reflecting the iterative research approach adopted for this study. The first three of these chapters present a framework of '3 Ds' of student experiences that I argue inform the political action of contemporary New Zealand students, which I describe as *desires*, *demands* and *doubts*. In Chapter 4, I consider the *desires* students expressed for different types of politics. This chapter analyses student attitudes towards formal politics, the issues that mattered to them and their aspirations for political action. As I discuss, these *desires* were not necessarily coherent or clearly defined by the students in this study. Nevertheless, far from apathetic, I argue student attitudes are suggestive of an underlying discontent among New Zealand students with the political status quo and an interest in political change. For theories of student political action, I identify some strong parallels in this analysis with some existing agency theories, but contend that the *desires* expressed by students appear to be much broader than previously anticipated.

Chapter 5 examines the *demands* students experienced in contemporary university environments. This chapter considers how students spoke about the experience of being a student, including how debt affected them, and how they

described its impact on their political action. I then discuss the collective pressures experienced by New Zealand students' associations and how these challenges have influenced their role. I argue that a scarcity of finance and time appears to inform a preference among students, individually and collectively, for political action that is consciously cautious and uncontroversial. I also suggest there seems to be a tendency for students to limit their engagement to forms of political action that other actors external to the university consider acceptable and respectable. For theories of student political action, I argue these *demands* resonate with political economy theories, but contend that analysis of student attitudes offers greater nuance to these accounts, especially about debt.

In Chapter 6, I turn to the *doubts* students experienced as political actors in an era of political ambiguity. One aspect of the *doubts* discussed is the questions students raised about the effectiveness of political action and their expressed scepticism of the political claims made by politicians, public commentators and other students alike. Far from complacent, I argue that these attitudes are suggestive of an intriguing willingness among students to rethink and experiment with political action. However, the chapter also considers student *doubts* of the political community that they were part of as students. I suggest these *doubts* of community appear to contribute to hesitation and insecurity of participating politically among some students, especially where they feel politically isolated. For theories of student political action, I contend that these *doubts* are suggestive of the importance of social networks in influencing student political action, although not necessarily in the way anticipated by social network theories.

Following these '3 Ds' of *desires*, *demands* and *doubts*, Chapter 7 then considers a particular type of political agency that appears to be emerging among New Zealand students. I propose the concept of 'creative pragmatism' as a way of synthesising and understanding this approach. Creative pragmatism is a term advanced as a way to describe the 'realistic' and 'sensible' politics that students seem to be engaging with. As I argue, the concept helps to highlight the creativity and ingenuity of their agency, but also provides a way of thinking through some of the weaknesses of the approach,

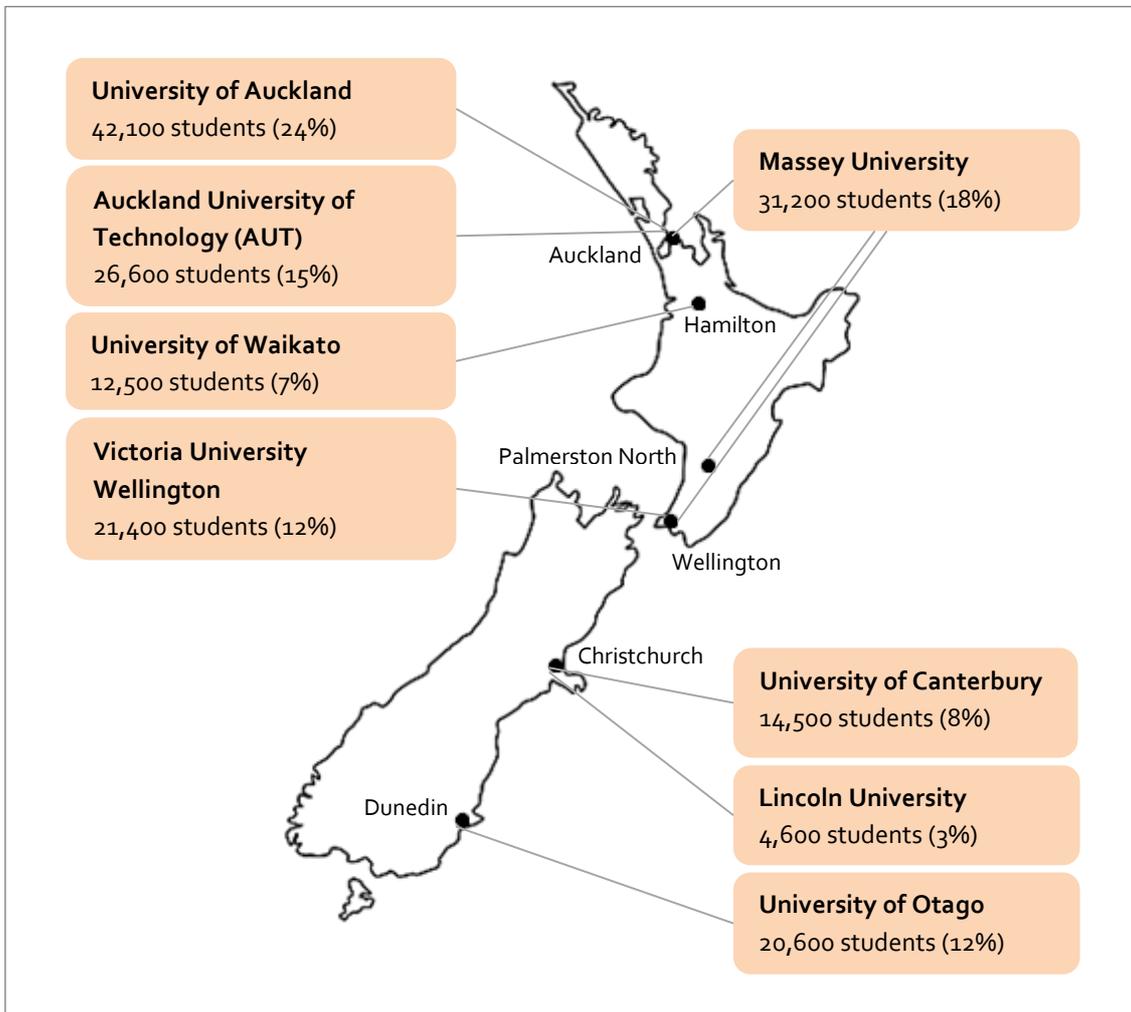
especially its tendency towards narrow action that offers a limited challenge to existing power relations. However, pragmatism has a second definition as a political philosophy, which I suggest is also applicable for understanding contemporary student political action. I argue that definitions of pragmatism as a political philosophy provide a way of articulating the volatility that appears to underscore the political action of contemporary New Zealand students, especially their apparent readiness to rethink political agency and to believe that a different politics is possible.

In Chapter 8, I conclude the thesis by summarising the research analysis and responding to the research aim. I then consider the implications of this thesis for student political agency research and practice. For research implications, I suggest there is scope for future research to consider student political action more holistically. Regarding implications for practice, I argue that greater attention should be given to the political context of student political action, particularly the role of political parties, student debt and university environments in informing student agency. The thesis concludes by discussing the implications of analysis for students interested in social change. In an era of growing divisiveness in politics, I argue there is a need for types of politics among students that are less concerned with what others consider acceptable, and instead support solidarity among students and their capacity to resist.

#### **1.4 Introducing New Zealand students**

A brief background to New Zealand students is needed to situate this research. In 2017, in a population of 4.5 million, New Zealand has 172,000 students who attend eight universities across the country (Figure 1). These include four universities established in the main centres during the second half of the nineteenth century: University of Otago (1869), University of Canterbury (1873), University of Auckland (1883) and Victoria University Wellington (1897). Two more universities were established in 1964: the University of Waikato in the outskirts of Hamilton and Massey University, a former agricultural college. In 1990, Lincoln University was formed from an agricultural college on the outskirts of Christchurch and in 2001 a polytechnic became Auckland University of Technology.

Figure 1 New Zealand universities in 2017



Source: Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.30

By international standards, New Zealand's universities are relatively small. The largest university, the University of Auckland, has 42,100 students, while the smallest, Lincoln University, has 4,600 students. This small size can potentially present distinct challenges for political action among students, especially as it may be harder to bring together large numbers of students that can be conducive to collective action (Crossley 2008). Nevertheless, New Zealand students also have a strong legacy of political activism that reflects and connects with international trends (Boren 2001; Ibrahim 2010). This activism has included involvement in the protest waves of 1968 (Grocott 1971), activism against the Vietnam War (Rabel 2005), feminist movements (Dann 1985), campaigns against apartheid in South Africa (Richards 1999), support for New Zealand becoming

nuclear free (Clements 1988), indigenous Māori rights movements (Walker 2004) and challenges to the introduction of student fees and loans in the 1990s (Robson 2009).

Especially since the 1990s, the landscape of higher education in New Zealand has gone through dramatic social, economic and political change. Regarding demographics, student numbers have increased significantly since the 1960s and especially from the 1990s, with the numbers of students attending universities almost doubling between 1990 and 2000 (France 2016, p. 64; Crawford 2016a, p. 11). There has also been growing diversity of the students attending university. In 2015, students who identified as Māori, Pasifika and Asian respectively comprised 9%, 7% and 25% of domestic students, which is an increase from 5%, 2% and 4% in 1990, respectively (Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.6; Ministry of Education 1990, p. 75). Like other English-speaking democracies, the number of international students attending New Zealand universities has grown, from 4% in 1990 to 15% of university students in 2015<sup>2</sup> (Ministry for Education 1990, p. 75; Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.10). For one in four students, English is not their first language (Tustin et al. 2012, p. 9).

The economic conditions under which students attend university have also radically shifted since the 1990s, as part of ambitious changes aimed at introducing neoliberal-inspired reform to higher education. Although there are subtle but significant differences in the meaning of **neoliberal**, the term is used in this research to describe an approach to the conduct of human affairs which gives priority to free market values of efficiency, competition and choice (Castree 2010, p. 1726; Larner 2003). While neoliberal approaches have inspired reforms in many democracies, New Zealand is notable for the speed of the changes and their systematic adherence to economic theory, described by one researcher as 'the most ambitious attempt at constructing the free market as a social institution to be implemented anywhere this century' (Gray 1998, cf. Larner & Craig

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<sup>2</sup> While foreign students have traditionally been considered an important site for cross-cultural interaction, they have tended to be increasingly valued narrowly in New Zealand for their financial contribution to higher education and the national economy (Martens & Starke 2008).

2005, p. 406-407). Initially spearheaded by a centre-left Labour government elected in 1984, the reforms were then carried forward by a right-leaning National government from 1990 (Kelsey 1995; Lerner 1997). In higher education, the reforms sought to support strongly defined government goals to promote economic growth, cost efficient education and equality of opportunity, including via the introduction of new managerial practices within universities and demonstrated compliance with government priorities for funding (Lerner & Le Heron 2005; Shore 2010; Grey & Scott 2012).

For students, the most significant impact of these reforms has been a shift towards a 'user pays' model of higher education, through the introduction and increase of tuition fees, and a move from student allowances to student loans. Since the early 1990s, tuition fees for students have grown to the sixth highest in the OECD, from a flat rate of NZ\$1,250 in 1990 to an average of \$6,500 per year for an undergraduate student in 2015, with some students paying up to \$13,800 per year (OECD 2014, p. 260; Universities New Zealand 2016). Student debt has also grown rapidly. Total student debt in New Zealand reached \$14.8 billion in 2015, an increase of 87% since 2005 (Education Counts 2015, p. 36). New Zealand has one of the highest rates of students accessing support in the OECD, with three in four New Zealand domestic students having a student loan (OECD 2014, p. 260). In 2016, the average debt that students with a bachelor degree graduated with was \$22,000, up from \$14,000 in 1997. Around 3% of borrowers or 11,500 students have debt greater than \$80,000 (Education Counts 2015, p. 37). Since 2005, this debt has been interest-free for students and graduates, so long as they remain in New Zealand.

Like other higher education sectors with student tuition fees and loans, the shift in the burden of funding in New Zealand has been justified for enabling a greater number of students to attend university while ensuring higher education remained affordable for the government. For instance, in a recent review of the history of tertiary education for the Productivity Commission, Ron Crawford (2016a, p. 12-13) has characterised New Zealand's financing of higher education as a matter of achieving the 'right balance between public and private funding' based on 'fiscal sustainability,

tempered by a desire to see a large increase in participation'. Students, as consumers, are also argued to gain substantial private benefits from university education in the form of increased earnings. According to the 2015 *Student Loan Scheme Annual Report*, young people who complete a bachelor's degree and go into the workforce on average earn more than 46% above the national median earnings five years after graduation (Education Counts 2015, p. 19; Engler 2014).

Despite these claims, all is not necessarily well for students in New Zealand. Week-to-week, increasing numbers of students appear to find it challenging to meet escalating costs of living via allowances or loans, with students reported to be taking on higher levels of employment during term time (Moayyed 2015; NZUSA 2015; Lin 2016). According to the 2014 New Zealand Union of Students' Association's *Income and Expenditure Survey*, students without external financial support work an average of 14 hours per week during the academic year, up from 12 hours in 2010 (NZUSA 2015, p. 8). Despite this employment, pressures on student finances persist. Among the 8,700 final year students that participated in the 2011 *Graduate Longitudinal Survey*, one in six respondents reported that they lived in significant financial distress, defined as being unable to afford basic accommodation, food and housing (Tustin et al. 2012, p. 103).

Post-study, New Zealand students appear to be facing increasingly fractured and precarious transitions from study to work. In a study that followed 93 young New Zealanders transitioning into adulthood, Karen Nairn, Jane Higgins and Judith Sligo (2012) in *Children of Rogernomics* have argued that New Zealand students belong to a generation for whom traditional life-course patterns have broken down. At the same time, the authors suggest that young New Zealanders hold onto strong individualistic perceptions that everything is 'up for grabs' and that they are personally responsible for making the 'right choices' about every aspect of their lives (Nairn et al. 2012, p. 17). Yet the circumstances in which students move from higher education into the workforce are in many respects beyond the control of individual students. For instance, student debt in New Zealand disproportionately affects women and students who identify with non-

Pākehā<sup>3</sup> ethnicities, who have longer repayment times (Education Counts 2015, p. 39; St John 2015). The impact of debt appears to be especially significant for students who travel overseas post-study, with the interest-free provisions of student loans removed. In 2016, the balance of defaulted student loans reached \$1 billion, almost all of which is owed by New Zealand graduates who have moved overseas, and two of whom were arrested at the border for defaulting on their loans (Furley 2016; Shadwell 2016).

Troubling indicators are also emerging that pressures on students may be negatively affecting their mental health. Although comparative data on this distress remains difficult to locate, the 2014 New Zealand Union of Students' Association's *Income and Expenditure Survey* reported a 24% increase in the demand for counselling services across New Zealand's eight universities between 2009 and 2014 (NZUSA 2015, p. 21; also Braybrook 2015). These concerns about student mental health have arisen as part of broader debates about the well-being of young New Zealanders. For instance, loneliness among young people in New Zealand appears to have risen. According to the 2014 New Zealand General Social Survey, 45% of 15-34 year olds felt lonely at some time during the previous month, up from 35% in 2012 (Statistics New Zealand 2015, Table 3; Dean 2015, p. 66).

Concerns of student well-being have emerged at a time when the collective organisations that have traditionally advocated for students are going through significant upheaval (Taylor 2016). Historically, students' associations in New Zealand have provided support for students on academic and welfare issues, advocated for student interests and coordinated social activities. In New Zealand, they have played a significant role in mobilising citizens to support predominantly socially liberal, political campaigns, and participation has often been viewed as a rite of passage for many of the nation's political leaders (NZUSA 2016).

In the past decade, however, students' associations have gone through radical reform. At the heart of this change has been the progressive introduction of voluntary

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<sup>3</sup> Pākehā is a Māori term for New Zealanders of European descent.

student membership, first at two New Zealand universities in 1999, followed in 2011 by the *Education (Freedom of Association) Amendment Act*, which removed mandatory student association membership at all universities. This process has been fraught. By taking away the guaranteed funding stream of compulsory membership levies, student membership has fallen dramatically and removed the financial security of students' associations (Green 2015; Taylor 2016). The national collective of students' associations, the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations, has weakened considerably, with three of the most financially powerful students' associations withdrawing or threatening to withdraw support and funding (Boot 2014).

Reforms of students' associations are part of wider debates about changing political engagement among young New Zealanders. As a small democracy, New Zealand has relatively ready access to politicians and public figures (Miller 2015; Tawhai 2015). Since 1996, it has also had a proportional representation electoral system that has brought greater diversity of political parties and representatives to parliament (Vowles 2010). Nevertheless, like other established democracies, electoral participation in New Zealand has continued to progressively decline, particularly since 1984, when 94% of eligible voters participated. By 2014, general turnout was to 78%, a moderate increase from 74% in 2011 (Electoral Commission 2015; Vowles 2012). While relatively high by international standards, these turnouts are respectively the second lowest and lowest since the advent of universal suffrage in 1893. Young New Zealanders are especially likely not to participate: more than half the people under the age of 30 did not vote in the 2014 election (Electoral Commission 2015).

Declining participation in electoral politics has prompted concern of youth apathy among some scholars, practitioners and young people alike. A number of conferences and workshops have been organised that seek to understand this changing political participation (*Valuing the Vote* 2014; *Civics and Media Project* 2015) and numerous initiatives have been developed to 'fix' youth apathy and encourage voter engagement, such as Get Up Stand Up, RockEnrol, the On the Fence online tool and the Virgin Voter Collective (Tawhai 2015, p. 515-517). Yet these initiatives may be missing the point.

Other researchers have argued there is broader disconnection and disillusionment with formal politics among young New Zealanders that is overlooked by approaches that situate the problem of declining turnout with young citizens. Introducing a collection of essays of young New Zealanders, Morgan Godfrey (2016, p. 10) has argued that 'To participate in politics is, for many young people, to experience powerlessness'. In the same volume, Andrew Dean (2016, p. 30) has similarly written that 'Not listening, or refusing to listen, marks our treatment of those who have been disempowered by the changes of the last three decades'. This thesis responds to these observations by listening to and documenting the political attitudes of contemporary New Zealand students.

## **1.5 Summary**

This introductory chapter opened by arguing that the political action of students in the twenty-first century needs to be re-examined, given the particular challenges confronting current students and the formative role of university in influencing their political action. I outlined the research aim to reconsider how university students are expressing their political agency in contemporary university environments in New Zealand. I defined the research objectives and outcomes, before providing an outline of the thesis structure and argument. To situate this thesis, this chapter then provided a background to New Zealand students. I discussed the significant neoliberal-inspired reforms to higher education that have contributed to unprecedented levels of debt and part-time work among contemporary students, before examining debates of changing political participation among young New Zealanders. In the next chapter, I consider theories that seek to understand contemporary student political action.

## CHAPTER TWO – A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THEORIES OF STUDENT POLITICAL ACTION

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines current theories of student political action. I consider three dominant theoretical approaches, which I describe as agency, political economy and social network theories. I review their contribution to understandings of student political action in the twenty-first century, and consider their implications for this investigation. However, I also identify some key assumptions that underlie these approaches and examine the challenges and contradictions they present, which will be interrogated in the empirical study.

### 2.2 Agency theories

Since the concept emerged in Enlightenment debates over the nature of freedom, agency has been one of the most fundamental, but also elusive, concepts within the social sciences (Emirbayer & Mische 1998). Although the term remains contested, **agency** is defined in this thesis as the capacity of humans to act consciously and with intent (Hay 2002, p. 94-95). More than political action or conduct, agency implies a sense of free will and a capability to consciously deliberate between potential courses of action. The concept of agency acknowledges that political actors are reflective, have particular understandings of the political environment and their action, and are capable of acting differently in response to similar stimuli. It is this capability to act with intent that has led some scholars to argue that agency ‘injects an inherent indeterminacy and contingency into human affairs’ (Hay 2002, p. 50; also Flyvbjerg 2001).

In this thesis, agency theories are taken to be theoretical approaches that seek to understand student political action primarily by reference to the capacity of students to

act, consciously and with intent. I consider two of these agency theories in this section, both of which have sought to account for declining voter turnout among young people in established democracies. The first of these has reconsidered claims of youth apathy by suggesting that young people's non-participation may reflect a politics of frustration and disaffection. The second approach has claimed that young people are increasingly choosing to adopt alternative repertoires of political action as a substitute for established forms of electoral participation. These literatures help to demonstrate key strengths of agency theories, especially that they tend not to take for granted student perspectives about political action and the political environment. However, as I discuss, these theories may inadequately account for the role of the political context in contributing to how students express their agency.

### **2.2.1 *A politics of frustration?***

Over the past three decades, there has been a steady decline in young people's participation in established and formal routes of political engagement across Europe, North America and parts of Australasia. Indicators for this shift include falling rates of voter turnout (Franklin 2004; Dalton 2000), eroding social capital (Putnam 2000) and declining party loyalties (Dalton & Wattenberg 2008; Sloam 2007; Mycock & Tonge 2012). Some researchers have argued there is a 'rising tide' of popular discontent and deep mistrust towards governments (Norris 2011, p. 3) and a growing tendency for young citizens to 'hate politics' (Hay 2007, p. 1).

The apparent withdrawal of some young people from the standard routes of political engagement is a source of serious concern for many academics and practitioners, and has been the focus of some high profile forums and reviews (e.g. UK 1998 Crick Report). A particular anxiety is that patterns of non-participation among young people may become entrenched and habit-forming. In the mid- to long-term, there is unease that older civic-minded generations will be replaced by a cohort that is apathetic towards politics or public life more generally (Franklin 2004, p. 20).

One agency theory locates the problem of declining voter participation with individuals and the (poor) choices that they make. This 'deficit' approach suggests that

young people are somehow lacking as citizens, either in terms of an absence of knowledge, interest or sense of civic responsibility (Russell 2004; Edwards 2007). Dominant in media portrayals, this alleged deficit among young people has been attributed to diverse sources. Some accounts focus on general traits among young citizens, such as considering them apathetic, lazy, indifferent or complacent (McClennen 2015; Neilson & Michael 2012; Ellis 2016). Other researchers have sought to identify the social characteristics that might contribute to an absence of political knowledge or interest among young people, such as their class background or geographical mobility (Kimberlee 2002, p. 87-88; Pattie et al. 2003). In response to this perceived deficit, practitioners have developed a series of strategies to encourage electoral participation. These responses vary significantly but retain their focus on changing the disposition of individual citizens, and range from introducing civic education in schools, to nudge approaches, online social media strategies, social marketing or apps for voter engagement (Farthing 2010, p. 182; Edwards 2007, p. 540).

Countering this account is an alternative branch of agency theory that suggests that declining electoral turnout among young people is motivated less by indifference, and instead by disillusionment and frustration (Henn et al. 2002; Lister et al. 2003; Edwards 2007; Pilkington & Pollock 2015). Far from apathetic, these researchers argue that empirical studies of young people's attitudes in Europe and North America suggest young citizens are highly critical of the ways that the political system operates and the manner in which professional politicians and established parties conduct their business (also Sloam 2008, p. 565; Cammaerts et al. 2013). According to this literature, young people feel 'ignored', 'powerless' and 'alienated' by a professional political elite perceived to be pursuing a narrow, self-serving agenda. In some cases, young people's dislike of formal politics is claimed to be so pronounced that they are deliberately distancing and disassociating themselves from the term 'politics' itself (Henn & Foard 2014, p. 367).

This turn in the literature of agency theories represents a significant shift in how young people's non-participation in electoral politics is understood. Deficit approaches

situate the 'problem' of declining participation with individuals and the choices they make based on a perceived lack of knowledge, interest or social responsibility. However, claims that young people are disaffected and disillusioned with formal politics suggests that declining participation may be less a crisis of engagement among citizens, and instead a failing of political institutions (Henn et al. 2005; Kimberlee 2002). This shift has been characterised by some theorists as a move from 'demand-centred' accounts that focus on the interest citizens demonstrate in politics, towards 'supply-centred' approaches that emphasise the type of politics on offer (Hay 2007, p. 40). As these researchers note, the 'supply' of politics has not remained static as political participation among young people has declined. To the contrary, reforms over the past three decades have arguably served to concentrate power amongst a political elite (Marsh & Miller 2013; Jones 2014), as well as away from elected politicians towards technocratic officials and 'the market' (Mouffe 2005; Crouch 2011; Bauman 2012b). In this context, non-participation among young people might be interpreted as a valid critique of the political status quo. For example, Brian Loader (2007, p. 10) has argued that young people's 'rejection of arrogant and self-absorbed professional politics may not be a cynical withdrawal, but rather interpreted as the beginnings of a legitimate opposition'.

For this investigation of student political action, this agency literature raises several points to be taken forward. Perhaps most significantly, the reconsideration of young people's non-participation highlights the importance of not taking for granted the attitudes of students. Students, like citizens more generally, perceive and experience the world in particular ways, and have distinct understandings of how their action relates to that environment. As such, it cannot be assumed that the decision not to participate or act necessarily equates to apathy or indifference. For this study, this agency literature is suggestive of the value of empirically investigating student perspectives on political action, including among students who might conventionally be considered 'apathetic'.

There is a related methodological point raised by these agency theories. In rethinking young people's non-participation, some agency theorists have argued that the approaches and methods used by researchers to investigate political action also need

to be reconsidered (Henn et al. 2002; O'Toole et al. 2003). These theorists argue that deficit approaches have tended to rely on quantitative indicators and surveys that measure levels of participation, such as whether a young person voted, joined a political party, signed a petition or attended a mass demonstration. While valuable in terms of tracking participation levels over time, these approaches have been challenged for inadvertently creating a binary in how young people's political action is understood (also Lister et al. 2003; Farthing 2010). By pre-determining what is considered political participation, young people who are not active in these avenues tend to be accounted for, almost by default, as politically apathetic. For example, Therese O'Toole and colleagues (2003, p. 53) have argued this tendency establishes a 'false dichotomy' between participation and apathy, which they describe 'at worst, a simple duality or, at best, a continuum'. This binary approach cuts off the possibility for analysis of a more complex political terrain, and is suggestive of the need for research approaches and methods that allow students to discuss their agency in their own terms.

In terms of attitudes to be investigated, the agency literature suggests student perspectives on formal politics are a critical element for understanding contemporary student political action. Most explicitly, some scholars have suggested that frustration at the ballot box may be related to the apparent rise of student protest in the twenty-first century (Brooks 2017, p. 1-2; Henn & Foard 2014, p. 361). However, a persistent challenge for these claims is to articulate the particular nature and extent of the critique expressed by students or young people of formal politics, and how that might relate to protest among students. Defining this discontent is not a straightforward task, since researchers have identified sources of frustration among young people as diverse as the internal organisation of mainstream political parties (Sloam 2008; Mycock & Tonge 2012) to the declining power of governments, real or perceived, in the context of globalisation (Hay 2007). Student attitudes towards formal politics may also differ across democracies. It cannot be taken for granted, for instance, that the attitudes of young Europeans or Americans will necessarily apply to young New Zealanders. Moreover, the political views of university students are likely to be distinct within the wider cohort of young

people, as young people with higher levels of educational qualifications tend to report a stronger sense of efficacy about formal politics (Henn & Foard 2014, p. 374).

Besides attitudes towards formal politics, agency theories are suggestive of the value of considering the political aspirations of students. While many young citizens appear to be frustrated with formal politics, agency theorists have suggested that this disaffection does not signify a rejection of all forms of politics *per se* (Henn & Foard 2012; Flinders 2015). To the contrary, young people are claimed to have an underlying engagement with formal politics, retain high regard for democratic values and aspire to play a more active role in the democratic process in the future (also Cammaets et al. 2013; Norris 2012; Pilkington & Pollock 2015).

Recent discussion about young people's declining electoral turnout has illustrated the vital contribution of these political aspirations for understanding contemporary political action. If considered by themselves, there is a risk that the critical and disaffected attitudes of young people towards formal politics might be read as nihilistic. These concerns were given particular attention following Russell Brand's (2013) controversial interview for the BBC's *Newsnight* programme in which he urged young people not to vote as 'it just encourages the bastards'. One of the key lessons from the debate that followed was that approaches that portray the political establishment as uniformly corrupt and self-serving can promote and reinforce a corrosive cynicism towards politics that may further suppress voter turnout (Flinders 2013; Pearce 2014). Yet contrary to this nihilism, young people's aspirations are arguably suggestive of a much more positive desire for more robust democracy.

The importance of listening to young people's political aspirations has been reiterated with the emergence of insurgent parties and outsider challengers across Europe and the United States. Many of these political outsiders have been welcomed for upsetting the political status quo. However, other scholars have warned that some of these challengers may exploit disaffection with existing politics and desire for change with a thin populism (Pilkington & Pollock 2015, p. 15-20). Articulating the democratic aspirations of students and young people matters in this context. Matthew Flinders

(2016), for example, has argued that only portraying young people's disillusionment with formal politics without their aspirations for more robust democracy may offer 'fertile public terrain for those who wish to nurture and benefit from the politics of pessimism' (Flinders 2016, p. 185).

### **2.2.2 *New interests, new repertoires?***

Against this background of debate among agency theorists, a third stream of agency theory has emerged. This literature suggests that contemporary political participation among young people has not so much declined, but rather switched focus to other repertoires of political action (Norris 2002, p. 141-142; Dalton 2008, p. 69-71; Pattie et al. 2003). These theorists are less inclined to interpret declining electoral participation as a problem. Instead, these scholars trace a process of what they suggest is democratic disaggregation, in which other types of political activity have increased or remained static as traditional forms of participation have decreased. One of the most vivid descriptions of this alleged shift in political action is Pippa Norris' (2003, p. 3) notion of a 'democratic phoenix'. While participation in formal politics may be declining, Norris has claimed that new possibilities for civic engagement are emerging that supplement traditional forms of participation. Following the metaphor of a 'democratic phoenix', political engagement is claimed to not so much be dying, but rather being reborn in different forms (Norris 2002).

In suggesting that political participation is shifting to alternative repertoires, theorists have pointed to a wide range of non-conventional forms of political participation in contemporary society. Protest is one of these repertoires beyond the ballot box. However, citizens are also said to be increasingly pursuing market-based forms of participation, such as consumer action of 'buying right' to 'boycotting' (Willis & Schor 2012) or participating in volunteering or social entrepreneurial activities (Eliasoph 2011; Dacin et al. 2011). The increasing availability of the Internet is considered to offer new opportunities for interacting and participating online, such as via social media (Castells 2013; Loader 2007). There are also a diverse range of actions that seek to

reclaim and renew urban spaces, such as flash-mobs, street art, knit-bombing and guerrilla gardening (Harvey 2012; Shepard 2011; Hou 2010).

Students have long been considered to be at the forefront of the adoption of these alternative repertoires, stemming back to the student protests of the 1960s. One of the key theories to emerge following this period was offered by Ronald Inglehart (1977), who suggested that there had been a 'silent revolution' in the political values of students in the post-war era (Inglehart 1977, p. 1; Inglehart & Welzel 2005). As students obtain higher levels of education and standards of living, Inglehart argued that there had been a generational shift in student political attitudes. This value shift, he suggested, has contributed to the emergence of cohorts of students that are less deferential and 'content to be disciplined troops', and instead more autonomous, 'elite challenging' and inclined to express their political agency through non-electoral means, including protest (Inglehart & Welzel 2005, p. 4). Inglehart also claimed that changing values among students has affected the political issues they are engaging with. Rather than traditional class-based concerns, Inglehart claimed students report greater concern for 'post-material' issues, such as sexuality and gender, the environment, race, disarmament and human rights (Inglehart & Welzel 2005). These arguments have been echoed by Pippa Norris (2002, 2011). Norris has contended that there has been a rise of what she terms 'critical citizens', who tend to be younger and better educated, have a healthy scepticism in their expectations towards politics and are more likely to be active in 'cause-oriented' styles of politics (Norris 2002, 2011).

Alternative repertoire theories provide a very different account of student political action than the deficit theories that were discussed earlier in this chapter. Rather than indifference or apathy, alternative repertoire theorists tend to argue that the political agency of citizens has expanded in contemporary society. A leading proponent of this stance is Russell Dalton (2008). According to Dalton (2008, p. 92), political repertoires have broadened as duty-based norms of citizenship have weakened and citizens are stimulated to participate in alternative activities that give them more direct say and influence. By this account, citizens are able to focus on issues that are of greatest

concern and to select when and how they participate, both individually and collectively. As such, Dalton (2008, p. 93) has argued that changes in political participation should not necessarily be considered negative, but rather 'positive' in that they 'expand the potential influence of the citizenry'.

For this investigation, alternative repertoire theories point to the value of adopting a broad conception of politics and political action in research. A particular concern for alternative repertoire theories has been that conventional definitions of political action tend to focus on formal politics or mass movements. This overly narrow definition can overlook new content and approaches that have emerged over the past half-century. These arguments initially crystallised following the growth of 'new social movements' among students in the 1960s and 1970s. Some scholars claimed these student movements operated outside of 'normal' politics, in that they adopted looser organisational models and focused on 'identity' or 'post-material' issues (Inglehart 1977; Habermas 1981; Cohen 1985). Yet as critics later argued, the significance of these student movements for understanding political action was not necessarily the 'newness' of their aims or tactics. Rather, they suggested the challenge 'new social movements' posed was to conventional and overly narrow assumptions among some researchers of what counted as 'normal' political action (Calhoun 1993, p. 415-416; Martin 2015, p. 70-71).

Arguments for an inclusive approach to the study of political action were further expanded during the 1990s and 2000s (Furlong & Cartmel 2007, p. 134-135). Responding to claims that declining levels of participation in electoral politics among young people represented apathy, these scholars identified forms of 'everyday' or 'ordinary' actions undertaken by citizens that did not conform to traditional notions of political action. Indeed, many of these actions were not considered 'political' by the actors themselves, such as volunteering or buying ethically (also Bang 2009, p. 848; Harris et al. 2010, p. 9). To ensure that young people were not mistakenly described as apathetic, these scholars subsequently argued for research to adopt more inclusive understandings of political action, such as Ariadne Vromen's (2003, p. 82-83) definition of political participation as 'acts that can occur, either individually or collectively, that are intrinsically concerned

with shaping the society that we want to live in'. For this study, this literature suggests these less formal actions need to be part of analysis, including actions that students do not necessarily define as political.

There are some potential limitations with alternative repertoire theories that need to be taken into consideration for this research, however. Perhaps most significantly, alternative repertoire theories, like agency theories more generally, are often challenged for inadequately accounting for how the political context informs political action. As will be discussed in the next section, students are not unencumbered political actors that can act with free will and autonomous choice (Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, p. 10; Schor 2007). Although citizens are capable of influencing the political environment, how they express that agency is also informed by the context itself, which will be discussed in greater depth in the next section. Failing to fully account for the role of this wider political-economic environment can offer thin and incomplete accounts of student agency.

One example of inadequate attention being given to this wider political environment is Inglehart's (1977) claim that different forms of political action are emerging as a result of a 'value shift' among contemporary students. As discussed, Inglehart has proposed that the political values of young people and students have changed as they attained higher levels of education and standards of living (Inglehart & Welzel 2005). However, the material well-being of contemporary students is not necessarily assured (Johnson & Marcucci 2010; Furedi 2011). As these theorists argue, levels of state support for students have progressively declined in many democracies over the past three decades, which may have considerable repercussions for their agency that are not considered in Inglehart's account. Critics also argue that Inglehart's theory makes assumptions about student attitudes, suggesting that the claim that qualifications necessarily contribute to more sceptical attitudes towards politics and political action is tenuous (Martin 2015, p. 73-76).

Besides inadequate attention to context, alternative repertoire theories have been challenged for tending to consider all political action as equivalent or a substitute. As

discussed, alternative repertoire approaches can tend to treat these different forms of political action as interchangeable in an attempt to assuage anxieties of widespread apathy as part of declining participation in formal politics. Yet voting does matter. As Colin Hay argues (2007, p. 46-49), there is no substitute for declining participation at the ballot box, and there is a troubling possibility that further decreases in turnout among young people may contribute to greater marginalisation of their interests and concerns within formal politics (also Furedi 2005, p. 40). Similar concerns have been voiced about participation in traditional forms of confrontational protest (Pilkington & Pollock 2015, p. 4; Mirowski 2013, p. 147-148). These scholars reject the claim that alternative forms of participation, such as online engagement or buying ethically, can offer an equivalent political challenge to more conventional forms of protest (also Willis & Schor 2012).

Some researchers have also brought into question the extent to which young people or students might actually be participating in these alternative forms of political action (Keating 2015; Pilkington & Pollock 2015, p. 3-4). These scholars have typically drawn on empirical surveys of young people's political activities to argue that, while the range and types of political engagement might be proliferating, only a minority of young people appear to be engaging in them (also Henn et al. 2005; Cammaerts et al. 2013). A related claim is that alternative repertoire approaches tend to primarily account for the political action of socially liberal groups, which overlooks the action of conservative students (Binder & Wood 2013). For this project, these criticisms suggest that a broad range of student perspectives need to be included, on the political left and right, as well as those students who are not necessarily at the vanguard of new forms of political engagement.

### **2.3 Political economy theories**

The agency theories discussed so far primarily focus on the capacity of students and young people to act consciously and with intent. Yet as has been noted, all students act within a particular context, which in turn informs their action. Within the social sciences, this context has typically been described as **social structures**. Although the concept of social structures is as controversial as the concept of agency, for this thesis it is defined

as the patterned nature of social and political relations that inform political action (Sewell 1992, p. 2; Hay 2002, p. 94; Elder-Vass 2010, p. 1-2). Coming to prominence in the late nineteenth century, structural theory is often positioned as being opposed to approaches that favour agency in their account of political action. Agency explanations tend to emphasise the capacity of political actors to consciously reflect and decide to act to shape the social world. By contrast, structural approaches emphasise the ways that political action is informed by sets of dispositions acquired from the social context. Following Colin Hay (2002, p. 90-91), I do not consider these differences between agency and structure to be a 'problem' to be solved, but rather a language through which the ontological differences between these contending accounts can be registered.

In the context of student political action, I describe the more structuralist approaches as political economy theories. I use this term because these existing accounts have typically focused on the role of the political-economic context in informing student political action, particularly the introduction of neoliberal ideas into political life. As discussed in Chapter 1 (p. 19), neoliberal approaches have informed sweeping reforms to diverse areas of public policy over the past thirty years, especially in the English-speaking democracies, including the privatisation of key assets, the 'roll back' of government intervention and the introduction of market-friendly regulation (Harvey 2005). Neoliberal approaches are also associated with cultivation of a particular 'way of thinking' associated with the application of market principles to decision-making and an ethic of 'self-sufficient' individuals and communities (Castree 2010; Peck & Tickell 2002; Larner 2003).

Political economy theories have offered varying accounts of how the political environment informs contemporary student political action. In this section, I consider two existing approaches. The first theory contends that student political action has become 'disabled', especially in context of high debt. The second approach suggests student agency has been transformed as neoliberal ideas have been co-opted into their political action. As I argue, these political economy theories demonstrate an awareness of context that does not always appear in agency theories. However, these accounts can

also be limited in that they tend to suffer the opposite problem of agency theories: they tend to inadequately account for student agency.

### **2.3.1 *Disabling conditions?***

As discussed in Chapter 1, the landscape of higher education has been transformed by neoliberal-inspired reforms (Furedi 2011; McGettigan 2011). Although these reforms vary across higher education sectors, they have typically reoriented the purpose of higher education away from a public good towards market values of competition and individualism (Bok 2009; Marginson 2006; Slaughter & Leslie 2001). Among researchers, this shift has brought unease that students are increasingly valued by policy-makers and university administrators less as citizens, and instead as consumers of a service or as commodities in that they can provide economic returns to their country's economic competitiveness as skilled workers (Levin 2005, p. 13; also Giroux 2011; Engler 2014).

The application of market values to the higher education sector has informed a series of policy reforms that have had a dramatic effect on the lives of students. As I touched on in Chapter 1, perhaps the most significant change for students has been the progressive shift of the costs of education from the state to individual students. While these arrangements differ across higher education sectors, they have tended to involve an introduction and increase of tuition fees, with a corresponding decrease in financial support for students with a move from student allowances to student loans (Johnstone & Marcucci 2010; Dwyer et al. 2011; Dean 2015). Student loans and debt in these countries have typically been justified by reference to the private benefits that higher education brings to individual student 'consumers' (Christie & Munro 2003, p. 621-622; Dwyer et al. 2011, p. 728-729). Yet as aggregate levels of student debt have escalated, a growing number of public commentators and researchers have expressed concerns about the adverse impact of debt on students and graduates. Much of this debate has been oriented towards the concerning patterns of risk and vulnerability that are emerging as a result of high levels of debt, especially relating to poor mental well-being and constrained life choices (Callender & Jackson 2008; Dwyer et al. 2011; Rothstein &

Rouse 2011; Jackson & Reynolds 2013; White 2013). However, the impact of debt on student political action has also been considered by some researchers.

Among these scholars, the impact of this escalating debt on student political action is disputed. Some researchers suggest that debt and related reforms to higher education may be contributing to the apparent rise of student protest in the twenty-first century. For example, in accounting for the political uprisings of 2011, the journalist Paul Mason (2013, p. 66) has proposed that a key motivator was a 'new sociological type: the graduate with no future'. He suggested that rising debt and precarious unemployment compounded with the global financial crisis to create a 'generation of twenty-somethings whose life-arc had switched, quite suddenly, from an upward curve to a downward one'. This abrupt switch in expectations, Mason suggested, contributed to the occupations and unrest of 2011 (Mason 2013, p. 66-73). Corroborating this argument, many contemporary student protest movements have confronted the introduction and advancement of neoliberal-inspired reforms in higher education or have sought to roll back policies to an earlier period of welfare provision (Brooks 2017, p. 4-5; Williams 2013; Sukarieh & Tannock 2015; Rheingans & Hollands 2012; Hensby 2013).

However, other researchers and commentators have suggested debt may be severely restricting the capacity of students to participate politically (Giroux 2014; Graeber 2013). Student debt and fees are often associated with high levels of part-time work in addition to full-time study, potentially leaving students time-scarce to become active on campus, including politically (Dwyer et al. 2011; Robotham 2012). Obligations to repay debt in a competitive and unstable job market may also contribute to hesitation among students of becoming involved in some forms of political activity in anticipation of an insecure future. As such, Henry Giroux (2014) has claimed that debt 'disables' student agency as it forces students 'into an intellectual and morally dead zone that robs them of their imagination and forces them to think about their lives and careers solely in terms of survival tactics'. Similarly, David Graeber (2012) has argued that debt is 'destroying the imagination of youth', writing that 'If there is a way of society committing mass suicide, what better way than to take all the youngest, most energetic,

creative, joyous people in your society and saddle them with \$50,000 of debt'. In New Zealand, Andrew Dean (2016, p. 33) has likewise suggested that student debt acts as 'market discipline', but also as 'a form of political and mental discipline'.

Central to these political economy theories is the role of the wider political context in influencing student political action. As touched on earlier, acknowledgement of these conditions can be strikingly absent in some agency theories, which can tend to emphasise the unencumbered capacity of students to make autonomous choices in how they participate politically. Yet changes to higher education may have significant implications for the capacity of students to participate politically. For this investigation, these approaches suggest student experiences of university, especially debt, need to be considered in this project, including the ways in which these experiences might inform their political action.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this emphasis on the context of political action that can be a weakness of political economy theories. In seeking to demonstrate the pervasiveness of neoliberal approaches, political economy theories can risk effectively writing out the political agency and the aspirations of students from their explanations of contemporary student politics. Approaches that consider the social context 'disabling' have been challenged by some theorists for implicitly treating agency as 'haphazard, happenstance, disjointed intrusions ... a troubled sort of passivity' (Lugone 2003, p. 215). Moreover, critics have argued the failure to adequately account for agency may inadvertently encourage a dangerous sense of impotence, fatalism and cynicism that can be paralysing. Tara Woodyer and Hilary Geoghegan (2012, p. 195) have written about feeling 'helpless, depressed and defeated' as a result of accounts that portray neoliberalism as inescapable, while Jane Bennett (2001) has proposed the development of a 'why bother?' attitude. Similarly, Paul Mason (2013, p. 28) has described these approaches as 'rationalisations of defeat'.

### **2.3.2 *Transformed agency***

Besides accounts of student agency as 'disabled', an alternative branch of political economy theory contends that student political action is being transformed as neoliberal

approaches have implicitly come to inform their political agency. This approach has gained prominence since the global financial crisis of 2007, as a growing number of scholars have sought to understand the 'strange non-death of neoliberalism' by turning their focus to 'everyday neoliberalism' and the ways in which neoliberal approaches are internalised and reproduced in everyday actions (Crouch 2011, p. 1; Mirowski 2013; Brown 2015). Especially in the predominately English-speaking democracies, most contemporary students are considered part of a 'shopping generation' in that they grew up following the major neoliberal-inspired reforms of the 1970s and 1980s, and were the target of relentless advertising and encouraged from a young age to be autonomous actors and consumers in the marketplace (Schor 2004; Mayo & Nairn 2009; Nairn et al. 2012). For this generation, neoliberal priorities and practices of competition, self-improvement and personal responsibility are claimed to have come to unconsciously inform many, if not all, of the ways in which young citizens think and behave (Mirowski 2013, p. 93-106). Wendy Brown (2015), for instance, has proposed that the political consciousness of young citizens is increasingly being 'subsumed' into a 'homo economicus' in which every aspect of life, including participation in politics, is seen as a possibility for competitive positioning and self-investment (Brown 2015, p. 31).

By this account, student political action is becoming increasingly dominated by neoliberal values. This theoretical perspective can offer a strikingly different account of student political action to agency theories. As discussed, alternative repertoires theories suggest different forms of participation represent an expansion of agency in that citizens are choosing to express their agency in more effective ways (Dalton 2008). By contrast, political economy theories tend to interpret these alternative repertoires as indicators that participation is becoming less civic-minded, and instead more individualised and focused on self-expression (Holdsworth 2011; Eliasoph 2011; Mirowski 2013). For instance, market-based political action, including boycotts and ethical consumerism, are proposed by these scholars to reproduce a belief in individual 'choice', personal responsibility and the entrepreneurial self (Barber 2007; Giroux 2011; Brown 2015). Young people are also claimed to be less accepting of conflict, and more likely to adopt 'post-political' forms of activism that employ technocratic approaches that seek

consensual solutions to collective problems (Mouffe 2005; Swyngedouw 2010; Moon 2013). Critics argue this co-optation of neoliberal values and approaches is contributing to a narrowing of political action among young people that leaves the underlying drivers of social and political problems unchallenged. For example, Phillip Mirowski (2013, p. 144-145) has characterised market-based repertoires of political action as a 'great neoliberal innovation' in that they have 'seduced people into believing that the market itself can offer sufficient choice in expression of political programs'.

More specifically in the context of university education, the progressive introduction of neoliberal values into the organisation and funding of universities are suggested by some researchers to be narrowing the democratic imagination of students (Williams 2013, p. 2-5; Brown 2015, p. 22-24). For example, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010, p. 2) has warned of a 'silent crisis' emerging as a result of radical changes to the curricula of what is taught in higher education. Nussbaum is perhaps best known for her work on agency and capabilities. However, in *Not for Profit*, Nussbaum has claimed that the skills needed to keep democracies alive are being heedlessly discarded by universities with the progressive undermining of the humanities in favour of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects believed to drive economic growth. These developments, Nussbaum has argued, may lead universities to be creating 'generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements' (Nussbaum 2010, p. 2).

Contemporary students may also be more accepting of neoliberal models of higher education. In considering the student protests of the twenty-first century, some researchers have argued that students are adopting less ambitious protest aims because they are becoming used to their 'consumer status' and paying at least some of their tuition fees (Williams 2013, p. 4-5; Sukarieh & Tannock 2015, p. 10-11). This claim that students are increasingly accepting the neoliberal status quo appears to be reflected in New Zealand research. Drawing on interviews with university students, Karen Nairn, Jane Higgins and Judith Sligo (2012, p. 167) have claimed that New Zealand students

tend to assume tuition fees and student loans are 'facts of life, if regrettable ones'. Likewise, Andrew Dean (2015, p. 16) has argued that neoliberal approaches and arrangements in New Zealand's higher education sector are 'neutral in the public imagination, just a form of common sense'.

For this investigation, accounts of student agency as co-opted suggests consideration needs to be given to the extent to which neoliberal values appear to inform student attitudes and aspirations. However, these accounts of student agency as co-opted are not without their critics. Earlier it was noted that political economy approaches can risk writing out the political agency of students in their accounts of political action. A related challenge is that the voices and perspectives of students can be overlooked or assumed by political economy approaches. Malcolm James (2012, p. 29) has characterised these accounts as offering a type of 'pre-formulated listening' that silences voices more than it listens, in that the significance of student political action can tend to be taken for granted by researchers. As agency theories suggest, the attitudes of young people and students are not self-evident, and portraying neoliberal approaches as omnipresent within democracies potentially risks overlooking or ignoring spheres where they do not exist (Clair 2015).

These assumptions extend to how students understand their circumstances. It cannot be assumed, for instance, that students find their situation, or social conditions more generally, fixed and determinate, or that they are considered constraining. In the Global South where there is significant youth unemployment, Alcinda Honwana (2012) has argued that the concept of waiting, usually negatively associated with a surplus of time and of being left behind, may also constitute a period of improvisation and great creativity as people adopt a range of strategies to cope with daily challenges in their lives (also Conlon 2011). It is similarly conceivable that the pressures of contemporary university environments may not necessarily act to 'disable' or 'co-opt' student political agency, but rather prompt experimentation with alternative expressions of political action. Instead of making sweeping claims of 'neoliberalism', investigating these

perceptions and negotiations of the political context may offer a more nuanced – and ultimately more helpful – understanding of student political action.

#### **2.4 Social network theories**

Besides agency and political economy theories, a third stream of literature considers student political action via the density and nature of social networks among students. Social network theories have a long association with students, extending back to studies that sought to explain the dramatic unrest and protest of the 1960s and 1970s. Especially in North America, scholars noted that it was students in particular, and not young people more generally, who tended to be taking to the streets. The student protests were also more likely to occur at more elite or selective colleges, as well as on larger campuses (Altbach 1989; van Dyke 1998, p. 205-206). Initially these trends were considered the result of social strain on isolated individuals (Lipset 1976). However, these accounts were subsequently challenged by explanations that suggested that more densely connected or ‘networked’ students were more likely to be mobilised for political action. One example is Doug McAdam’s (1986) study of the ‘freedom summer’ in the United States in which white college students travelled to support the civil rights movement. He argued that students were far more likely to be successfully recruited and to remain active in the movement if others from their friendship networks were involved as well (McAdam 1986, p. 127-132).

Social network theories have recently experienced renewed popularity among scholars seeking to account for the rise of protest among students in the twenty-first century. In particular, Nick Crossley (2008) and Joseph Ibrahim (Crossley & Ibrahim 2012) have argued that campus environments have a distinctive ‘politicising effect’ on students by bringing them together. By this account, universities are relatively unique in that they geographically concentrate large groups of people over time, many of whom have traditionally had greater amounts of spare time than other citizens. This dense group of students is suggested to provide a ‘critical mass’ that helps to develop and sustain activist identities and to facilitate protest via close networks (Crossley 2008, p. 25-30; Crossley & Ibrahim 2012; also Hensby 2013, p. 103).

According to these researchers, campuses have also traditionally provided 'foci' for the formation of networks among students, which may be conducive to political action. Conventionally, one of the most important of these 'foci' has been students' unions. Students' unions have been characterised by Crossley and Ibrahim (2012, p. 604-605) as a central 'hub' for networks of student activists and groups that can help to 'politicise' students, with union officers noted to generally be very active as organisers and facilitators of protest (also Stockemer 2012, p. 1040; Bégin-Caouette & Jones 2014). Other 'foci' include student societies, which are identified by Brian Loader and colleagues (2014, p. 3) as providing 'focal points' for students to meet others with similar interests, including politically.

However, over the past three decades, significant reforms to higher education have disrupted many aspects of university environments through which students have conventionally formed connections. The impact of these changes on the development of social networks among students is ambiguous, however. On the one hand, a greater number of students are attending university than ever before, which could be conducive to collective action by providing opportunities for a 'critical mass' of students to form (Crossley 2008; Altbach et al. 2009, p. 21; Mason 2013, p. 69). The growing diversity of students in terms of age, gender and ethnicity has also led some researchers to claim that campuses have the potential to bring disparate groups of students together to forge greater understanding and solidarity across differences (Ramburuth & McCormick 2001; Harris 2013).

On the other hand, the dramatic transformation of the conditions under which students are attending university may undermine the capacity of students to form meaningful connections with their peers. Especially in democracies with high student tuition fees and debt, students are taking on increasingly long hours of employment in addition to full-time study (Kulm & Cramer 2006; Christie et al. 2010). Growing numbers of students are living at home for longer periods during study, rather than in university halls of residence, which have been identified as traditionally offering an important avenue for fostering connections between students (Hensby 2013, p. 103). Changes to the

structure of academic learning may also result in fewer students being on campuses day-to-day, including through increases in distance education and online courses, changes to timetabling and a shift towards continuous assessment (Altbach et al. 2009, p. xv). Although much of the research on the effect of these changes has focused on their adverse consequences for student academic achievement (Curtis & Shani 2002; Manthei & Gilmore 2005), it may have an equally significant toll on their capacity to participate in campus life, socially as well as politically.

In practice, contemporary universities may also offer few opportunities for students from different groups to meet. Indeed, some researchers have suggested universities may perpetuate and increase inequality among students, particularly in more commercialised university environments (Andersson et al. 2012; Antonucci 2016). According to Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton's (2014) ethnographic study of a girls dormitory in the United States, students from less affluent families tend to find it challenging to participate in academic, social and political activities on more commercialised campuses. The authors argue that less affluent students do not have higher levels of resources to 'pay for the party' and the requisite networks to support their lifestyle, with many subsequently dropping out of university (Armstrong & Hamilton 2014, p. 3). Minority groups also appear to struggle to 'fit in' to contemporary universities, despite greater numbers attending than previously (Ellis 2009; Reay et al. 2009).

Moreover, research about the changing role of students' unions suggests that universities may no longer 'politicise' students as anticipated. Far from a 'hub' that brings like-minded students together, contemporary students' unions may instead be shutting down student debate and engagement with politics. Although not necessarily an analysis of the social networks among students *per se*, Rachel Brooks, Kate Byford and Katherine Sela (2015) have argued the values of many students' unions in the United Kingdom have become much more closely aligned with those of university managers, as a result of a changing balance of power between students' unions and the university, as well as the increasing influence of permanently employed staff in setting the direction

of unions. The researchers propose that this alignment of priorities is limiting the capacity of students' unions to adopt more questioning, critical and 'activist' positions (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 179). Given the introduction of voluntary student membership in New Zealand, it is similarly conceivable that students' associations may be pursuing less activist approaches or even discouraging other students from participating in protest.

For this investigation, social network theories suggest an important avenue of inquiry may be the density of social networks or connections among students. However, the nature of these networks also seems to matter, with some researchers proposing that networks can act both to 'politicise' or, conversely, to 'depoliticise' students. For example, in his investigation of the 2010 student protests in the United Kingdom, Alexander Hensby (2013, p. 104) has described social networks that 'depoliticise' students as 'counter-networks' that 'erode' or 'neuter' the desires of students to convert political interests into action, whether by offering explicit arguments or by providing no precedent of political activity.

However, there is cause for caution in adopting social network theories that describe students as 'politicised' or 'depoliticised'. A key argument discussed earlier in the chapter was the value of probing beneath surface appearances of 'apathy'. As noted, agency theorists argue that there is a need for research to shift away from top-down conceptions of what young people 'ought' to be doing politically, as this approach can establish a 'false dichotomy' between participation and apathy (O'Toole et al. 2003, p. 53; Henn et al. 2002). Yet an implicit binary is maintained in the language of describing students as 'politicised' or 'depoliticised'. Given agency theories contend that non-participation is more nuanced than 'apathy', there may similarly be value in reconsidering the political attitudes of a seemingly 'depoliticised' student body.

## 2.5 Summary

This chapter critically reviewed three dominant theories that seek to understand contemporary student political action: agency, political economy and social network theories. Agency theories explain political action primarily by reference to the capacity

of students to act, consciously and with intent. Political economy theories emphasise the ways in which the social, political and economic environment, particularly neoliberal-inspired approaches, can act to disable or co-opt student agency. Social network theories account for student political action via the density and nature of the connections among students.

In critically reviewing these theories, some key avenues for inquiry were identified for this investigation. An overarching argument that encompassed all three theories is for researchers to avoid taking for granted student attitudes towards political action and the wider political environment. Student perspectives are not self-evident and require empirical investigation, including the attitudes of students on both the political left and right, as well as those who might conventionally be understood as 'apathetic'. This review also established more particular fields that appear relevant for understanding student political action. Agency theories are suggestive of the value of examining student attitudes towards formal politics, as well as their aspirations for political action more generally. Consideration of political economy theories points to the significance of accounting for how students experience the political context, including debt, and how that might influence their political action. Social network theories suggest the relevance of inquiring into the connections among students and the contribution of the university in supporting those ties, as well as the changing role of students' unions. To avoid simplistic binary accounts and to enable analysis of a more complex political terrain, the review also lent support to research approaches and methods that provide openness and flexibility for students to describe their political action or inaction in their own terms, including action that they do not necessarily define as political themselves.

Emerging from this review are several more specific research questions that were used to inform the empirical study:

1. What are student attitudes towards political action and participation, including in formal politics? What aspirations for political action do they identify?

2. How do students describe their experience as a student, including debt? In what ways, if at all, do they consider these experiences to inform their political action?
3. To what extent and through what avenues are students able to make connections or friendships at university? In what ways and to what extent do these networks influence their political action?
4. How has the role of students' unions changed? In what ways and to what extent has this changed role informed their approach towards political action?

In the remainder of this thesis, I document and analyse how New Zealand students are expressing their political agency within contemporary university environments. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodological approach and research methods adopted to examine the attitudes of a sample of New Zealand students so as to generate a substantive account of their political agency.

## CHAPTER THREE – RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explain and justify the methodological approach and data gathering and analysis methods used for the empirical study of student political action in New Zealand. This chapter opens by outlining the research aim and questions, before justifying the interpretivist position adopted in this study. I then describe the in-depth interviews and observation methods used to understand student perspectives about political action, including sampling methods and procedures for ethical practice. Discussion also considers how data analysis was undertaken and research validity achieved.

### 3.2 Research approach

As identified in Chapter 1, the overarching aim of this research is to reconsider how university students are expressing their political agency in contemporary university environments in Aotearoa New Zealand. This thesis addresses four key objectives:

1. To document the attitudes of New Zealand university students towards political action and the political environment;
2. To analyse the experiences, challenges and tensions that inform New Zealand student political action as identified by students;
3. To critically interrogate theoretical debates of student political action from the perspective of students; and
4. To develop a conceptual framework to better understand how students are expressing their political agency and how it is informed by university environments in the early twenty-first century.

To address these objectives, this study is conducted from an interpretivist position, defined here as a research stance in which the perspectives of citizens – their interpretations of their environment and the meanings that they give their actions – are placed at the heart of political research (Hay 2011, p. 168-169; Bryman 2012, p. 28-31; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012, p. *xiii-xiv*). This position builds from an understanding that citizens hold particular perceptions of the social and political world, which informs their political conduct and practice (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 42-45). Research conducted from an interpretivist stance acknowledges and is attentive to these subjective perspectives, experiences and meanings that shape political behaviour.

To enable the perspectives of university students to come to the fore, this study primarily employed an inductive strategy to the relationship between theory and research. Unlike deductive research that interrogates theory usually via the testing solidified hypotheses, inductive strategies are more respondent-led, with concepts and theories generated out of the research (Bryman 2012, p. 712, 24-26). For this project, openness and flexibility were maintained in the research design and conduct so as to offer students space to describe aspects of their political action and social world in their own terms. The concepts and categories that were subsequently developed in analysis were principally derived from the data.

Nevertheless, while the research strategy was primarily inductive, this project also involved elements of deductive theory. In privileging the perspectives of political actors, interpretivist approaches have been criticised for providing overly simple accounts of political action as an act of will or choice that can overlook how the ‘macro’ environment might inform that action, or the ways individuals may bring about change unconsciously through instinctive, responsive behaviour or habit (Schor 2007; Hay 2002, p. 112). These are valid concerns that were taken into consideration in the design, data collection and analysis stages of this project. To mitigate this tendency, existing theories from the literature, including those that consider the political economy and the macro-level institutional context, were revisited repeatedly during data collection and analysis in an iterative process of ‘weaving back and forth between data and theory’ (Bryman

2012, p. 26). These specific procedures and their contribution to the robustness of the findings and analysis will be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter.

### **3.3 Data gathering methods**

Qualitative methods provide a way of empirically probing beneath the surface appearances of political action to capture the perspectives and experiences that inform it. These methods were adopted for this project in response to concerns, discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 29-29), that researchers may be imposing top-down frameworks of political action onto students or young people, and mistakenly characterising them as 'apathetic' or 'depoliticised' (O'Toole et al. 2003, p. 53-54; Henn et al. 2002). Qualitative data gathering methods have also been widely adopted in recent studies of the political attitudes and perspectives of young people and students, although there has been some variation in the specific methods used in these studies. Typically, these projects have included a component of ethnographic fieldwork (Eliasoph 2011; Armstrong & Hamilton 2014), in-depth interviews (Nairn et al. 2012; Binder & Wood 2013) and focus groups (Henn et al. 2002; Brooks et al. 2015).

For this study, the data sources employed were 70 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with university students at New Zealand's eight universities in conjunction with non-participatory observation. These two data sources allowed for corroboration of findings and accounts, and brought greater breadth and depth to the analysis (Bryman 2012, p. 392). As I will discuss, I initially pursued ethnographic fieldwork more extensively, but found some practical limitations with the method in the context of studying student political action. Focus groups were also considered in the development of this project, as insights raised in group discussion can be valuable for analysis. However, focus groups provide practical challenges for studying student political action in terms of offering relatively limited flexibility for recruiting diverse groups of participants within their busy schedules.

While a key strength of in-depth interviews and observation is the richness it brings to understanding the motivations that inform student political action, it is less

able to describe the actual extent of participation among students in political activities. I was acutely aware of this limitation throughout this project. The analysis presented in this thesis, therefore, does not describe the extent of student participation in different forms of political action, but rather interrogates the range of attitudes towards political action among New Zealand university students in the early twenty-first century. To quantify levels of political participation among students would require survey research with a large random sample, which was considered for this project. However, I decided against this approach. Although this data would be valuable, survey research also contains weaknesses, particularly that it can provide a relatively 'thin' account of student political action to enable statistical analysis, which may overlook what the actors themselves consider most significant (O'Toole et al. 2003; Henn et al. 2002). I was also concerned that a survey in addition to the qualitative data would thinly spread the time and resources available for this project, while not significantly contributing to analysis.

A related caveat is that this research does not account for whether there has been an increase or decrease of protest among New Zealand students over time, or how their political action might have changed. Since the dramatic student protests of the 1960s, there has been an 'inevitable' tendency among students, academics and the wider public alike to compare contemporary student protesters to their predecessors, usually finding them lacking in some respect (Rhoads 1998, p. 35; Olausen 2007). Rather than comparing current students to their predecessors, this study begins from a stance that contemporary students in New Zealand face a series of particular challenges as political actors and that there is a need to understand student political attitudes and approach in this context.

For this research, in-depth interviews and observation were carried out in several stages from early 2014 to mid-2015. A summary timeline of the stages of this data collection is presented in Table 1, with a more detailed schedule provided in Appendix 1. These multiple stages enabled gaps in the data to be interrogated and emergent concepts and categories to be fully explored.

**Table 1** Data collection timeline and stages

Year	Semester	Observation	Interviews
2014	Semester 1	<b>Stage 1</b> Informal observation at the University of Canterbury	
	Semester 2		<b>Stage 1</b> Five pilot interviews with students at three universities
2015	Semester 1	<b>Stage 2</b> Observation at all eight New Zealand universities	<b>Stage 2</b> 51 in-depth interviews with students at all eight New Zealand universities
	Semester 2		<b>Stage 3</b> 14 interviews with students at two New Zealand universities

### 3.3.1 *Observation*

One of the advantages of investigating student political action is that their university affiliation makes them an easily locatable research population. In the first stage of observation, I was encouraged by Mats Alvesson’s (2009, p. 162) suggestion of ‘breaking out’ of taken-for-granted frameworks and used the opportunity of the beginning of the academic year to informally observe student-led events at my home university as a non-participating observer (Bryman 2012, p. 443-444). This ‘background ethnography’ was valuable for broadening my experience as a student, as I was aware that, as a member of the university community, I was coming to research with my own particular background of experiences, interactions and perspectives. In this stage of research, I purposefully sought to observe the widest possible range of student events on my home campus within my time constraints. In all cases, as in later stages of observation, the events attended were open and public. In these settings, I did not actively disclose my researcher role as it would not be practicable, but neither did I actively hide it.

The second stage of observation was undertaken in early- to mid-2015, when I spent between one to three weeks at each of New Zealand’s eight universities, including visiting different campuses within universities (for a detailed timetable see Appendix

1).<sup>4</sup> While the aim of the first stage of observation was to capture the diversity of activities within a student population at one university, the second stage sought to investigate differences among students across campuses and universities. These observations were vital for situating and providing reflections about the 'atmosphere' or culture of each of the universities. The intensive period of fieldwork, particularly when moving between campuses rapidly over the course of three months, helped to identify concepts that were significant across institutions, and those that were more specific to particular settings.

Recognising the unreliability of human memory, several approaches were adopted to record observations. For this process I relied heavily on Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz and Linda Shaw's (2011) *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Day-to-day, notes and ideas were recorded in a journal, sometimes quite extensively, as it is a practice not out of place in a university environment. Full field notes were then typed up as immediately as possible. The field notes were directed towards the research interests as well as points raised by students in interviews. In recording observations, I sought to be as concrete, comprehensive and systematic as possible, describing details of location, time of day, and my position within the situation (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 34-36, 58-59). Nevertheless, the focus of observations was not on individual students; I did not record any identifying details of individuals to ensure the confidentiality of the students involved. Rather, the field notes focused on broader impressions that occurred. In particular, the process of writing field notes was a valuable source of ongoing reflection on my role as a researcher and of spelling out my assumptions and preconceptions, as well as developing initial analytical thoughts about what was observed and the content of interviews.

During the development of this project, two practical limitations with observation as a research technique were identified when studying student political action. First, I observed that a relatively limited group of university students were active participants in clubs or societies, and most of them knew each other well. While it was

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<sup>4</sup> This travel was funded by the Kate Sheppard Memorial Scholarship (2013).

interesting to discover these networks, the majority of university students did not appear to be part of these interactions, especially those conventionally considered apathetic, and I was concerned that their perspectives could be lost to the research.

Second, I became aware that a potential tension might arise if a more 'participatory' approach to observation was adopted. Existing studies of activist groups using observation advocate fairly active participation, as well as being an observer and researcher, to build credibility and 'give back' to the group (Juris & Khasnabish 2013, p. 9). This process would have brought a series of significant dilemmas for myself as a researcher if used to study a broad range of political actions. The student community in New Zealand is relatively small, and as a researcher, I would have had to walk a fine line between meaningfully contributing to groups, but not in a way that would alienate me from other student organisations, such as those with opposing views or approaches. While I could have become a non-participating observer of those groups, that approach would potentially have exacerbated tension between competing clubs.

### **3.3.2 Interviews**

The second method adopted for this project was 70 in-depth interviews with students at New Zealand's eight universities, undertaken from late 2014 to mid-2015. Interviews offered a means of listening to the diversity of perspectives of students across New Zealand, on both the political left and right, as well as those highly active and those who could be described as 'apathetic' by traditional measures. Interviews were also not overly intrusive or disruptive to students. In this section, I detail the sampling strategies used to recruit respondents, provide an overview of the characteristics of respondents and outline the procedures used for interviews.

#### **3.3.2.1 Sampling method**

As previously noted, a key concern in developing this project was to probe beneath surface appearances of student political action. As such, I pursued a sampling strategy that ensured that the diverse perspectives of students were present in analysis. In many respects, the sampling method used for the interview component of this research bears

many similarities to a cross-sectional design in quantitative research, in that the students who participated in this study formed a 'cross section' of New Zealand university students at a single point of time (Bryman 2012, p. 63, 418). To ensure a diversity of perspectives in the research, respondents were purposively sampled so that interview participants exemplified New Zealand's university student population as a whole, in terms of demographics (gender, age and ethnicity), the university they attended, the degree they studied and their political perspective. This nationwide coverage of New Zealand students was ambitious but achievable in a small country with only eight universities. The specific characteristics of the interview sample are discussed in depth in the next section.

To generate the sample, demographic data about the student body as a whole was collated from several quantitative surveys of New Zealand students prior to interviews. Specifically, this data was collected from the Ministry of Education (Education Counts 2015, 2016), the New Zealand Union of Students' Association's 2014 *Income and Expenditure Survey* of 5,000 tertiary students (NZUSA 2015), the New Zealand Graduate Longitudinal Survey *Baseline Report* that surveyed 8,000 final year students in 2011 (Tustin et al. 2012) and the 2011 New Zealand Electoral Survey (NZES 2011). This data was then mirrored in a short questionnaire that respondents were asked to fill out at the start of their interview (Appendix 3). Questions about the involvement of participants in clubs or associations on and off campus were also added to the short questionnaire to gauge whether the respondent was highly active in campus life, or less so. Throughout the interview process, quotas of key demographic and political characteristics were applied to ensure the diversity of participants (Silverman 2005, p. 129-130; Bryman 2012, p. 416).

Recruiting a diverse sample of students for this research was achieved through a dual strategy. Initially, students were approached via a publically available email address using the student clubs databases at each of the universities. Approaching respondents via the clubs they were involved in was an effective means of meeting students from a wide range of academic, social and political backgrounds. After this

initial pool of interview participants, a snowball sampling strategy was adopted in which students were used to establish contacts with others (Bryman 2012, p. 424). At the end of every interview, participants were asked if they knew of other friends or acquaintances that they thought might be interested, including at other universities. I made it clear that I was interested in interviewing a broad range of students, including those that were not active on campus at all or were not interested in politics. This snowballing approach brought me in contact with students who were less active in student life, including students who had not voted in the previous election and those not involved in any clubs.

While this purposive sampling strategy strengthened the overall diversity of respondents, it did not inform how many interviews were required for robust and trustworthy findings. To this end, theoretical sampling was adopted in addition to applying quotas. Theoretical sampling entails continuing to gather data up until theoretical saturation occurs, in which no new theoretical insights are being generated, and emerging concepts have been fully explored and elaborated (Glaser & Strauss 2012, p. 212; Silverman 2005, p. 130-134; Bryman 2012, p. 420). The relatively broad characteristics of respondents, including at eight universities in six cities, suggested the sample size for this project was likely to be relatively large in order to grasp the range of perspectives within the New Zealand student community. Other interview projects in similar fields, such as Karen Nairn, Jane Higgins and Judith Sligo's (2012) study of young New Zealanders transitioning from high school and Amy Binder and Kate Wood's (2013) research of conservative college students in the United States, had carried out between 60 and 120 interviews before they reached theoretical saturation, although both projects had been undertaken by a research team rather than a single researcher.

It is difficult to know in advance how many interviews are needed for theoretical saturation. As such, considerable flexibility was maintained as the research progressed, with data collection carried out in multiple stages. In the first stage, 51 interviews were completed over a period of three months across all eight universities around New Zealand, from January to March 2015 (a detailed timeline is provided in Appendix 1).

Following the advice of Eleanor McLellan, Kathleen MacQueen and Judith Neidig (2003, p. 63), a large proportion of the transcription of the data from interviews was completed during this time, which provided scope for me to revisit and reflect on what had been said, identify gaps, develop new questions to interrogate and start developing some tentative concepts. Universities were visited multiple times during this period, which enabled me to re-examine the concepts that I had begun to develop in various contexts and to continuously revise assumptions: what might appear to be a salient concept at one university was not necessarily at another.

Following this first stage of interviews, I took a break from data collection for six weeks to complete transcribing as well as to give space for theoretical reflection, and the further development and refinement of categories and emerging concepts. In revising the data, some categories had reached theoretical saturation in that they were fully elaborated. In other cases, I identified several gaps within and between categories where more data was needed to more fully understand the processes and relationships that were emerging. To directly address these oversights, I undertook a further 14 interviews, with the students purposively sampled. In the coding of these subsequent interviews, no new categories were added, confirming and validating the existing categories that had been developed (Bryman 2012, p. 426-427).

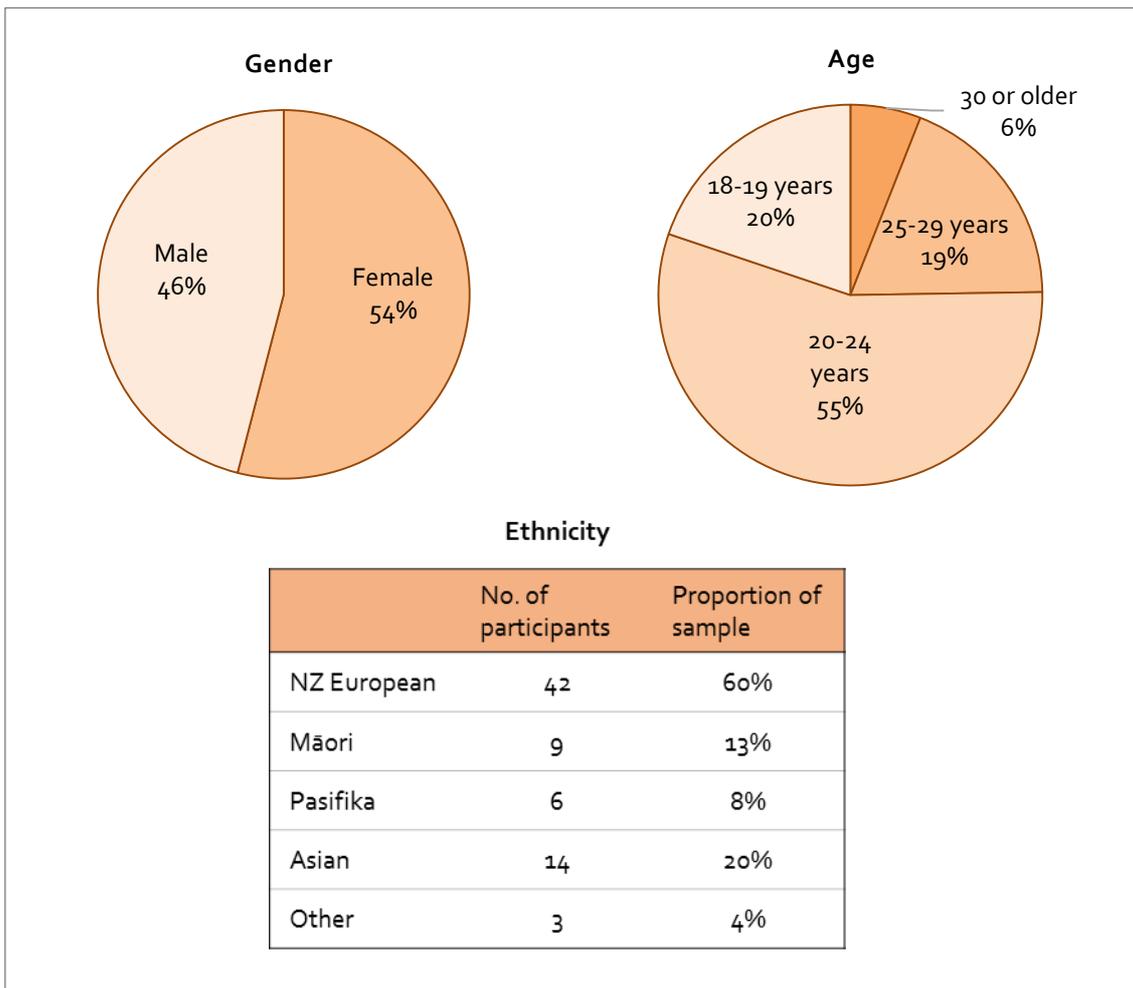
### *3.3.2.2 Interview sample*

As previously noted, the final sample of respondents interviewed largely exemplifies the New Zealand student body as a whole, both demographically and politically. A detailed table of the characteristics of the interview sample relative to the national student population is provided in Appendix 2. In this section, I provide a snapshot of the key features of respondents.

The gender, ethnicity and age of participants are summarised in Figure 2. Like the student population as a whole, there was a moderately higher number of female (54%) than male (46%) respondents. The identified ethnicity of students also closely exemplified the national student body, with 60% of the sample identifying as New Zealand European, 13% Māori, 8% Pasifika and 20% Asian. Regarding age, there was a

moderate disparity between respondents and the student population as a whole. Among interview participants, 76% were under the age of 25, compared to 64% in the wider student body. While the younger age of the participants in this research means the views of older students are given less attention, this sample offers greater focus on the particular challenges and tensions of being a young student in the 2010s in New Zealand.

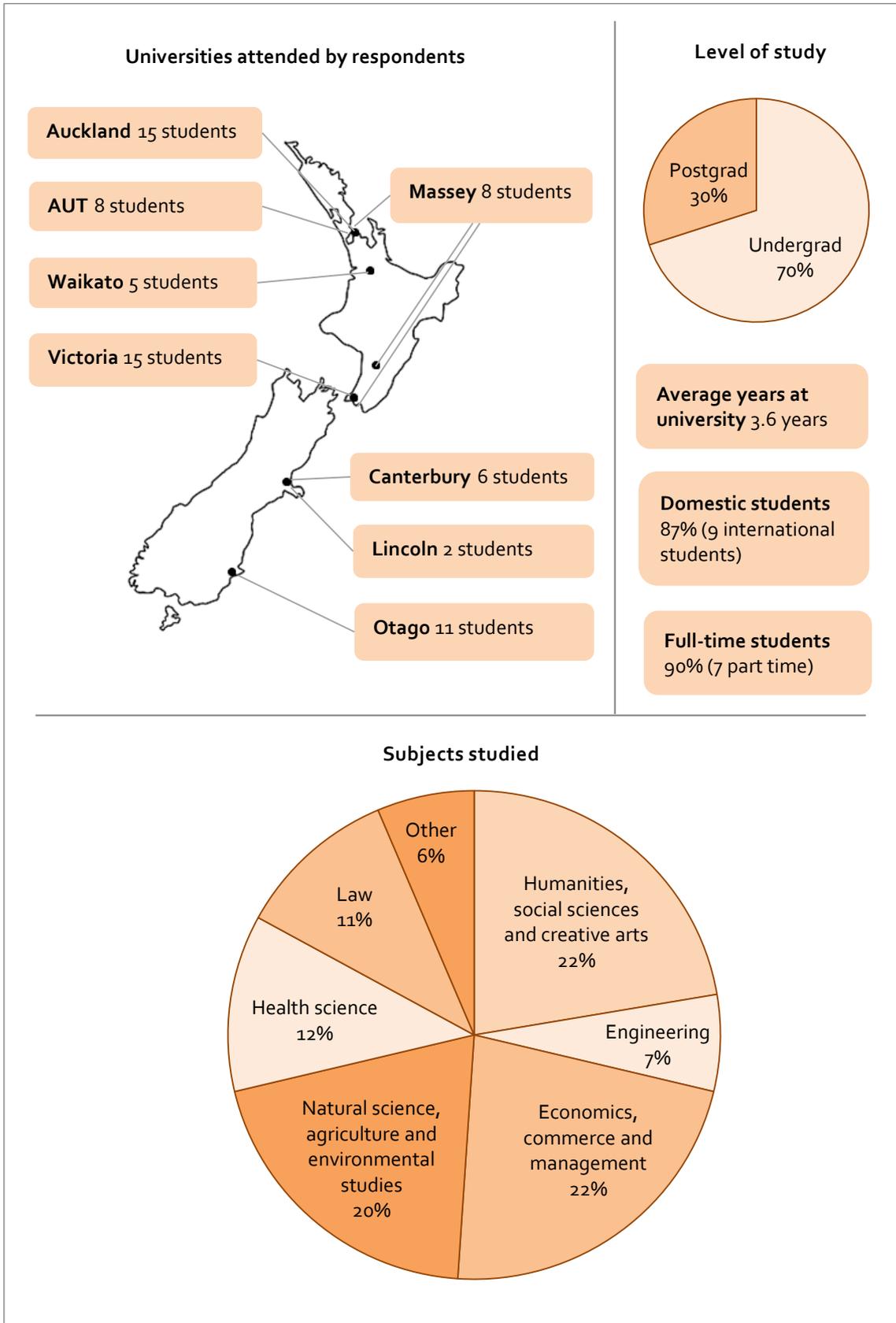
**Figure 2** Gender, age and ethnicity of respondents



Besides demographic data, interview participants were sampled to be proportionate to the size of student bodies at universities in New Zealand (Figure 3). Among the students in this sample, 21% of respondents attended Auckland University

and Victoria University respectively, 11% were at AUT, 11% at Massey University (all three campuses) and 7% attended Waikato University. In the South Island, 16% of respondents attended Otago University (Dunedin), 9% were from Canterbury University (Christchurch) and 3% attended Lincoln University. Students from Victoria University were moderately over-represented in this sample due to a high response rate, while students from Auckland University, AUT and Massey University were marginally under-represented. There was a greater proportion of students who studied full-time than the national student population, likely because these students tended to be present on campus for interviews.

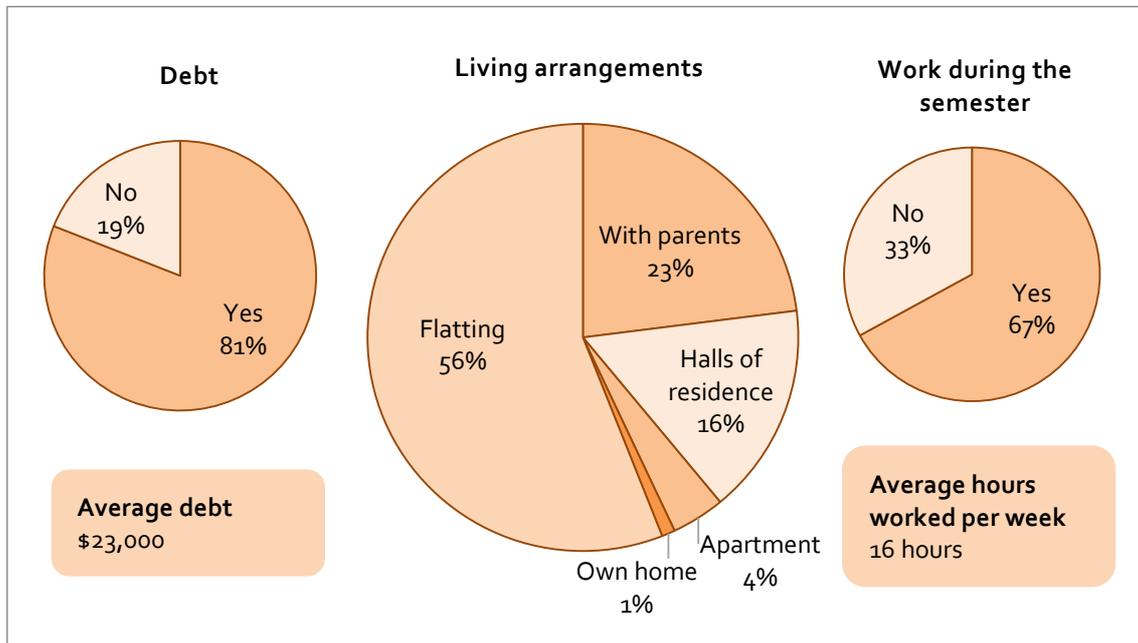
**Figure 3** University attended and level, type and subject studied by respondents



In addition to university attended, students were sampled by their type of study, also reported in Figure 3. Regarding the degrees they studied, 15 students reported primarily studying the humanities, social science or creative arts, and a further 15 respondents were students of economics, commerce or management. The natural sciences and agriculture were studied by 13 students, and health sciences by eight respondents. Seven students studied law, and six students studied engineering. Students studying law were slightly over-represented in this sample relative to the wider student population, due to a high response rate. Among respondents, 70% were undergrads, with students having spent an average of 3.7 years at university. All but seven students were studying full-time. The sample included nine international students who comprised 13% of respondents.

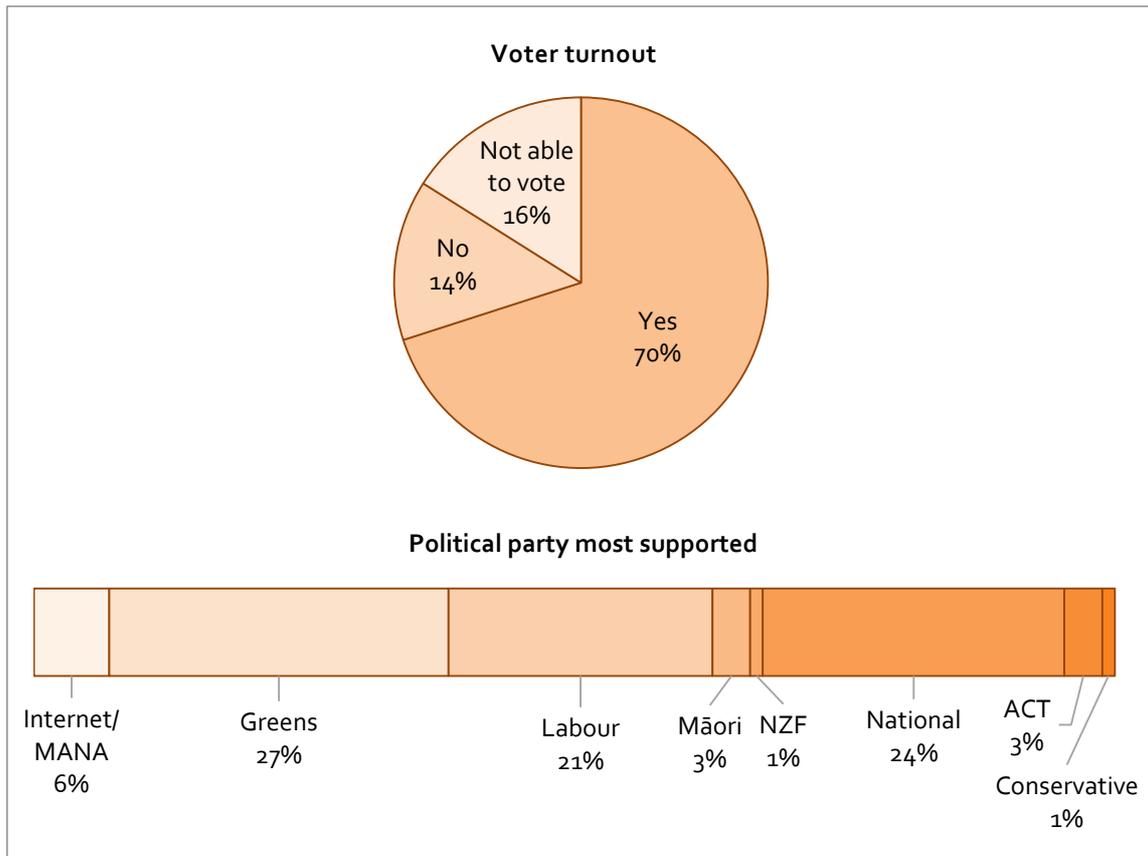
Interview participants were also asked about their economic situation (Figure 4). Regarding debt, respondents closely reflected the wider student body in terms of whether they had debt: 81% of students reported having debt, while 19% recorded that they did not. Amongst students with debt, the average reported level of debt was \$32,000, not including four students who were uncertain of the amount of debt they owed and wrote question marks or 'lots'. This reported average debt was higher than the national average of \$22,000 for students graduating with a bachelor's degree, likely because this nationally reported average does not include postgraduate study (Education Counts 2015, p. 37). In terms of employment, interview participants reported similar levels of work during term-time to the wider student population: 67% of respondents stated that they were employed during the academic year, working an average of 16 hours per week. Regarding living arrangements, most respondents were flatting (56%), while 23% lived with their parents, 16% in halls of residence, 4% in a single apartment and one respondent owned their own home.

**Figure 4** Levels of debt, living arrangements and employment of respondents



In terms of political perspective, interview participants were purposively sampled to include students on both the political left and right, as well as those who might conventionally be considered 'apathetic'. Among the students in this sample, 70% of respondents reported that they had voted in the 2014 election, moderately higher than the national voter turnout for young people aged 18-29 years (Figure 5). Nevertheless, the sample included ten students who indicated that they had chosen not to vote at the 2014 election. Eleven students were not able to vote, either because they were international students or had been under the age of 18 at the time of the last election.

**Figure 5** Voter turnout and political party most supported by respondents

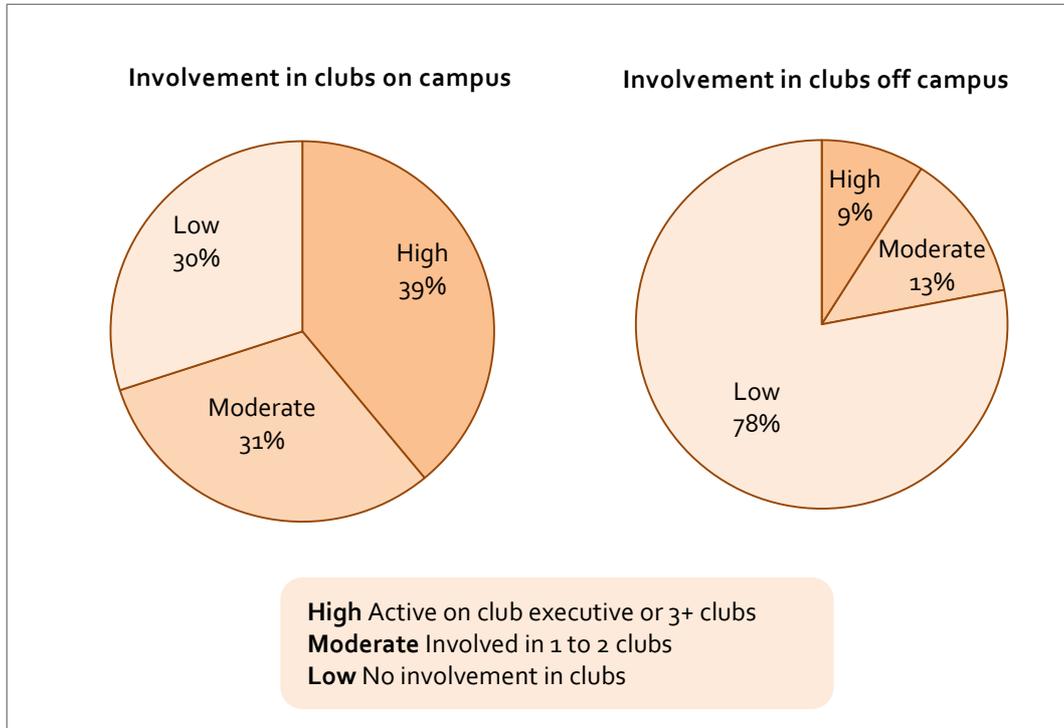


Besides voting, respondents were asked which party they most supported as a means of ensuring there was a diversity of political views present among the students in this sample. Of the students interviewed, 54% indicated they most supported political parties that can be considered on the political left: Labour (21%), Greens (27%) and Internet/MANA (6%). Twenty respondents, or 28% of the sample, indicated support for right-leaning political parties: National (24%), ACT (3%) and Conservative (1%). Two students also reported most supporting the Māori Party, and one student New Zealand First. In the analysis presented, students who most supported the Māori Party are included as right-leaning because the Māori Party is currently in coalition with the National Party, while the student who most supported New Zealand First has been reported as left-leaning as the party is currently in opposition.

By itself, participation at the ballot box is an incomplete measure of political engagement. As such, respondents were asked to list the clubs that they were involved

in, on and off campus, to provide an indication of the level of their participation in collective activities and to provide a starting point for discussion. This level of involvement is summarised in Figure 6. Regarding involvement on campus, respondents were members of an average of 1.7 clubs. Within the sample, 39% were highly active on campus, in that they indicated that they were either active on a club executive or involved in three or more societies. Nine of these students were active or had recently been active in the youth wings of political parties. A more moderate level of participation was reported by 31% of respondents, with students indicating involvement in one to two clubs. Low levels of participation were reported by 30% of the students in this sample, with these respondents reporting no involvement in any clubs. Off campus, high levels of participation in clubs were much lower among respondents, with only 9% of participants active on a club or organisation executive, while 78% reported no involvement.

**Figure 6** Involvement in clubs on and off campus of respondents



Before progressing to discuss the interview procedures, it is important to note what data was not collected about this sample. The background information sheet did not collect any information from respondents about their parents' qualifications, occupations or incomes, nor was it discussed in interviews other than in some passing references. As such, this study is not able to comment on the socio-economic background or social classes to which respondents belonged. In the development of the short questionnaire for interviews, I chose not to include this information to ensure that the questionnaire did not become too long and the questions would not appear too invasive at the outset of the interview. Proper discussion of these topics would also have extended the length of interviews, which were already challenging to fit into the busy schedules of students. However, this information would have added greater depth to analysis, especially regarding the complex repercussions of debt on the student body and the ways in which contemporary university environments may be reproducing or amplifying inequality. Nevertheless, without this information, the focus of my analysis related to understanding among students of debt and the differences that they saw at university, which proved a rich seam of inquiry in itself.

### *3.3.2.3 Interview procedure*

All interviews were semi-structured to encourage respondents to share their experiences and express their attitudes towards political action, but with scope to go off-topic if they chose. An interview schedule was developed from the research questions arising from the literature review (p. 47-48) and preliminary observations. To ensure that the questions were in language that was comprehensible and relevant to students, they were trialled in five pilot interviews in late 2014 with students from three universities. A summary of the key topics covered in the interviews is provided in Figure 7, with a complete interview guide provided in Appendix 4.

**Figure 7** Summary of key topics covered in interviews

<p><b>SECTION 1: Activities on campus</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Description of their involvement in club(s) and how they came to be involved (or not)</li><li>• What they valued about their, or others', (political) activity and why</li><li>• What they considered to be the challenges facing their club(s)</li><li>• Their personal frustrations with the club(s)</li><li>• External support received by the club(s)</li></ul>
<p><b>SECTION 2: Political perspectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students' views on 'politics' and how it had changed since arriving at university</li><li>• How comfortable they feel expressing their political views to their peers</li><li>• An issue that they were most interested in or concerned about</li><li>• The ways that they had sought to act on these interests, if at all</li><li>• The extent to which they felt their views were similar or different to other students</li></ul>
<p><b>SECTION 3: Reflections on campus and student life</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Expectations and surprises when they first came to university</li><li>• Discussion of their experiences as a student</li><li>• How debt has affected them or their friends, if at all</li><li>• How these experiences have affected their political activity, if at all</li><li>• How easy they found it to make friends at university</li><li>• How the role of students' associations has changed</li></ul>

As can be seen in Figure 7, the interview was structured in three parts. The first section considered the involvement of students in clubs and societies on campus, such as how they came to be involved, what they valued about their participation and the challenges facing their club. The discussion in this section probed aspects of Research Question 1 by considering student attitudes towards their political action and participation, as well as their aspirations for that political action. The second section then examined the political perspectives of students. This section similarly drew on Research Question 1 by considering their attitudes towards formal politics and their aspirations for political action via discussion of an issue that mattered to them, but also Research Question 3, by discussing the extent to which they felt their views were shared with other students. The third section of the interview covered student reflections on the campus and student life. This part addressed Research Question 2, by asking about their experiences of university, including how debt had affected them. It further probed Research Question 3 by considering how easily they had made friends at university, as

well as Research Question 4 by enquiring how their students' association has changed. Over time, additional questions were added to each of these sections to investigate more specific points or to test concepts that I was developing.

Interviews with students usually lasted for around 30 minutes to one hour, depending on the depth of involvement of the interviewee and their schedule. After running pilot interviews, this length of interview was determined to be appropriate to cover the topics required and to fit in with student timetables. These pilot interviews, plus all of the interviews in the second stage between January and March 2015 were conducted face-to-face, either at the personal office of the student or in a public location of their choosing, usually a café. In the third stage, eight interviews were conducted via Skype as it was not financially feasible for me to travel for each interview. Interviews were primarily with individual students as it was challenging to fit in group interviews. However, in eight cases, students chose to be interviewed collectively in groups of friends of up to four members. In two cases, follow-up interviews were sought with students who indicated particular interest and knowledge in the topic. The detailed timeline of interviews is provided in Appendix 1.

With the permission of participants, all interviews were audio recorded, and I transcribed them verbatim to allow for thorough and repeated examination of responses. To ensure the confidentiality of participants, some minor details that could identify students have been changed on the transcripts. Beyond these considerations, however, there has been no 'tidying up' of the transcripts; included are repetitions at the start of sentences, digressions from the topic and incomplete sentences (McLellan et al. 2003, p. 67). The transcripts were sent to interviewees to approve, and all were returned, seven with minor alterations.

### **3.3.3 Ethical considerations**

All research needs to be sensitive to the needs and characteristics of participants. The research methods adopted for this study were approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee (HEC 2014/80, 17/10/2014). Throughout this investigation, I

took some practical steps to ensure the consent, confidentiality and anonymity of the students who participated.

Regarding consent, all respondents consented to participate before interviews began and each signed a formal consent form, which guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality (Appendix 5). From the outset, all participants were fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their involvement. When potential respondents were approached via publically-available email, an information sheet was attached, which included a summary of the research objectives, the research team, what their participation would require, how the data would be used and contact information for further information (Appendix 6). So they did not feel obligated to participate, all respondents were aware that their participation in the research was voluntary and that they could withdraw up until they approved their transcript. I also sought to ensure that consent was a process, not a onetime event by sending draft chapters to students who had indicated interest in the research to respond to how they were portrayed in the research.

The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were of careful concern from the earliest stages of this research. Claudia Bell and Lindsay Neill (2016, p. 5) have recently restated the argument to 'think of New Zealand as a small town' in undergoing nation-wide research in that 'New Zealand's small size makes identification not only easy but also likely'. In line with this advice, several steps were taken in this project to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. All students interviewed chose their pseudonyms at the beginning of the interview, which I use throughout this thesis along with the university they attended. In some cases, I have obscured the university the respondent attended entirely to ensure their anonymity. Specific details that could make students identifiable have been removed, such as the names of the clubs they were involved in, the particular degree they studied or any other identifying names and locations. Where students voluntarily shared sensitive or personal information, I have been selective in drawing on this data for a public arena publication out of courtesy to the participants. In some instances, I have obscured their name and the university they

attended. For discussion of students' associations, I have taken further steps to change the pseudonyms of student officers as well as removing the university that they attended. There are very few student officers in New Zealand and they are potentially easily identifiable. These steps mean that student officers in this sample effectively have two pseudonyms, and the statements they made about students' associations are not able to be connected to other comments that have been used in other parts of the thesis.

Beyond individual students, I have worked actively to disguise the identities of student groups and those involved in them. In field notes, comments about student organisations were kept at a general level, discussing the group as a whole rather than its individual members. Although the names of some student clubs are mentioned in this thesis, this discussion is restricted to groups that have large numbers of members, usually on multiple campuses. I have actively disguised the identity of smaller groups, which are typically spearheaded by small numbers of individuals. In interviews, I was privy to a range of sensitive information concerning roles, relationships and conflicts between groups and individuals. Especially among those groups actively seeking social change, it is a dense community in which everyone is more or less aware of everyone else, and interested in their affairs. Exposing or discussing these relations would betray the confidence of the students who generously participated in this research and might have significant negative repercussions. I have therefore left aside any detailed analysis of interpersonal relationships, factions or rivalries, both within and between student groups.

Regarding the universities themselves, I do not take the steps that some recent studies of universities have taken and completely obscure their identity (e.g. Binder & Wood 2013; Armstrong & Hamilton 2014). This approach is not feasible given that I spent time and interviewed students at all of New Zealand's universities. That said, I recognise and respect that the university community in New Zealand is small and there are real concerns that research can harm profitability. Therefore, specific universities are discussed in this thesis only where that information is already publically available. In considering the reflections and criticisms of universities in New Zealand raised by

students, a more general language is used and specific institutions are not named. While the comments of students were often directed at their particular university, these statements were almost always echoed across many if not all the universities. It is therefore not particularly important to identify exactly which university a comment was directed at, but rather that it was said. This approach does not detract from the research, as the aim is not to identify and shame particular groups or decision-makers, but rather to open discussion about the challenges students are facing as political actors in contemporary university environments.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

As noted earlier in the chapter, the procedures used for data analysis in this study were iterative and took place from the earliest stages of data collection, with theoretical propositions developed, reconsidered and refined throughout and following data collection. A series of strategies were adopted to make the process of analysis as robust as possible. In particular, I relied on strategies recommended by Pat Bazeley (2013) and David Silverman (2005).

From the outset, all transcripts and field notes were uploaded into NVivo to manage the text and ensure quick retrieval of data relating to a particular topic or concept. As transcripts and field notes were completed and approved, each text was read through in its entirety, to regain familiarity with the scope and content of the text, with thoughts arising recorded in a project journal and NVivo. Particular attention was paid to the stories and accounts used by participants to explain, justify and legitimise behaviour, the meanings and purposes that they gave to their actions, the difficulties or challenges students identified and the reasons why participants felt they needed to give an account of their behaviour (Bazeley 2013, p. 115). Following Silverman (2000, p. 135), 'puzzles' were also sought within the data as a way to open out analysis and consider what was being described and why, and to identify gaps for further research.

After these initial explorations, data was manually coded. Codes had four purposes, directed by the research questions (Bazeley 2013, p. 127-131). The first type

was a descriptive code that provided a means of managing and locating data and usually related to a particular topic or common questions across interviews. The second set of codes described student interpretations of key issues or events and identified similarities or differences among students in their perceptions. A third group were *in vivo* codes drawn directly from interview respondents that were frequently repeated or had noted linguistic features, such as metaphors or use of 'my' or 'our' when explaining their activities. The fourth group of codes identified aspects of the socio-political or institutional environment that shaped student political action to maintain a macro-level focus in analysis. As data collection and analysis progressed, codes were subsequently refined by examining data multiple times to develop more detailed categories. Several meta-codes were developed alongside these categories that formed a more abstract, than descriptive, level of analysis of the data. These meta-codes include the '3 Ds' that are used to structure the next three chapters of this thesis – *desires*, *demands* and *doubts* – as well as the concept of creative pragmatism, which is discussed in Chapter 7.

During data analysis, the robustness and reliability of the interpretations being developed were of constant concern. An enduring challenge with interview data is that there can be a 'gap between beliefs and action, and between what people say and what they do' (Silverman 2005, p. 239). To mitigate this tendency, multiple accounts and observations were drawn on to corroborate the perspectives offered in interviews to ensure analysis did not rely on single perspectives. Undertaking interviews in several stages and across eight different universities was critical for enabling concepts that were not fully developed or relied too heavily on a few voices to be further investigated. The 'birds-eye' perspective that came from working with a large number of interviews conducted with students from different social, academic and political backgrounds also meant that I was able to identify similarities and differences in attitudes that students themselves were not aware of, so as to move beyond individual accounts.

A further criticism often levelled at qualitative research is that it can be too subjective (Bryman 2012, p. 405). By this, it is implied that the research lacks the robust rigour of quantitative research. Several strategies were pursued to ensure the rigour of

the interpretation presented. Following David Silverman (2005, p. 213-214), I employed constant comparative method in which emerging theories were continuously revised by considering them against all interview texts until they accounted for all respondents. Negative case analysis was also utilised by searching out and discussing deviant cases that did not support or appeared to contradict emergent theories (Baxter & Eyles 1997, p. 514).

In the presentation of this analysis, the number of respondents who described a particular phenomenon is referenced wherever possible to ensure that the findings do not appear anecdotal. Where relevant, student responses are presented visually in graphs to indicate the number of respondents who raised a particular topic or statement in interviews. I recognise that this approach does wash out the richness of qualitative data and can lend itself to top-down generalisations that inductive research arguably seeks to counter. However, these graphs also provide a helpful way of demonstrating the extent to which these ideas were raised across the sample, such as whether it was just a few students or a substantial majority. These techniques to display the data have only been used when there was strong consistency in responses to a similarly worded question. In presenting the analysis, these more descriptive techniques have been complemented by closer discussion of single transcripts and possible interpretations of student accounts, including in relation to theory.

To confirm and corroborate the credibility of analysis, I undertook respondent validation in which interpretations of the data were discussed with students (Bryman 2012, p. 391). This technique is used in qualitative research to ensure there is a good correspondence between the account provided and the perceptions and experiences of the research participants (Bazeley 2013, p. 408-409). For this study, respondent validation took part in two stages, with students drawn from interview participants who had indicated some interest in the subject and my personal networks. As key categories were developed, interpretations were discussed with nine students, either in person or by Skype. These students were selected to ensure a range of perspectives were included, and they were asked to consider whether the interpretation resonated with their

experience and understanding and those of their friends. Drafts of Chapters 4, 5 and 6 were sent to four students, with minor revisions returned. Furthermore, some of the findings of this research were published and presented at conferences, including to students (e.g. Nissen 2016, 2015a, 2015b). At these presentations, I received positive feedback about the concepts I was developing, including that they strongly resonated with student experiences. Following the completion of this study, a summary of the findings of this project was sent to all respondents who had indicated interest.

Lastly, a concern with qualitative research is for the transferability of the analysis. Qualitative data generates in-depth knowledge about embedded actors in particular environments. As has been discussed, the analysis presented in this thesis is indicative of the range of attitudes present among contemporary New Zealand students. It is, therefore, not directly transferable to students in other established democracies, nor to young people more generally in New Zealand. That said, the significance of this research is less its descriptive capacity, and instead its contribution to theoretical understanding of how students are expressing their agency and the ways contemporary university environments are informing student political action in the early twenty-first century. New Zealand students are not alone in experiencing high debt, growing levels of part-time work and precarious transitions to work, especially among the predominately English-speaking democracies, and elements of this study may resonate with these student populations. Details of the New Zealand context were provided in Chapter 1 to help facilitate this transfer of knowledge.

### **3.5 Summary**

As stated at the outset of this chapter, the aim of this thesis is to reconsider how university students are expressing their political agency in contemporary university environments in New Zealand. In this chapter, I detailed and justified the interpretivist approach adopted for the empirical study and the qualitative data gathering methods used, specifically 70 in-depth interviews with students and observation at New Zealand's eight universities. I argued that this approach is well-suited to provide an insight into student perspectives on political action. It also offered a degree of flexibility

to research that, while still robust enough to allow for comparison among respondents, enabled a broad range of students to discuss politics and political action in their own terms.

The analysis presented in this thesis is indicative of the range of attitudes towards political action present among contemporary New Zealand students. Students were purposively sampled to exemplify the national student population as a whole, with theoretical sampling employed to determine the overall size of the sample to ensure emergent categories and concepts were fully developed. Demographically, the students who participated in this study largely reflect the student body as a whole in relation to gender and ethnicity, as well as the university they attended, the subjects they studied and their levels of debt. Regarding political perspectives, respondents include those who indicated support for political parties on both the political left and right, as well as those who might conventionally be described as 'apathetic' in that they had chosen not to vote or did not participate in any clubs on campus.

The remainder of this thesis presents the analysis of the attitudes of these students. The next three chapters are structured around '3 Ds' that I argue inform contemporary New Zealand student political action. These '3 Ds' are *desires* for different types of politics, *demands* as contemporary university students and *doubts* in an era of political ambiguity.

## CHAPTER FOUR – DESIRES

*It's not that people aren't involved with or interested in politics, it's what type of politics.*

*~ Alex (Victoria)*

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine student perspectives on the political environment and what they valued about political action in this context. As discussed in the previous chapter, conversations with students sought to probe beneath the surface of their political action and understand what was most significant to them as political actors. What emerged from these discussions was a series of political aspirations that I describe as *desires* for different types of politics. As I will argue in this chapter, these *desires* were not necessarily coherent or clearly defined for many of the students in this sample, but are nevertheless suggestive of an underlying discontent with the status quo among New Zealand students and an interest in political change.

To situate the analysis, this chapter begins by considering how respondents characterised themselves and other students as political actors, including a dominant perception among the interviewees that contemporary students were 'apathetic'. Yet, as I discuss, this stated belief in student apathy was not reflected or corroborated by student responses in interviews. In the remainder of the chapter, I examine the critical but engaged attitudes students expressed towards formal politics, before considering the enthusiastic ways that students spoke about the issues that mattered to them. I then discuss the types of political action that respondents valued or admired, specifically approaches that brought tangible change, contribution and a sense of connection.

#### 4.2 'Students just aren't political these days': Perceptions of students as political actors

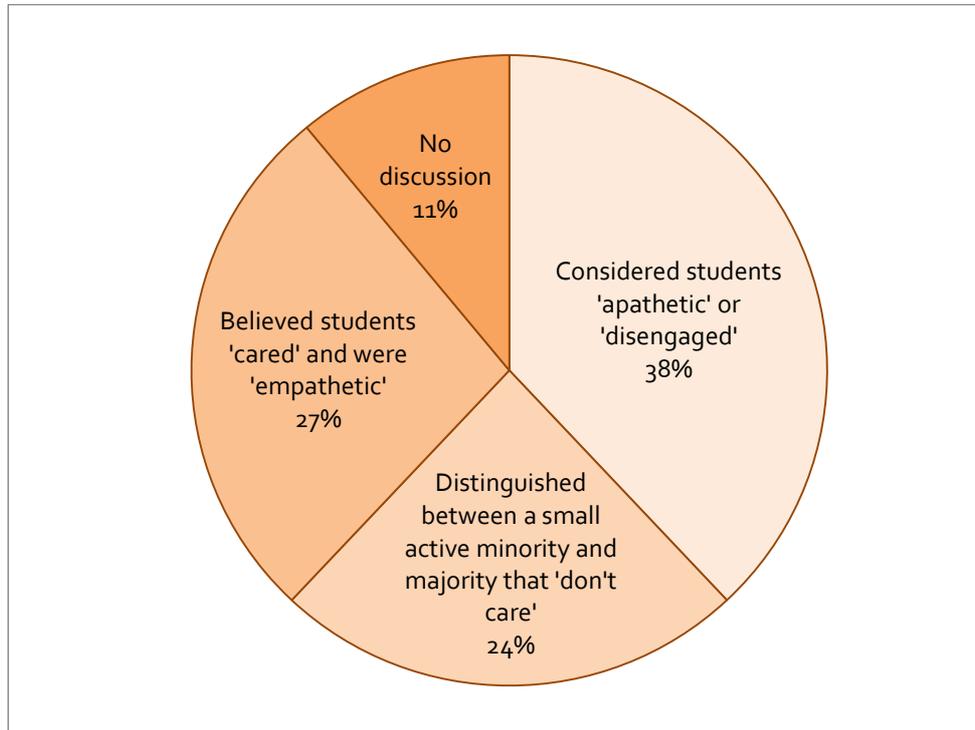
One of the most striking features of conversations with students was that respondents tended to assume student apathy was the norm. These reflections were not made in relation to any specific question but rather were offered in passing, usually at the start of interviews when the topic of the research was described, when students elaborated on a question about their political action or when they were asked whether other students shared their political views.

Amongst the students in this sample, 44 respondents volunteered that they considered most students to be 'apathetic'. As portrayed in Figure 8, there was some variation in how students spoke about this apathy. For 26 interview participants, the term was applied to students generally, with the student body as a whole characterised as 'apathetic', 'disengaged', 'indifferent' or, as James (Canterbury) memorably described, 'just don't give a rat's arse about politics at all'. These comments were typical of these students:

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| Ross | Students just aren't political these days. I don't know why, but it's not really done anymore, there's just not any interest or engagement out there (AUT).                      |
| Sara | Students don't really care about politics; they're just not interested. I guess it's just laziness and apathy, and that they think they've got better things to do (Canterbury). |

This belief in student apathy appeared widely held. Not only did 38% of respondents volunteer these views, but the students who made these comments were diverse politically: they reported support for political parties on both the political left (16 respondents) and right (10), and included students who were highly active in clubs (8) as well as those who were not involved in any clubs (13) or had chosen not to vote (4). That students who were not involved in any clubs or who had not voted described other students as apathetic is somewhat surprising, as by conventional measures these students might themselves be considered as 'apathetic'.

**Figure 8** Characterisations of students as political actors by respondents



A related account of student apathy distinguished between levels of political involvement among students (17 respondents). The students who offered this characterisation tended to be active in clubs on campus, with all but three respondents reporting high involvement. These interview participants identified two groups of students: a small, highly motivated and active minority (of which they and their friends were a part) and the 'vast' majority that 'don't care either way'. These active students tended to express frustration towards the students who 'don't think they're political at all' and argued that 'something needs to happen to make students less apathetic'. However, all but five of these respondents also reported sympathy towards what they described as 'normal' students who were 'apathetic'. This view is illustrated by Michael (Auckland), who spontaneously raised this perspective when discussing the different types of student groups on campus:

Michael            I'd say students are kind of apathetic, but they're just kind of normal, really, they just want to get on with what they're doing and not be disturbed by someone handing out a flyer or asking them to vote for them or for their party (Auckland).

Consistent with 'apathetic' students being described as 'normal', five students who were highly active in clubs spoke about themselves as 'unusual' or 'strange' in being involved on campus. For example, a second-year student at AUT, Lily-Jane, recounted how she and her friends joked that they were 'very weird 20-somethings because we're all very politically engaged'.

When discussing apparent student apathy, some interview participants made unfavourable comparisons between their peers and other student cohorts, both historically and internationally (19 respondents). These students volunteered ideals of what being a student was 'supposed' to be, usually making references to becoming engaged in politics. These statements were typical of these respondents:

Felicity            It's university, right? It is supposed to be this awesome time of getting engaged with all these crazy ideas and debates. I guess just being super-engaged with politics. That's what happened in the past, and you hear about it happening in other places around the world too (Otago).

Luke                You hear about students overseas protesting this and that in the news all the time. And my dad always had these stories from when he occupied the registry in the '80s. That's what students do: they protest (Canterbury).

Greg                There is this idea that you come to university and you get involved in all these things, and it is this great, fun, cool thing, you meet all these people, stuff like that (Victoria).

Despite these expectations, all but two of these students suggested their experiences had fallen short of these hopes. Somewhat surprisingly, the students who reported this disappointment were not all left-leaning, highly active students as might have been expected given the comparisons students were making. Rather, these respondents also included five students who were not active in any clubs on campus and six students who most supported political parties on the right. One of these right-leaning students was James, a third-year student at the University of Canterbury:

James              ... if you think about students around the world, say at US universities, I can never imagine students here rioting as they did in London a few years ago. I can never imagine them sort of doing the big sit-downs and protests that you see in the States. And I don't know if that is

necessarily all of New Zealand or if it confined here ... I think Wellington is a bit more sort of active. But it just doesn't seem to happen like I thought it might have (Canterbury).

Similar to James was Luke, cited earlier, who was a right-leaning engineering student at the University of Canterbury and was only peripherally involved with one club on campus. After arguing that 'That's what students do: they protest', he described his regret that, compared to other democracies, New Zealand student politics 'is dead here compared to over there'.

While perceptions of student apathy were dominant among interview participants, it is important to note that not all respondents shared these views. To the contrary, 19 respondents spoke, often passionately, about the underlying capacity of students to 'care'. These students spontaneously described frustration with external stereotypes, especially in the media and among older New Zealanders, which assumed contemporary students were 'hedonistic', 'selfish' or 'indifferent'. These responses were typical of these students:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Margot | ... for me, what I find really frustrating is when older generations tell us that we're not political anymore, that we don't care about any of the popular issues (Victoria). |
| Naomi  | I get really annoyed when people in the media say students don't care, that we're just too busy taking selfies or on Facebook or something (AUT).                             |
| Greta  | There's this assumption that all students care about is going to parties and getting drunk. Like our maximum ability to care is where our next keg is (Otago).                |

Rather than apathetic, these students instead characterised students as 'empathetic' (5 respondents) or 'compassionate' (2), and argued that they 'cared' (5) or were 'concerned' (4), 'worried' (2) and took 'seriously' (1) the socio-economic problems in New Zealand and abroad.

The contested nature of respondent characterisations of the student body will be returned to in Chapter 6, as part of an examination of their *doubts* about the political views of other students. In the rest of this chapter, my focus is on the underlying

attitudes towards politics and political action described by interview participants. I consider whether the perspectives of students could be considered apathetic, as was suggested by most respondents, or whether they are suggestive of something else. As I will argue, a conspicuous contradiction that emerged in this research was between dominant perceptions of student apathy among interview participants, on the one hand, and the interested and engaged way individual students in interviews spoke about the political context and political action, on the other. Far from apathetic, I suggest that most of the students in this sample demonstrated what I describe as *desires* for different types of politics. The next three sections consider how these *desires* were expressed in interviews: first, the critical and engaged way students spoke about formal politics, second, their enthusiastic discussion of the issues that mattered to them and, third, their discussion about what they valued or admired about political action.

### **4.3 Student attitudes towards formal politics**

Of the 70 students interviewed, 54 were asked about their attitudes towards formal politics.<sup>5</sup> Reflecting the wider student population, these interviews included students who indicated that they most supported political parties on both the political left (34 respondents) and right (20), as well as the ten students who had chosen not to vote at the previous election. Conversation about formal politics emerged in response to questions about why, or why not, they had voted and how their political perspective had changed during their time at university, as well as associated probing questions such as why they most supported a political party (see Interview Guide Questions 2.1-2.3, Appendix 4).

At the outset, it needs to be acknowledged that discussing ‘politics’ with students in interviews could be challenging as some students could become hesitant and even hostile when the term ‘politics’ was used. Most confronting in interviews were outright rejections of politics by five students: ‘I’m not at all political’ (Xavier, Otago); ‘I hate

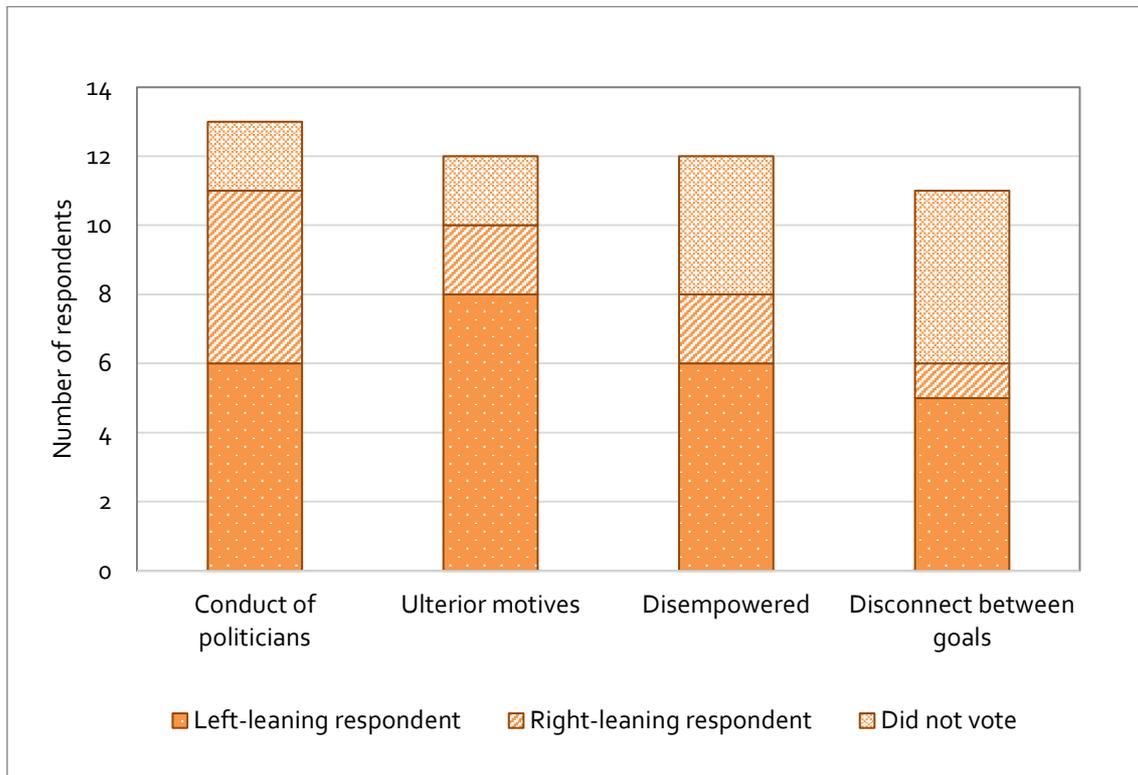
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<sup>5</sup> This topic was not raised in 16 interviews either because respondents were international students or because of limitations in the time available for the interview.

politics, I *hate* politics' (Laura, Victoria); 'I don't like politics' (Kate, Otago). In the early stages of interviews, when the information sheet contained the phrase 'political agency', I received four initial rejections from students saying that they did not think that they would be relevant for this research as they were 'not political'. In interviews, 17 respondents or 24% of the sample also became noticeably cautious and chose their words with care once the word 'politics' had been used. In addition to their sentences becoming shorter and more abrupt, these students tended to qualify their statements with phrases such as 'I'm not really into politics' (5 respondents), 'I don't usually talk about this' (4) or 'it is not something I really discuss' (2).

Despite these initial reactions among some interview participants, further probing about formal politics revealed attitudes among students that for the most part were far from apathetic. Among the 54 respondents that discussed formal politics, 44 students or 81% expressed an underlying discontent that current practices of politics often fell short of their needs and expectations as citizens. The nature of student disaffection varied among respondents, with their expressed frustrations summarised in Figure 9. The graph summarises four key clusters of criticisms volunteered by respondents who voted for the political parties they most supported on the left or right. The views of participants who chose not to vote at the 2014 election have been reported separately.

**Figure 9** Dissatisfaction with formal politics among respondents



The most frequent source of disaffection expressed by respondents related to the conduct of politicians (13 respondents). These respondents described being exasperated with the ‘immature’ behaviour sometimes displayed in parliament. Renee, a right-leaning business student at AUT, offered one of the most extensive accounts of this frustration:

Sylvia            I wanted to ask you about your views about formal politics.

Renee             Oh right ...

Sylvia             You don’t sound very enthusiastic!

Renee             I guess I’m not. Politics is just so ... immature? When I lived with my parents, we’d watch the news and you’d see them, all the politicians, yelling at each other. You know, playing up for the cameras and just being dicks. And I remember thinking, um, these are the people that are supposed to be running the country? That stuff they’re cracking jokes about is actually really important!

Renee's statement illustrates two key aspects of this disaffection that was echoed by other interview participants. First, like Renee's disgust with 'immature' behaviour, other respondents spoke about the conduct of some politicians being 'petty', 'ridiculous', 'stupid' or 'embarrassing'. Metaphors were used by two respondents, with parliament compared to a 'pig-sty' (Ross, AUT) and 'worse than a kindergarten' (Kurt, Massey). A further two students identified what they considered to be a 'double standard': 'yelling and name-calling isn't acceptable anywhere else, but somehow because it is in parliament it is okay' (Peter, Otago). Second, Renee's dissatisfaction with this 'immature' behaviour appeared to be motivated, at least in part, by frustration that issues she considered 'actually really important' were not being given the gravity they deserved. Like Renee, five other students also spoke with concern that topics were being 'trivialised', 'not taken seriously' or upstaged by 'irrelevant bickering'.

A second source of disaffection volunteered by interview participants was of the 'ulterior' motives of politicians (12 students). This conversation with Kate, a second-year commerce student at the University of Otago, was evocative of this scepticism. In the interview, we had been discussing her experience of casting a vote for the first time in the 2014 election, when Kate abruptly said that she 'didn't like' politics:

Kate                    Ugh! I don't like politics.

Sylvia                Why do you say that? That you 'don't like' politics?

Kate                    I dunno. Um ... I guess it's just such a *game*. Like, everything's carefully controlled and manipulated, and it's all about getting elected and not what's the best policy. Kind of like House of Cards. Just kind of fake, yeah (Otago).

Like Kate, other interview participants similarly described becoming 'disillusioned' with politics that they believed was treated as a 'game' (6 respondents), 'spin' (3) and 'point-scoring' (2). These students spoke with scepticism of politics that was 'branded' (4 respondents) and 'professionalised' (2), describing it as 'fake' (2), 'not real' and 'not genuine'. One of the most striking examples of these frustrations was offered by Alex, when she rejected the idea that students were apathetic:

Alex [Students] aren't apathetic; I think that is really unfair. It's, like, oh you're so apathetic to politics, but it is, like, why? Why should we care about the game that they're playing which is really crap and stuff. It is just, like, grrr! It is so frustrating hearing that in the media ... It is politics. Even the word doesn't generate a positive idea, it is so tainted and, like, irrelevant, and I think it is going to become increasingly irrelevant (Victoria).

For two students, this scepticism of the ulterior motive of politicians appeared to form a deterrent for voting. For instance, when Peter (Otago) was asked why he had not voted he explained that politicians 'have their own agendas that have little to do with me'.

A third cluster of attitudes expressed by respondents was that the goals of politicians and political parties were disconnected from their views (11 respondents). This view was especially described by students who had chosen not to vote in the previous election (5 respondents). One of those students was Josie, a post-graduate medical student at AUT. Josie explained that she had decided not to vote at the previous election because political parties 'didn't stand for any goal that I had'. She spoke about her dilemma:

Josie It was such a grey area for me. I was so swayed between each party. I think ... I read that in our demographic, among students, it is quite common not to vote, especially in the last few elections. But I didn't agree. That was my main point (AUT).

Josie appeared to not be alone among the students in this sample in finding it difficult to 'agree' with or 'want to support' any of the parties on offer. Besides the four other respondents who said that they had not voted because of this disconnect, six students who *had* voted also spoke about frustrations of having 'no options that I want to buy'. For example, Boris (Otago) explained that while she thought 'it's important to vote, it's a responsibility', she found it 'hard sometimes, because none of [the political parties] are good'.

The fourth cluster of student attitudes related to feelings of disempowerment and exclusion (12 respondents). These perspectives were related, but distinct, from the stated disaffection of students with the 'ulterior' motives of politicians. Where students who spoke about politics as a 'game' emphasised the less than genuine goals of

politicians, interview participants who described feeling 'disempowered' expressed a lack of agency on their part to shape formal politics. This perspective was expressed by Margot when she reflected on student attitudes towards parliamentary politics:

Margot            I think students come to university already with a sense of being quite disillusioned with politics, or disillusioned with any sort of influence that students or young people can have in politics [...] I think people see parliament as a monolithic thing that they can't possibly get into or affect (Victoria).

Like Margot, other students spoke directly about feeling 'disempowered' (5 respondents) or 'excluded' (3), as well as 'helpless' (3), 'powerless' (1) and 'despondent' (1). Mahe (Canterbury), for example, described feelings of exclusion when he explained: 'when I think of politics, I feel a bit helpless, kind of disempowered. Like what can I do?'

#### **4.3.1 *'It still matters even though it's crap'***

The frustration and disconnect described by these 44 respondents is suggestive of political attitudes among students that, while critical, are far from apathetic. These perspectives appear to closely align with agency theories that suggest non-participation at the ballot box may be motivated by discontent with the politics on offer (Henn et al. 2005; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Sloam 2008). Like these studies, the students in this sample appeared to be frustrated with political debate that they felt veered towards petty, point-scoring behaviour or trivialised the issues at hand. Despite the smallness of New Zealand's democracy and a proportional electoral system, many interview participants also seemed to consider the political system to be relatively closed to them and were sceptical of whether party politics would be responsive to their interests and concerns, believing instead that many politicians were driven by self-serving agendas or the 'game' of politics.

In listening to these frustrations, a temptation could be to interpret these attitudes as an indicator that there is a wholesale rejection of formal politics among students. The hesitant or hostile responses of some students when the topic of 'politics' was initially raised in interviews might seem to reinforce this suggestion. However, closer examination of student responses suggests that interpretation overlooks a more

complex series of perspectives. Rather than an outright rejection, interview participants who discussed formal politics appeared to hold an underlying interest and engagement with New Zealand's democracy.

Perhaps the most striking indicator that students had not fully abandoned formal politics was the references some students made to the impact or importance of formal politics. In interviews, 28 respondents or 52% of the students who discussed formal politics made these references in conversations. Often this discussion was raised as frustration that other students 'didn't realise' that government or politics generally 'affects literally every aspect of your life' (Lily-Jane, AUT) and that 'everything the government does affects you' (Pogal, Auckland). This conversation between two moderately active students at Waikato University illustrates this frustration that other students did not understand the implications of politics:

Duffman            I think a lot of students aren't really too bothered [about politics] because you still feel quite sheltered within university and, um, a lot of people don't realise that once you have a job, voting is critical, you know, you're on your own now. You've still got your parents I guess, but, like, how the government runs things is really, really going to affect your lifestyle and how much money you get and what your job is like ...

Sammy             Your tax, your student loans ...

Duffman            Yeah, and when you can afford to buy a house and just everything will be affected by which party you vote for (Waikato).

As might be expected, 19 of the students who spoke about the 'importance' of formal politics had voted, including Duffman and Sammy. However, more surprising was that nine of the students who considered themselves 'not political' or had not voted at the last election also characterised politics as being 'significant', 'important' or having 'lots of consequences'. These views might appear puzzling. To put it bluntly, why would these students describe themselves as 'not political' or not vote if they thought politics was significant?

I explored this apparent contradiction in an interview with Jane, a third-year science student at Massey University. At the outset of the interview, Jane had declared

that she was 'not really into politics' and indicated that she had not voted in the last election:

Jane                   Um, before we start, I just wanted to say that I'm actually not sure how much help I can be for you for your project. Like, I'm happy to help, but I'm not really into politics, I don't actually have anything to do with it.

Sylvia                 That's all good, I'm still interested in hearing about your views.

Jane                   Okay, that's cool. Just as long as you're not going to be disappointed or anything! [Laughs].

It would have been easy to turn away at the point when Jane declared that she was 'not really into politics' and conclude that she was apathetic or disinterested in formal politics. Yet later in the interview, Jane went on to vividly speak about the ways that 'government is really important':

Sylvia                 I wanted to ask about what you said earlier when you said you weren't 'into' politics. Why did you say that?

Jane                   Um, it's hard to say ... It's just politics is so ... I dunno. Like just a bit shite? It's not really one thing, I guess, it's more just that ... yeah, it's just that it's all about winning in the polls and scoring points and, um, arguing with people and I don't really do that. But actually when I think about it, it kind of makes me a bit annoyed actually because what the government does is really important and it affects, like, everything in your life, you know, like how much tax you pay and stuff like that.

I asked Jane whether she considered there to be a contradiction in not being 'into politics', while recognising its importance. Jane emphatically argued that there was not:

Sylvia                 Do you consider that to be a contradiction? To say that you 'don't do politics' but then also to think it important?

Jane                   No, not at all! It still matters even though it's crap.

Jane's insistence that politics 'still matters even though it's crap' makes a subtle but significant distinction between her respect for democracy as a process, on the one hand, and her dissatisfaction with its current practice, on the other. In making this distinction, her statement resonates with existing agency theories that suggest that despite growing disaffection with party politics, young people still maintain strong democratic ideals and

aspire to a more robust democracy (Norris 2011; Henn & Foard 2014; Cammaerts et al. 2013).

An alternative interpretation of the disaffection with formal politics expressed by students like Jane could be that students have unrealistic expectations for a political process that is always going to be messy and controversial. In some cases, respondents themselves levelled this criticism against their peers. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, there was frustration among some interview participants that students could be 'too cynical' to the extent that it prevented their political participation.

The claim that students are overly critical is questionable, however. To the contrary, what was striking in listening to the frustrations of interview participants with formal politics was the sincerity and reasonableness of their concerns. Apart from wanting their concerns to be taken seriously, students spoke with nuance about formal politics and were reluctant to paint all politicians with the same brush. To rework Russell Brand's (2013) phrase, politicians were *not* all 'bastards' to the students in this study. Jane, for instance, following the extract cited above, went on to qualify her dislike of party politics:

Jane                    It still matters even though it's crap. And, um, also I'm sure politicians aren't all, like, bad or anything, they're probably mostly good people doing their best. It's just that they don't stand for me.

Besides Jane, 32 of the 44 students in this sample who volunteered disaffection with formal politics qualified their criticisms, such as conceding that 'it's not all of them' and 'they're not all like that'. Students acknowledged that their frustrations applied to 'just some of them' or that politicians were 'doing their best', that they 'probably think they're doing the right thing' and that 'some are really good'. Respondents also suggested that politicians 'probably just don't understand', that it was 'just part of politics' and that 'no-one is perfect', 'they can't please everyone' and 'they're probably good people, I just don't agree with them'.

In discussing formal politics, respondents were quick to draw attention to the limits of their knowledge about parliamentary politics. Of the 44 students who raised

criticisms of formal politics, 27 respondents or 61% conceded that their own views were 'biased' or 'just my perspective'. Lack of knowledge was also raised by eight of the ten interview participants who did not raise any criticisms when discussing parliamentary politics. These students explained that they did not feel qualified to discuss formal politics because they did not 'know enough to judge' (Annie, Otago) or that they were 'not super aware of every detail that goes on in the political system' (Fracturedfemur, Auckland). Similar claims were made by three of the ten students who had chosen not to vote at the previous election. For example, when asked why he had not voted, Adam (Victoria) responded that he 'didn't understand anything about politics'. This self-awareness also emerged when discussing other topics in interviews and will be returned to in Chapter 6.

Perhaps because of these doubts, interview participants seemed to be interested in becoming more informed about New Zealand's democracy. As an illustration of this underlying engagement, three respondents recounted political debates held at Victoria University and the University of Canterbury before the 2014 election, both of which were unexpectedly attended by an estimated 500 to 800 students. At the University of Canterbury, Mahe vividly described the event:

- Mahe                    There was this debate last year at uni before the election. Did you hear about it?
- Sylvia                    Yeah, I was at it.
- Mahe                    Oh cool, so you'll know how awesome it was. I don't know about you, but it just gave me a real buzz, you know? Just that crazy-awesome vibe of hundreds of students crammed into the Undercroft [the main student hub] for, like, an hour and a half totally listening and engaged. There is no way that you could have been there and then said that students aren't interested in politics, right?

At Victoria University, Greg explained that students 'completely packed out that space, and so the kind of notion that students are apathetic I think is not true'. Also at Victoria University, Alex recalled that the presenter was 'a bit blown away by the questions because he made jokes about students just being drunk or high and it just kind of went over the top of everyone's head'. While she acknowledged that it was likely that the

event would have primarily attracted students who were already politically engaged, she described the students as ‘really politically switched on, just not how they are often portrayed’.

The responses of other interview participants were similarly suggestive of an underlying appetite for learning about New Zealand’s democracy. Among the 54 students who discussed formal politics, 26 respondents volunteered that they were ‘interested’ in politics or would like to become more knowledgeable about parliamentary politics. As might be expected, 22 of these students indicated they had voted at the previous election. Yet like when students spoke about the ‘importance’ of politics, the students who volunteered that they were ‘interested’ in New Zealand’s democracy were surprising. Of the ten interview participants who had not voted, four also spoke about being ‘interested’ in politics. While the sample of these students is small, it was nevertheless striking the desire for knowledge these students displayed. One example is Adam, the Victoria University student discussed previously who explained that he had not voted in the previous election because he ‘didn’t understand anything about politics’. In explaining his decision not to vote, Adam went on without prompting to say that he was ‘very interested’ in politics and that he had ‘future plans about learning more about politics’. He wished there ‘could be more ways of integrating knowledge into the system so then you don’t have to try and find it yourself’.

#### **4.4 What were the issues that mattered to students?**

The previous section established that despite dominant perceptions of student apathy among respondents, the students in this study appeared to have an underlying engagement and interest in New Zealand’s democracy, albeit with a healthy scepticism of its practice. In this section, I move beyond formal politics to consider the political interests of students more generally – although without using the term ‘politics’. At the outset of the previous section, I noted that the word ‘politics’ could tend to shut down conversation, with the responses of students becoming halting or even hostile. As a way to open out discussion, I deliberately removed the word ‘politics’ from some parts of interviews and asked students in 63 interviews a general question: ‘What is an issue that

you are most concerned about or interested in?' (see Interview Guide Question 2.5, Appendix 4).<sup>6</sup> In interviews, I specified that it could be anything: global, local or something in between.

Once the term 'politics' had been removed from conversation, it was striking how confidently and enthusiastically the students in this sample responded. Contrary to beliefs of student apathy among some respondents, these initial responses were typical, including among students who might conventionally be described as 'apathetic':

Renee                Oh wow. Where to start? There's so many things! (AUT).

Margot              Okay. Oh man. This is such a huge question; it changes every day! (Victoria).

Marmaduke        Oh my gosh. One thing that ... well, there are so many issues (Massey).

Amongst the 63 interview participants who responded, 16 students or 25% remarked on having 'many' areas of interest or concern. Students also spoke at length in their responses. Despite being asked to identify 'an' issue that most concerned them, participants raised an average of 2.4 topics, with one student mentioning 12 separate areas of interest. Only one participant replied that he did not have any particular interests.

Asking students about an issue that mattered to them was initially intended as a means of opening out discussion about student political aspirations. However, as this research project progressed, the responses of students came to be significant on their own terms. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, students themselves tended to be highly uncertain of what the political views of other students were, and the findings presented in this section are therefore likely to be of interest and possibly a surprise to some students.

Despite the diversity of the students interviewed, both demographically and politically, there was an unexpected degree of consistency between the issues raised by

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<sup>6</sup> The question was not asked in seven interviews either because of lack of time or because conversation had moved elsewhere and it would have disrupted the flow of the interview to return to it.

respondents, summarised in Table 2. Broadly, these topics fell under three areas of interest: (1) the natural environment; (2) social justice; and (3) belonging, meaning and direction. As I will discuss, there was some variation in how respondents articulated these concerns, which could present challenges for students in understanding each other's views and struggles. Nevertheless, in describing these issues, the students in this study appeared to demonstrate an underlying discontent with the socio-economic and political status quo and *desires* for political change.

**Table 2** Topics identified by respondents when asked 'what is an issue that you are most concerned about or interested in?'

Topic		References by students*
Natural environment	Climate change and reducing emissions	17
	General	15
	Consumption of particular products	5
	Conservation and biodiversity	4
	Oil, sustainable energy and transport	3
	Science communication and awareness	2
	Business' relationship with the environment	2
Social justice	Inequality	16
	Poverty (global and local)	10
	Racism and race relations	9
	Feminism and LBGTOI rights	8
	Access and participation in education	7
	Justice and the legal system	5
	Access to healthcare	5
	Immigration and refugee policy	4
	War and human rights	3
Belonging, meaning and direction	Social isolation, community and belonging	11
	Economic and business growth	8
	National vision	6
	Meaning and purpose	5
	Technology	4
	Faith and religion	4

\* Refers to the number of students who made reference to these topics in their responses when asked what issues they were concerned about or interested in.

Before discussing in depth how students spoke about each of these three fields, it is worth drawing attention to the topics that interview participants did not volunteer. Notably, only four students described issues directly related to students or higher education. Three of these respondents were highly active in student politics and in two cases, these student-related issues were mentioned at the end of their responses, almost as an afterthought. The topics these respondents identified were debt and student poverty (2 respondents), cuts to university education (1) and the ‘corporatisation’ of the university (1). However, it is important to note that while most students did not speak about issues relating to students or higher education when directly asked about the issues that mattered to them, it does not necessarily denote a complete lack of interest in the subject. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, the students in this sample tended to report concern about the impact of contemporary university environments on some of their peers when asked more directly about higher education in other parts of the interview.

#### **4.4.1 *Natural environment (35 respondents)***

Among the 63 respondents, 35 students or 55% volunteered an issue related to the natural environment when asked what issue they were most concerned about. Climate change and reducing emissions stood out as the topic most frequently raised by students (17 respondents), followed by general statements about concern for ‘the environment’ (15). Alongside these broad areas, some students described more specific areas of interest, including consumption of products like plastic or food (15), conservation and biodiversity (4), oil and sustainable energy (3), science communication (2) and business’ relationship with the environment (2). The students who volunteered these issues were diverse politically: 23 students most supported parties on the political left and 12 on the political right. They also included nine students who participated in no clubs on campus and three respondents who had chosen not to vote. Students studying the natural sciences, agriculture and engineering were moderately more likely to volunteer environmental issues (13 respondents).

Among the 35 students who raised environmental issues, 23 students or 66% spoke about the urgency of environmental issues. Respondents described the status quo as 'unacceptable' (3 respondents) and the need for change as 'urgent' (7), 'pressing' (2) and 'needed to have happened yesterday'. Students considered the consequences of failing to act as 'really big' (3), 'unfathomable' (2), 'terrifying' (2) and 'pretty scary', and characterised themselves as 'freaked out' (4) or 'panicky' over the issue. The urgency of these *desires* for change is returned to later in the chapter when student aspirations for political action is discussed.

Within the broad topic of the natural environment, respondents spoke about environmental issues very differently. Most students who raised the topic of the natural environment described it briefly and somewhat fleetingly. Of the 32 references made by students to 'climate change', 'emissions reduction' or 'environment', 21 were made as a single mention of the subject without any wider discussion. These excerpts illustrate the brevity of some references to environment and climate change:

- Carly                    And then, like, the environment (Auckland).
- Sam                     Well the whole idea of, um, you know, global warming is quite big (Massey).
- Martin                 I suppose environmental stuff concerns me a lot as well (Otago).
- Kim                     Also environmental issues like climate change (Victoria).

Among these respondents, there was a sense that concern about the environment was widely shared among students. When raising environmental issues in their responses, nine of these students added 'of course' and four participants said interest in environmental issues was a 'given' among students. Corroborating this finding, six students in other parts of interviews remarked that environmental issues were 'relatively uncontroversial' among students, particularly the topic of climate change. For example, Nicola argued that 'most people agree that, okay, climate change is a problem', Felicity (Otago) felt that 'basically no-one challenges it' and Donald (Lincoln) suggested 'there's a few students who are still deniers, but they're, like, 0.0001%'.

Among the 21 students who spoke about environmental issues briefly, it was also striking that all but one described environmental concerns as distinct from social justice problems, and not interconnected. This separation was revealed most clearly in the language of ‘priorities’ used by eleven students when justifying their responses. Environmental issues were described by these students as something they ‘should’ care more about, but which came ‘second’ to their other interests, usually relating to social justice. These statements were typical of these respondents:

- William            Um, so I should care about the environment more than I do, but my main interest is social justice things (Victoria).
- Mark                I’m extremely interested in and probably more passionate towards the social justice side of things. That is not to say that I don’t care about climate change, but, um, yeah ... (Auckland).
- Catherine         I always go to answer this question with climate change is something that I’m really passionate about, but actually my studies show that I am much more concerned about social inequalities and welfare-based issues in New Zealand (Victoria).

Amongst these students, only one respondent, Mary, a third-year student at Auckland University, framed her interest in environmental politics as a way to work towards social justice. Mary explained that while she was very concerned about issues of global poverty, she focused on environmental fields because they were ‘disproportionately affecting poorer people in a lot of countries and that will have long-term negative impacts for people there’.

By contrast to the brevity with which some students discussed environmental issues, 14 students spoke about environmental topics extensively. Although these respondents also mentioned the broad fields of ‘climate change’ or ‘environment’, they demonstrated knowledge in more specific fields, such as consumption, conservation or sustainable energy. This statement from Duffman, a third-year science student at Waikato University, is worth quoting at length as an insight into the depth and breadth of responses:

- Duffman            I’d have to say one thing that I’m really interested in would be increasing community awareness about really important scientific

issues [...] I know that in the US instead of having scientists advising huge companies on what the consequences are going to be if they drill here or what the consequences are if they build something here or new medicines and things. But I read an article about it, they're basically hiring people now who have no scientific background, they're basically just there to do whatever the government or the company leaders say. And that is totally wrong. It is so manipulative; it is just completely not what, I guess, the community would want. And I guess we're going to need huge reform in terms of changing ... I mean, they call it democracy, but it is not really. So something needs to change there. And something probably will change there once things start to, you know, resources start to reach their critical boundaries. There is going to be a huge shift. The people in power are only so many. But then once you hit that limit, it is not going to matter who is in power anymore, it is going to matter who has the resources (Waikato).

Although the specific fields covered by Duffman were unique, the length and passion with which she spoke was shared among these respondents. Academic learning appeared to play a significant role in this interest and enthusiasm for the subject. Nine of these students studied the natural sciences, agriculture or engineering, and three framed their statements with comments such as 'we learnt it in class' (Donald, Lincoln). Two right-leaning commerce students spoke about the impact of business on the environment.

Unlike the students who spoke about environmental topics briefly, the students who more extensively described them tended to express frustrations that other students did not 'care' about environmental issues enough (9 respondents). To return to Duffman:

Duffman            I think a lot of people don't really care or just aren't that interested in learning about science. But it is one of the most fundamental areas that we need to expand in if we are going to, you know, continue living on this planet.

Like Duffman, Laura (Victoria) similarly explained that 'people are lazy, they prefer to go partying on Friday and Saturday' or that they 'just publish nail polish stuff' on their Facebook page.

#### **4.4.2 Social justice (46 respondents)**

The second field volunteered by interview participants were issues associated with social justice, raised by 46 respondents. Inequality was the most frequently discussed topic (16 respondents). For ten of these students, inequality was described as economic or income inequality, particularly 'disparities' in income or wealth (5 respondents) or 'the gap' (4). The remaining six students spoke more generally about 'social' inequality. Poverty was raised by ten respondents, described as relative and extreme, as well as local and global. Alongside these broad areas, students described inequality in the specific areas of education (7), health (5) and the justice system (5), as well as other forms of social injustice, particularly racism (9) and sexism (8). Some students volunteered issues relating to international politics, including immigration and refugee policy (4 respondents), war (2) and human rights (1). The respondents that raised these issues included a moderately higher proportion of women (30 respondents) and Māori (7), Pasifika (5) and Asian (11) students. There were also a greater number of students studying the arts (14 respondents), health sciences (7) and law (6).

Like students who raised environmental issues, students who spoke about social justice issues considered the status quo to be unacceptable. Students described current conditions as 'awful' (6 respondents), 'horrible' (2), 'really bad' (2), 'dreadful', 'appalling', 'unacceptable' and that 'there are people dying'. However, in contrast to the brevity with which many students spoke about environmental issues, students who spoke about *desires* for change on social justice issues tended to discuss their concerns at length and broadly. When speaking about 'inequality', students spontaneously made references to the consequences it had on 'literally every aspect of their lives' (Fracturedfemur, Auckland), including in education (4 respondents), health (4) and the justice system (3). Respondents also spoke about how inequality and poverty were 'intertwined' with racism (5 respondents), sexism (3) and classism (2). Inequality and poverty were described as having both 'global and local' dimensions (Martin, Otago) and being 'at home and abroad' (Paul, Auckland).

Despite the breadth of these responses, the students who volunteered social justice issues, like those who spoke about environmental topics, adopted different approaches to express these concerns. For 25 respondents, inequality, poverty or racism was framed as something that affected others, rather than themselves. These comments were typical of these students:

- Nerina I do believe that there needs to be a system in place to help support, um, ethnicity and, like, disadvantage. Cos the stats are there. They do need assistance; they are generally in a different environment compared to us (Victoria).
- Carly I don't like poverty, doing my studentship it's like constantly, here is this horrible health statistic, guess what, Māori are over-represented in it. So that is concerning (Auckland).
- Kurt I was reading this report the other day, like, all the stuff about how inequality, you know, affects people in all these other areas like mental health and education (Massey).

Like Nerina, Carly and Kurt, these students typically described the resources, such as statistics, books or reports, which they relied on to justify their concern for these social justice issues. Of the 26 references made to 'inequality' or 'poverty' by the students in this sample, all but four were justified by making use of these sources.

A further five students spoke more extensively about the direct experiences they had gained from their study at university that had allowed them to 'see' in practice the social justice issues they were concerned about. Four of these respondents were health science students and one studied social work. One example was Fracturedfemur, a fourth year Auckland University medical student who spoke extensively about the impact her medical training had on her:

- Fracturedfemur ... in first year, before I got into med, they had a talk on disparities between socio-economic backgrounds and health outcomes. And initially it is all on paper, you can't really see it until really ... One thing that really hit me was we have this thing called HELD Baby – Human Early Life Development Baby – where we get attached to a baby from when they were born over two years. But we see them once every two months. And the HELD Baby that I had was in a very, very ... all the stuff that I read on paper, that kind of situation. That was when it was very really real (Auckland).

While these students were able to draw on this direct observation of the effects of inequality and poverty, they tended to use a language of 'them' to describe the consequences: 'you see the way poverty really affects them' (Greta, Otago); 'it is something that really impacts the patient' (Fracturedfemur, Auckland).

Contrasting these 'observer' accounts were students who spoke about social justice issues from often intensely personal experiences (16 respondents). Among these students, there was a greater proportion of female students (12 respondents), as well as students who identified as Māori (4), Pasifika (2) and Asian (5) ethnicity. Unlike students who spoke about social justice issues by reference to 'stats' or what they could 'see', these students justified their concern based on their background: 'it is because I am from that background' (Rachel, Massey); 'it is quite interesting, especially for me with my background' (Sammy, Waikato); 'coming from my background' (Alice, Auckland). These students reported particular concerns that developed from their experiences of racism (6), sexism or sexual assault (3), homophobia (2), growing up in less privileged or rural areas (4) or living with disability or mental illness (2). Because of the length and specificity of these responses, examples from six of these students are presented in Figure 10.

**Figure 10** Concern for social justice issues based on personal experiences among respondents

Rachel	I'm very interested in how government is going to tackle this property issue. Because it affects people like me. I actually identify as Korean New Zealander. [...] But because of what is going on, it seems like, you know, jokes about Asian drivers or the Asian lady at the mall. I'm very interested in how they will be tackling this cultural issue underlying the property problems (Massey).
Bex	... just trying to reach people who have slipped through the gaps of education, yeah, that has always been my passion. Just trying to reach, um, those minority groups. And I come from a small town as well, so I am quite involved with some of those minority groups and people who belong there (Victoria).
Mahe	An ongoing thing for me has been to strengthen te reo Māori and, I guess, just give people the opportunity to learn it, you know, to hear it, speak it. My dad never spoke the language and, um, and when my granddad died, my dad couldn't really understand a lot of what was said at the tangi (funeral). I guess that has just kind of given me the drive to make sure that, you know, that wouldn't happen to me (Canterbury).
Nina	... in light of recent events is, sort of, victim's rights in relation to sexual assault and rape. Because I have had an ongoing police investigation that has been ... has treated me very terribly and it is something that I've ... I'm thinking of starting a discourse with. Though at the same time, I still need to look after myself. Seeing what the response of the university and the police force are ... it is terrible, it is terrible.
Sammy	Well, because I wasn't born in New Zealand, I come from Sri Lanka, and I was really lucky to receive citizenship and I know there are a lot of other families in Sri Lanka or elsewhere in the world who are really trying to come to New Zealand. So I find it quite interesting how, you know, how the government actually allows for that. Because, you know, New Zealand is like a safe haven compared to developing countries like Sri Lanka and things. So I guess it quite interesting how the government responds to refugees or immigrants and how they handle that (Waikato).
James	I grew up in a state house, same state house that my parents still live in, and that was never a problem for me, but nevertheless, I've got this idea, this thing where you think about the street that you grew up on and there is a big, big divide there. [...] And that is the social and economic inequality right there. My family was probably one of the best off on our street. So there were people who were much, much worse off than us economically (Canterbury).

#### 4.4.3 *Belonging, meaning and direction (23 respondents)*

The third area of interest raised by interview participants related to belonging, meaning and direction (23 respondents). Overall, these students expressed *desires* for a greater sense of connection and purpose in their lives and their community. The respondents who raised these topics included a moderately higher proportion of male students (17 respondents) and students who identified support for right-leaning political parties (15). It also included eight interview participants with no involvement in any clubs on campus.

The most common issues raised by these students related to anxieties that communities were becoming fractured. Students spoke about unease that people were becoming 'isolated' (7 respondents), 'lonely' (4), 'disconnected' (2) or 'segregated' (1). For example, Pricilla (Lincoln) argued that 'people just seem to be on their own these days' and Adam (Victoria) suggested that 'a lot of people walk around in their heads'. Four students, all of whom identified as Asian ethnicity, also raised concerns that many newcomers to New Zealand, including international students, were 'isolated' (2 respondents), 'desperately lonely' (1) and 'unsupported' (1). One of these respondents was Bob, an engineering student at the University of Canterbury:

Bob                    I'd say, um, what I'm really concerned about is that there is so much loneliness everywhere, there's so much isolation, like, people being on their own and not having any support around. Especially for people who have recently come here and they have no networks and it's such a challenging time in their lives for them. I guess I'm especially attuned to that because I've been through it myself. But that loneliness is also there for other communities too, not just people who are new to New Zealand. It makes me really sad because that's no way to live. And I see it everywhere.

Five students reported particular worries that new technologies were potentially accelerating or accentuating this process. A right-leaning student at Massey University, Sam, spoke about these concerns at length:

Sam                    ... the fact that, like, things changing rapidly, like, we're living through that, and everything is becoming more expensive and, like, um, people are creating things that are must-haves now. [...] And then from that there is the whole safety thing, like putting up images and stuff like

that. You've got to really look out for yourself now. I'd really like to look into the fact of how we could, um, you know, go back to a simpler time if that makes sense?

Sam went on to speak about his concern that changes to society meant that 'everyone is looking out for themselves more and more as it goes on' and that 'I really want to get the community feel back'.

Besides concerns that communities were fracturing, other students expressed anxieties about a lack of meaning, purpose or identity in their lives or those of their peers. Of these ten respondents, eight of them were male. One of the most explicit examples of this concern was offered by a right-leaning student at Massey University, Marmaduke, who described this unease at length:

Marmaduke I think it can be so easy to, you know, start thinking what on earth are you here for. And sometimes life can seem meaningless [...] Yeah, it makes me think of that campaign, I think it is the Otago one, like, 'find your place in the world' or something? You know? That is obviously the idea. But I think it can be a bit more trickier than that. Because obviously you can find your degree and you can get a job and that can be your role. But that is only one aspect of someone's identity. You can still be a bit lost without knowing who else you are or knowing what community you belong to or what you stand for (Massey).

While not as extensively described as Marmaduke, nine other respondents shared worries of not 'knowing what community you belong to or what you stand for'. In discussing these fears, five spoke about a need to be able to contribute meaningfully to a community or group. For example, Kurt (Massey) described the importance of 'needing to be part of something', but was worried that some of his friends were 'a bit aimless in their lives' as he thought 'society's not well set up for that'. Likewise, Rex (Otago) argued that 'people need to feel valued' and reported he was 'worried' that some of his acquaintances were 'drifting through their lives'.

At a national level, eight interview participants expressed unease about a lack of 'purpose' or 'direction' in New Zealand more generally. These students primarily studied commerce, economics or law, but were diverse regarding their political views, indicating support for both the National (5 respondents) and Labour (3) political parties.

Initially, this anxiety was discussed in quite general terms by these students, which closely echoed student concerns about a lack of direction in their lives. This statement by Trevor, a fourth-year, left-leaning student, was typical among these respondents:

Trevor            I really think that, the main thing is, like, what are we ... what direction are we on? A sense that the country is sort of drifting at the moment is the main thing. [...] So it is not a radical thing, but rather just really, what are we doing, what are we about?

As students elaborated on these general positions, almost all focused narrowly on economic priorities of 'growing a strong economy' (3 respondents), having 'a strong market' (1) or 'building a smarter economy' (1). Small business growth was mentioned by a further two students. Only one student, Peter, a post-graduate student at the University of Otago who had not voted at the last election, spoke more broadly about uncertainty of the 'values' that underscored New Zealand society and questioned 'what do we stand for?'

#### **4.5 'It's what type of politics': Student aspirations for political action**

Listening to the enthusiastic and earnest ways respondents described the issues that concerned them is suggestive of an underlying discontent among students with the socio-economic status quo and *desires* for political change. In this section, I turn to consider an alternative expression of student *desires*: their aspirations for political action. In the title of this section, I have quoted Alex, a student at Victoria University who was discussed earlier in this chapter when she spoke about her frustration that students were considered 'apathetic'. She went on to argue apparent student 'apathy' was not a result of lack of interest, but rather the type of politics on offer:

Alex            [Students are] not apathetic; I think that is really unfair. [...] it is not that people aren't involved with or interested in politics, it's what type of politics. Because politics is meant to be about how you or your community wants to live.

This section considers 'what type of politics' the students in this sample valued or admired. This discussion arose in several parts of interviews: at the outset when students were asked what they enjoyed about their (political) activities on campus, their

reflections of what they admired about the action of other students and, after having spoken about the issues that concerned them, whether they had sought to act on their interests, if at all (see Interview Guide Questions 1.3, 1.7, 1.9, 2.6, 2.7, Appendix 4). While indirect, these lines of questioning offered a way of opening out conversation of student aspirations for politics in their own terms, without using the word 'politics' and narrowing discussion to formal politics.

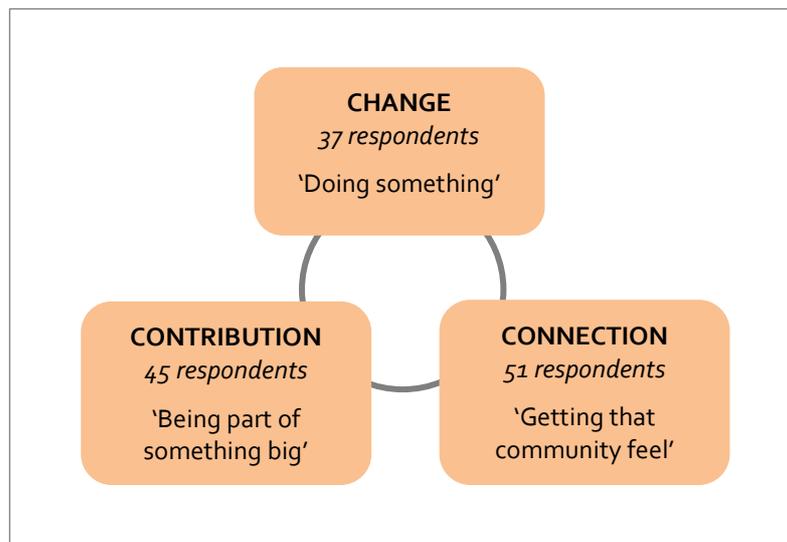
Nevertheless, in discussing these aspirations, it is important to not overstate the coherence and confidence of student aspirations. Student *doubts* about their capacity as political actors will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6. For now, the uncertainty of some respondents regarding how they could express their political agency needs to be acknowledged. Feelings of disempowerment and exclusion about formal politics have already been discussed, including that some students felt 'helpless', 'powerless', 'despondent' and unsure of 'what I can do'. Beyond formal politics, seven other respondents also described feeling unsure of how to express their agency. Margot, a Victoria University student who had since become highly active on campus, explained this feeling in some depth:

Margot                   ... there has been times when I've been thinking about things that are wrong, like generally, and then just having no idea where to go from there. Cos I remember when I first got here and I figured out there was no tertiary bus fares for students in Wellington I was, like, that is ridiculous, that has to change, I don't know where to begin with that. You know? I don't know who I'd go to (Victoria).

Like Margot, the six other students who reported these doubts identified concerns for a range of socio-political and environmental issues, but indicated they did not know 'where to start', 'where to begin', 'what is best' or 'who to go to'. For example, Annie (Otago) spoke about her frustration with existing inequality, but volunteered that she had 'no clue' about 'what to do if I wanted to change it'. This uncertainty was echoed in the arguments of eight respondents who worried that they did 'not know enough' to be able to participate effectively and that there needed to be improved education of young people to support their capacity to engage politically.

Notwithstanding these doubts, three aspects of political action stood out as being particularly valued by the students in this sample. These were forms of political action that brought: (1) tangible change; (2) a sense of contribution to a broader community; and (3) connection to others. As summarised in Figure 11, these aspirations were encapsulated in statements among students of ‘doing something’, ‘being part of something big’ and ‘getting that community feel’. To test the validity of these categories, the three aspirations were discussed with five students, two of whom identified support for the political left, two for the political right and one who described themselves as ‘not political’. Although two of these students did not recognise themselves in all of the categories, they agreed that this interpretation was evocative of their aspirations for political action, or those of their friends.

**Figure 11** Aspirations for political action among respondents



#### **4.5.1 Change: 'Doing something' (37 respondents)**

The value students placed on the capability to bring about change was described by 37 interview participants. While *desires* for political action to enact change might appear somewhat self-evident, these students spoke about this aspiration against a backdrop of ongoing discontent with existing forms of political participation, discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, Mary (Auckland) described wanting to ‘make change’ because she

felt 'despondent' and 'disillusioned' by traditional forms of politics, while Winston (Auckland) expressed a desire to 'make a difference [...] when the national-level government doesn't seem to be doing much'.

Some students also argued that student aspirations for change were related to their experiences growing up in the early twenty-first century (4 respondents). These students argued that young people in New Zealand or Western countries more generally had been told throughout their lives that they, as individuals, were going to 'make a difference'. One of the most vivid descriptions of this perspective was offered by Margot:

Margot            We grew up in a culture that really valued individualised identity; being, like, you beautiful little snowflake, you're going to be the shining star in the sky of the entire world, you're going to change the world (Victoria).

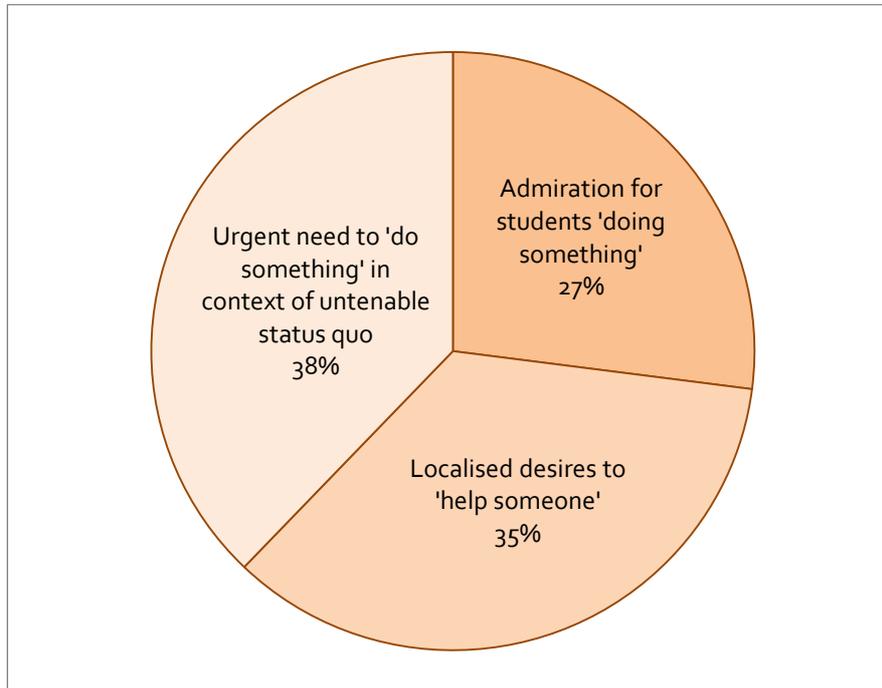
Spot, an Auckland University medical student, similarly described an individualised belief in 'changing the world':

Spot                When I left high school I was very idealistic, and like many students I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life but I wanted to change the world. I find that is a common trend with lots of people at university.

These students spoke about confronting a 'disconnect' or 'mixed messages' that came with their experience of the political system. Margot (Victoria), for instance, argued that her generation faced a 'hard balance' of being 'told you were going to change the world your entire life, but then also to be so disempowered by what actually happens at the same time'.

Against this backdrop of frustrated agency, many interview participants expressed *desires* to be able to 'do something', a phrase that was used by 25 students in this sample. There were subtle differences in the ways in which interview participants spoke about this aspiration to 'do something' or 'make a difference', lending itself to somewhat incoherent visions of change among students. These perspectives are summarised in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Desires for change expressed by respondents



One cluster of students described aspirations for change in terms of guilt that they were *not* 'doing enough' (10 students). These students had no or minimal involvement in groups on campus, with an average participation in 0.4 clubs. While tending not to be active themselves, these interview participants nevertheless spoke without prompting about their admiration or 'mad respect' for those students that they perceived to be 'taking action' and 'making a difference'. Finn, a first-year student at AUT, provides an insight into the value these students placed on 'doing something'. In the interview, Finn had been discussing his involvement in activities on campus, in which he had participated peripherally and somewhat ambivalently. He then volunteered that he had a friend who was much more active:

Finn                    I've got a friend who volunteers at this afterschool programme for disadvantaged kids, like helping them with homework and running activities for them and stuff. She is, like, awesome, she's actually doing something, you know, making an actual difference for people, which is pretty great. It's a lot more than what I do.

Finn's statement reveals two important aspects of how students spoke about change, which was echoed by other students in the sample. First, Finn's response highlights the

emphasis that these students appeared to give to change being tangible. Like Finn's description of his friend making an 'actual' difference for people, other respondents who felt they were not doing enough described their admiration for students or groups that seemed to be 'getting outcomes' (3 respondents) and 'results' (3). Second, Finn's response reflects the tendency of these students to speak about 'doing something' in individualised terms. In expressing anxieties of not 'doing enough', all but one of the ten students used the pronoun 'I' in their responses. They described individually felt guilt: 'I should do more than I do' (Marianne, Waikato); 'I should probably be doing more' (Greta, Otago).

The second cluster of students who spoke about valuing change described it in specific and localised terms of 'helping someone' (13 respondents). These students tended to indicate support for right-leaning political parties (9 respondents) or described themselves as 'not political' (3). One example was Sara, a right-leaning student at the University of Canterbury when she explained what she valued about her involvement in a club:

Sylvia                      Why did you become involved?

Sara                         Well, um, there were many reasons, but basically I wanted to do something to make things better. Yeah. I think everyone can really make a difference if they put their mind to it. It doesn't have to be much, just, like, helping someone out, giving what you can, whether it's time or money, that sort of stuff. It really makes change, one person can make such a huge impact (Canterbury).

Like interview participants who spoke about their admiration of other students who were 'doing something', respondents like Sara similarly expressed a preference for change that was 'tangible' and not 'abstract'. Among these students, change was described as something that could be 'seen' or the 'real' (4 respondents), 'meaningful' (3), 'actual' (2) and 'concrete' (2) rewards that came from 'putting in a few hours to make a difference for someone' (Bob, Canterbury). They also similarly spoke of change in individualised terms as the actions they, by themselves, could take, illustrated by Sara's comment, cited above, that 'one person can make such a huge impact'. However, six of these students also argued that these individual acts would 'add up' to more wide-

spread social change. For example, one student who was a member of the *Student Volunteer Army* that had helped to clean up after the Canterbury earthquakes argued that 'it's all about getting enough people involved, that's when change happens'.

The third cluster of interview participants described *desires* for change in the context of 'pressing' social or environmental problems (14 respondents). Where students who spoke about wanting to 'help someone' tended to be right-leaning, all but three of the students in this third cluster identified support for a left-leaning political party. These students argued that the ongoing injustice and unsustainability of the status quo was 'untenable', both domestically and internationally, and that there was an 'urgent' need to 'do something'. One of the most explicit examples was Nicola who spoke of her deep personal commitment to change when asked why she had become involved in a group:

Nicola            I've got to do it. I had a job interview for a tutoring position, and they were, like, um, this is really cheesy but what do you want to be remembered for when you die? And I was, like, I want to be remembered for trying to make a change. I just think this is really, really important and we can't wait.

The dominance of the pronoun 'I' in Nicola's response was echoed by other students: all but two of these students used the pronoun 'I', rather than 'we', in discussing the need to 'do something'.

Like other students who spoke about aspirations for change, these students expressed a preference for political action that was concrete and tangible. Students described needing 'change' (9), 'results' (7), 'outcomes' (5) and 'solutions' (3) to be 'immediate' (4), 'practical' (2) and 'real' (2) given the urgency of the issues being confronted. Similar to students who spoke about wanting to 'help someone', their focus could also be quite particular. Although these respondents demonstrated knowledge of the complexity of socio-economic and environmental issues and their interconnectedness with other fields, they also argued that a specific focus was essential for political action to bring about change. In the face of otherwise 'overwhelming' or 'insurmountable' social problems, these participants described valuing political action

that divided issues into 'clear' and 'distinct' problems, and in which solutions were broken into 'manageable', 'practical' and 'achievable' steps. For example, Winston explained his rationale for joining a 'single-issue' or 'interest-based' organisation that campaigned on a discrete topic:

Winston            For me it was something very practical I could do to contribute to change at a very local level. But something that actually has meaning and does something. It is very achievable. I saw it as a real way to make a difference (Auckland).

In identifying these steps, these students spoke enthusiastically about the 'positive' and 'can-do' culture that developed within the organisations or movements that adopted this solutions-focused approach (9 respondents). For example, Nicola argued that unlike other organisations that were 'encased in the idea that there is nothing we can do', the movement she was part of had 'done the research' and identified 'here are the things we can do'. Without prompting, seven other respondents across four universities described how an action-focused environment 'blew their mind' when they first encountered it. For instance, Mary (Auckland) spoke animatedly about first coming across one of these groups: 'I was suddenly, like, wo, there are actually people doing stuff, and they're making a difference and they're succeeding. [...] Totally what I needed at the time because I was feeling swamped by all the problems in the world'.

The belief that change was urgent also appeared to inform willingness among these students to work with anyone, or through any avenue, to bring about change. This openness appeared to contribute to experimentation with what might be termed 'alternative repertoires' of political action, such as developing online campaigns, providing volunteering opportunities or pulling media stunts. However, these students also seemed ready to pursue formal politics as an avenue for change, which corroborates with earlier discussion that interview participants appeared to consider parliamentary politics important, despite their frustrations. In engaging with formal politics, the student-led organisations that these students were part of typically adopted a non-partisan stance so that they were 'able to work with all the parties' in order 'to make change no matter what'. Professional approaches were also followed, which were

argued to strengthen the 'credibility' and 'reputation' of their organisation (5 respondents). As one student explained, 'we have to obviously be professional so that the politicians will listen to us'.

The expressed willingness of some interview participants to work with everyone, through whatever means, presents a problem for some alternative repertoire agency theories. As discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 32-33), Russell Dalton (2008, p. 93) has argued that new forms of political engagement offer an 'alternative' or 'substitute' for conventional forms of formal participation, as they provide citizens with more direct forms of influence. Following Dalton, it is entirely possible that non-conventional forms of political engagement did provide students with more direct avenues of influence. However, the stated willingness of many of the students in this study to work through a variety of channels, as well as to engage with anyone to bring about change 'no matter what', suggests that these forms of politics are not treated as a 'substitute' or 'alternative' to formal forms of participation by students. One did not seem to be exclusive to the other or, to rework Pippa Norris' (2002) notion of a 'democratic phoenix', one form of participation did not need to burn down for the other to rise. On the contrary, the students interviewed that were most active in what might be considered alternative repertoires also appeared to be some of the strongest advocates for active participation in formal politics. These attitudes appear to be consistent with some other empirical studies of young people's political participation in Europe and North America (della Porta & Rucht 2013; Keating 2015; Pilkington & Pollock 2015).

Especially striking in the New Zealand context is the ways in which students seemed to have made use of parliamentary politics as part of their political action. Far from abandoning formal politics, the students in this sample appeared to have sought to reclaim and rework New Zealand's established democratic processes as an avenue through which to express their agency. In particular, respondents in 13 different student groups identified that they had made use of the central government select committee

process,<sup>7</sup> with some describing formal procedures within student-led organisations to organise other students to research, write and present submissions. Students also tended to consider local government processes an effective avenue of bringing social and political change, especially when central government was believed not to 'work'. For instance, nine respondents spontaneously described their pride in making otherwise opaque and confusing local government submission processes more readily accessible and approachable to students that would not otherwise have participated.

#### **4.5.2 Contribution: 'Being part of something big' (45 respondents)**

In Chapter 2 (p. 39), it was discussed that some political economy theories claim that neoliberal models have been internalised by students, and that their political action is consequently becoming less civic minded and more individualistic and focused on self-expression (Mirowski 2013; Brown 2015). In some respects, the aspirations of many of the students in this study did appear to resonate with these political economy theories. As I noted, the pronoun 'I' dominated students accounts, which is suggestive of an individualistic approach towards political action. The privately-felt guilt expressed by some interview participants for not 'doing enough' similarly might be interpreted that students had come to rely on these models in how they thought about their political action.

Aspirations for change were not the only aspects of political action that students spoke about valuing, however. Far more collective in orientation were student *desires* to contribute to a broader community, volunteered by 45 respondents. One of the most striking indicators of this aspiration was how students spoke about what they enjoyed about their activities, both political and 'non-political', and on and off campus. In discussing their involvement in organisations on and off campus, many students spontaneously and sometimes cynically spoke about the 'rewards', 'incentives' or 'bribes' they received to 'encourage' their participation or 'make us show up' (19

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<sup>7</sup> Select committees in New Zealand are committees of MPs, made up in proportion to the size of parties in parliament. They scrutinise relevant legislation and receive submissions from the public as part of the progression of a bill through parliament (Miller 2015).

respondents). These 'rewards' were typically in the form of free food, such as pizza nights or drinks, but also included glamorous balls, free concerts or, in the case of youth wings, 'ready access' to politicians up to and including party leaders. Yet as Luke, a right-leaning student at the University of Canterbury explained, these 'bribes', while enjoyable, were rarely the motivation for participation among students:

Luke                    There's this assumption that students won't show up to anything unless there's food. I'm not complaining; food is great. But it's also dumb, really, when you think about it. It's like we couldn't possibly want to go to anything unless we're getting some food out of it, cave-man style.

Sylvia                 So why do you participate then – if not for food?

Luke                    Ha! Yeah ... um, I don't really know. It's ... I think it's being able to contribute, you know, to be part of something big (Canterbury).

One interpretation of the value that students like Luke placed on being able to contribute and 'be part of something big' could be that students were using organisations to progress their individualised *desires* to 'make a difference'. For 16 respondents, in particular, contributing to a group was described as the most 'effective' way in which they could make change or 'get into the thick of it' (Naomi, AUT). For example, Andre described his decision to become active in a non-partisan non-governmental organisation in this way:

Andre                    ... being an individual it is quite hard when you don't know where to go to influence quite a lot of political change. Whereas I feel that when you become part of a political movement or an organisation you've got the resources behind you, you've got that reputation behind you to really advance some change (Victoria).

Andre's explanation of his involvement did place himself at the centre of his account of his participation and could be read as using the organisation for his aspirations as an individual agent.

However, to reduce this aspiration to contribute to an expression of neoliberal values ignores the more collective elements of student *desires*. When asked what they

enjoyed about their activities on campus, these statements reveal the collective orientation of student values:

- Naomi           Um ... wow, yeah, I love the energy that comes when there's a whole bunch of us, and we've all got shared interests, and we're all working together. I love being part of that. That would be the main thing for me, yeah, being able to stand together with others like me (AUT).
- Trevor           ... there is a sense that you are contributing to something that is quite big and has been going along for quite some time. [...] The reaction of these people when they see you on their door-step is quite special ... to do the things we want to do for these people is really, really rewarding.
- Rex               It's hard to explain ... I guess it's just being part of the team, you know? It's just ... it's this awesome feeling, you know, wow, I've helped this happen. That probably makes no sense. You'll just have to take my word for it! (Otago).

Besides Naomi, Trevor and Rex, other students when asked about what they enjoyed about their political action volunteered the 'buzz', 'energy', 'pride', 'power' and the feeling of being 'humbled' or 'grateful' they felt from being part of a group or organisation working together towards collective goals.

Students appeared to be particularly enthusiastic when they considered their contribution to be meaningful. For example, interview participants spoke about enjoying feeling 'valued' (7 respondents), 'useful' (3), 'needed' (2) and 'appreciated' by an organisation or community, or of having a specific 'role' within an organisation that made use of particular 'strengths' (5 respondents). For example, Bob (Canterbury) described being 'more than just a cog in the machine; they really value me' and Nicola spoke about the enthusiasm from one of the organisations she had joined: 'they were just so happy to have me'. The students in this sample especially appeared to appreciate being able to put their particular 'skills' to use for a broader purpose (15 respondents). Alice, for example, described her involvement in this way:

- Alice            ... it has mostly been more of an organisation admin role, but that is what I really enjoy doing. I do like going to protests and stuff, that is great, but I don't want to brag, but I've done organising events before, I've got a bit of a knack for it, so I am happy to do that role (Auckland).

Students seemed excited to apply knowledge or expertise that they had learnt at university, with ten students without prompting speaking of the 'moment' that they realised 'hey, you can do something with your degree' (Spot, Auckland). Again, the value students placed on applying their knowledge could be interpreted as being motivated by more selfish values of furthering a career. However, these ten students primarily spoke about this value more in terms of wanting to help others, rather than get ahead for themselves. Moreover, four students indicated that a core but unofficial purpose of their organisation had become to subvert the more selfish and individualised aims of commercialised higher education by providing students 'with a chance to see what they can do with their skills outside of the corporate world'.

Nevertheless, in reporting these *desires* to contribute, it is important to note that while students could be enthusiastic proponents of organisations, their participation was not unthinking, but rather carefully and often critically considered. These attitudes will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 6, but it is vital to signal at this stage that expressed *desires* to contribute among students did not equate to automatic participation.

#### **4.5.3 Connection: 'Getting that community feel' (51 respondents)**

The third aspect of political action admired by respondents was the capacity to create connections with and between others, volunteered by 51 respondents or 73% of the sample. *Desires* for connection are in many respects similar to aspirations to contribute, as both appear to be collective in orientation rather than individualistic. However, *desires* for connection are considered separately here as students specifically spoke about valuing the capacity to connect, either as a third party bringing people together or as having meaningful interactions with others.

One way the students in this study spoke about valuing the capacity to bring people together was in general terms of wanting to 'build a sense of community' on campus or among students (25 respondents). When asked to explain the reasons for their participation in groups on campus, these statements were typical of these students:

- Donald            It's just trying to help build a community as much as I can while I'm here, you know, helping people feel like they belong and are supported so that they have a good time (Lincoln).
- Sam                ... there wasn't that student focus on campus and there wasn't that community feel. So I really wanted to bring that back, actually make the time that I have here really worthwhile and actually enjoyable for everyone (Massey).
- Rachel            I try to contribute to the community as much as I can because [...] I'm really keen on helping people and making it a better place per se (Massey).

The students that spoke about wanting to build a sense of community were all highly active on campuses, and their participation would be recognised by conventional understandings of participation, such as volunteering or participating in the students' association. While some of these students explicitly described these activities as 'not political' (13 respondents), most students linked the capacity to connect others or create a sense of community specifically to their political agency (19 respondents). In describing their activities on campus, these students spontaneously spoke about the necessity of creating and nurturing 'connections' (8 respondents), 'friendships' (6), 'bonds' (5) or 'social capital' (2) among students to facilitate social change. One of the most vivid examples of this link was given by Donald (Lincoln), cited above, who argued that, 'It's simple really: if there isn't that community feel, people aren't going to join in or keep coming back'.

The capacity to connect others for political purposes appeared to be especially relished by six interview participants. When I asked Alice (Auckland) what she enjoyed most about her activities on campus, she spoke about 'meeting lots of different people I wouldn't otherwise meet and just having all these connections'. She explained that she found it 'really fun' now she knew enough people that she could be the one 'actually forming connections with others'. Two other students described their political engagement in terms of encouraging others to become more politically active. For instance, Andre (Victoria) defined his role as 'enabling change as opposed to being part

of it'. Andre clarified that this approach enabled him to be active in political issues without taking on an overtly 'political' role.

Besides these more recognised forms of action were a plethora of informal and small-scale actions many interview participants described undertaking day to day to connect students, as well as others in the community (31 respondents). These actions that students described were modest, mundane and diffuse and would not usually be recognised by conventional understandings of political action. They included 'inviting people outside my group to events', 'talking to people', 'having conversations', 'sitting next to people who look lonely in class', 'smiling at others', 'saying hello to people at the bus stop', 'asking new people if they need help and showing them around', 'helping out with orientation events' and 'being nice'.

These actions could be dismissed as insignificant and trivial. The students in this sample were themselves often quick to do so, such as saying that their actions 'didn't count' or that what they did was 'not much'. However, these actions also need to be taken seriously as part of what students considered to be their political agency. Anita Harris, Johanna Wyn and Salem Younes (2010) have written about 'ordinary' and 'everyday' types of agency as presenting a challenge to conventional understandings of political action, as they are not apathetic but neither are they at the vanguard of new forms of political participation (Harris et al. 2010, p. 29). Similarly, in this study, the highly informal actions students described that sought to create connections presented a constant point of tension in analysis. These students could not be considered apathetic, as they spoke about caring deeply political issues, including concerns of loneliness and isolation in their community. However, neither could these students be considered agentic 'change-makers', nor could their action be portrayed as anything as grand as a 'democratic phoenix' (Norris 2002).

Besides these actions, students spoke about the value they placed on connections – however small – in terms of their enjoyment of having meaningful interactions with others. These interactions appeared to be especially valued when they were with others who had different perspectives from their own. In interviews, 44 students were asked

what they 'liked' most about being at university (see Interview Guide Question 3.2, Appendix 4). Of these respondents, 23 students or 52% of those who responded spontaneously identified the 'diversity' of the people on campus. When asked to elaborate, these students explained they enjoyed 'having conversations' and being 'confronted' or 'challenged' by perspectives different from their own, which they argued had 'opened my eyes' and made their views more 'robust', 'complex' and 'nuanced'. William's statement was typical among these respondents:

William           ... [university] allows you to meet a lot of different people from different backgrounds. [...] that gives you a richer picture, I guess, of the world. It doesn't necessarily inform your political belief, but it does let you be a lot more sympathetic and a lot more sophisticated in your views [...] it makes you more aware of other arguments and forces you to refine your views quite a lot (Victoria).

In other parts of interviews, other students made unprompted references to wanting to 'hear' a range of views in political debate (9 respondents). For example, Sam (Massey) argued that 'it is really good to hear different sides', while Greta (Otago) suggested that it was 'important to have balance in debates'.

In discussing these interactions, many interview respondents appeared to cherish the 'understanding' that could mutually emerge as part of engaging with others who had different views from themselves (17 respondents). These students expressed a desire to 'talk to people', 'have conversations' or 'discuss' issues to 'open up' other students to alternative views. For these respondents, a central part of social tension was defined as one of lack of understanding:

Felicity           It's not that people are bad or selfish, it's just that they don't understand and, like, don't have a good education. It's not their fault; they just don't know better (Otago).

Lee               ... one of the factors that can really affect the political views of a person or perspective on things is their own experiences [...]. Just because they're used to that, doesn't mean that it is the right thing. And it is up to you to get the knowledge (Massey).

Renee            It's just a matter of making enough people aware that it's a problem. They don't realise that, oh, this actually affects people. You need to make them understand (AUT).

One poignant example of these ‘conversations’ reported by interview participants was offered by two Muslim international students who described their frustration with being told in the news and on social media that ‘there is always fighting between religious groups’. They explained that they had sought to respond to these assumptions by ‘trying to establish a connection’ with other Christian and Jewish students at their university by ‘having a cup of tea’, ‘talking things through’ and ‘listening to one another’.

For understanding contemporary student political action, there are two particularly significant points that arise from these *desires* for connection that will be returned to later in this thesis. The first is the apparent emphasis among students on respectful and considerate interactions, expressed by 31 respondents. Although these students described ‘challenging’ or ‘pulling people up’ for their views, they also argued that people were ‘entitled’ to their opinions and that ‘you need to respect that’. For example, a second-year Auckland University student, Mark, spoke about seeking to ‘challenge’ a friend’s view that he thought was incorrect, but specified that he wanted to open up an ‘alternative perspective’ rather than necessarily change it:

Mark                    I get involved in a lot of discussions with people so the impact that I like having is on not necessarily changing a friend’s perspective but opening up another, like, alternative perspective on something. So challenging friends who have what I think is sometimes a very narrow opinion on something and getting into discussions with them. I find that quite rewarding (Auckland).

For six respondents, the need for respect appeared to form a barrier to discussion among students of political topics, with these students describing worries that they would ‘offend’ or ‘hurt’ other students in expressing their political views publicly. One of these students was Steve, a right-leaning commerce student who volunteered this statement when discussing his own political perspectives:

Steve                    Politics is such a personal thing; each person is going to have their own views, and you don’t want to make them feel bad about whatever political view they might have or vice versa. You don’t want to start criticising them or anything (Victoria).

This respect will be returned to in Chapter 6 in discussions of how students interacted with university managers or organisations external to the university. It is important to note, however, that while students may have spoken about the importance of respect in political debate, this claim was belied by the troubling reports of some students who reported feeling uncomfortable sharing their views with other students because of the hostile responses they had received from other students.

The second point, somewhat contrary to the emphasis among some students on respectful interactions, is that that students appeared to be adverse to situations where they believed there was a *lack* of meaningful connection and understanding. Among the students in this sample, 27 respondents spoke without prompting about their dislike of conversations or perspectives that they considered 'one-sided' and 'inflexible', or with students or people more generally that 'ranted', went 'off on some tirade', 'get on their soapbox' or 'don't listen'. In particular, student antipathy towards 'one-sided' accounts seemed to be grounded in frustration that the speaker was not open to new perspectives or evidence. For example, students rejected discussions that were considered to have 'pre-formed agendas' or in which the speaker had 'already made up their mind', with students arguing that people needed to 'talk with me, not at me' (Lisa, AUT) and 'there's nothing to be gained: I'm not going to change my mind, and they aren't going to change theirs' (Pricilla, Lincoln).

#### **4.6 Summary**

This chapter examined student *desires* for different types of politics. At the outset of the chapter, I considered the dominant perception among interview participants that most students are apathetic. However, far from apathetic, the attitudes of the students in this study are suggestive of an underlying discontent with the political status quo and *desires* for political change. While interview participants expressed dissatisfaction with its current practice, formal politics still seemed to matter to students: respondents considered parliamentary politics 'important' and expressed an interest in learning more about New Zealand's democracy. When asked about the issues that they were concerned about, the enthusiastic and earnest responses of interview participants are difficult to

reconcile with perceptions of students as apathetic or disinterested. Respondents also described aspirations for 'types of politics' that brought tangible change, provided a contribution to a broader community and enabled meaningful connection to others, both within and beyond the university.

There are some strong parallels in this analysis with existing theories of student political action, particularly agency theories that argue students are engaged with formal politics but critical of its current practice. The discussion also resonates with political economy theories that claim students are internalising individualistic and neoliberal modes of citizenship. However, listening to the *desires* expressed by the students in this study raises some key challenges for these theories. In terms of political economy theories, the aspirations of respondents did appear in part to be individualistic, but also included more collective values of contribution and connection that do not sit easily with existing accounts. Regarding agency theories, the analysis presented is suggestive of some limits to alternative repertoire accounts of contemporary student political action. Although students did participate in political action that could be considered an 'alternative', they did not appear to treat these forms of political action as a substitute to more traditional forms of engagement. Rather, students seemed willing to participate in both, so long as it brought change. The actions students engaged with also tended to be much more mundane and diffuse than proposed in alternative repertoire agency theories, and were certainly not as grand as a metaphor of a 'democratic phoenix' might suggest.

For understanding student political action, the *desires* considered in this chapter present a conflicted starting point for this analysis. The stated frustration and discontent among students with the political status quo, coupled with their engaged attitudes towards political issues and New Zealand's democracy, is suggestive of an underlying instability and potential volatility in student political agency. Yet in discussing these *desires*, many students also spoke about actions that were small-scale, respectful and in some cases grounded in an arguably naïve belief that the actions of other actors were

simply a result of a lack of understanding. The next chapter turns to consider some of the experiences that appeared to inform these seemingly conflicting views.

## CHAPTER FIVE – DEMANDS

*... try doing politics while being \$40,000 in debt, working two jobs and living in a mouldy flat.*

*~ Mahe (Canterbury)*

### 5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter established that students held underlying *desires* for different types of politics. These aspirations are only one facet of student experiences, however. In this chapter, I consider the challenges the students in this study faced as political actors, which I describe as the *demands* of contemporary university environments. As I will argue, student experiences of a scarcity of finance, time and security appear to inform a preference among some students for a style of political action that is consciously cautious and uncontroversial.

This chapter begins by examining how individual students described their experience of being a student in the twenty-first century, then considers how respondents explained the impact of these experiences on their political action. I then analyse in greater depth student attitudes towards debt and how these perspectives informed their political participation. Discussion then moves to examine the collective *demands* faced by students' associations in New Zealand, particularly in a context of voluntary student membership, and how the role of students' associations as a collective body representing students had changed.

### 5.2 Being a student: 'Pressures' and 'trade-offs'

In interviews, respondents were asked how they would describe their experience as a student and the challenges they faced in their (political) activities on campus (see

Interview Guide Questions 3.2, 1.10, Appendix 4). In speaking about their experiences, many interview participants were candid about the challenges they faced. The student lifestyle was described by respondents as 'stressful' (18 respondents), 'hard' (14), 'busy' (13), 'difficult' (9), 'challenging' (5), 'hectic' (3), 'demanding' and 'draining'. Particularly vivid were metaphors adopted by three students: Adam (Victoria) said being a student felt like being 'punched in the face', Mahe (Canterbury) compared it to 'trying to kayak upstream' and Felicity (Otago) likened it to a 'pressure cooker'.

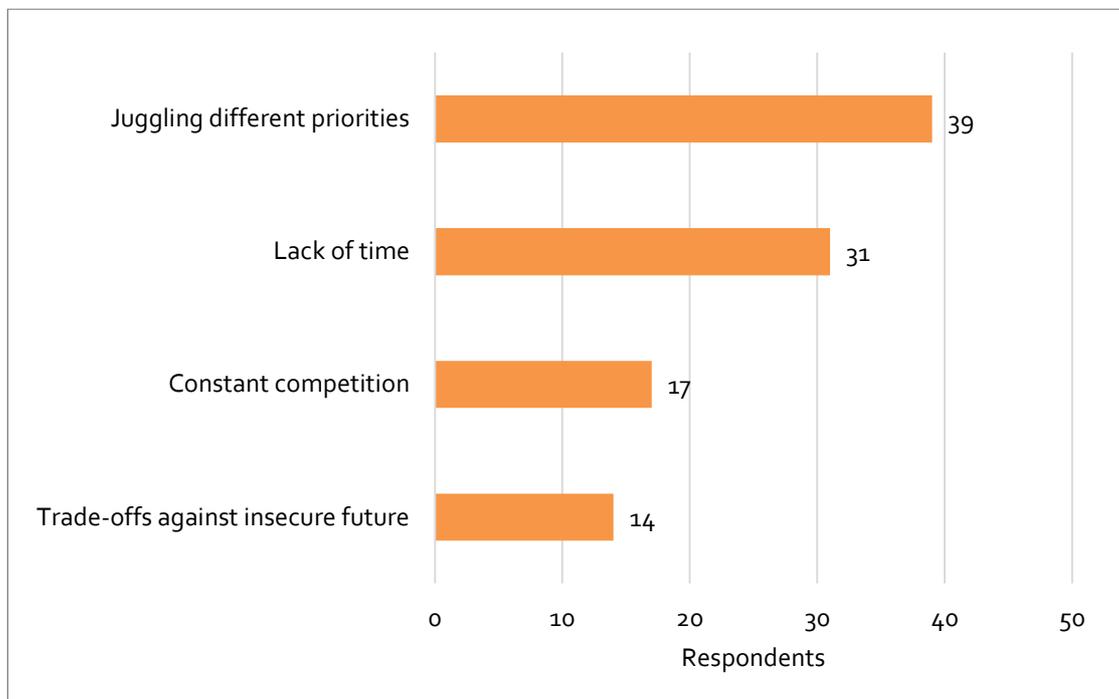
When asked to elaborate on these experiences, the students in this sample spoke about multiple, reinforcing *demands* on their time, finances and energy, summarised in Figure 13. Day to day, respondents made references to the multiple priorities that they managed: academic study, work commitments, sorting out living arrangements, ensuring they had enough money for rent and bills, extra-curricular activities, meeting people, maintaining a social life and spending time with partners or family, particularly where they had dependent children (39 respondents). These statements were typical from interview participants when they were asked to elaborate why they had described being a student was 'stressful' or 'hard':

- Xavier            I'm just juggling a lot all at once. There's obviously all the assignments which never stop, and then I work three evenings a week and a day at the weekend so that I can cover my rent. And then there's my work with the club and sorting out flat stuff. And also there's catching up with mates so that I've got, like, a life. So, yeah, it's pretty hectic (Otago).
- Sue                There is so much crap being thrown at us, so that is all you care about. You care about passing, getting an essay done on time, making sure you have enough money to live, finding somewhere to live ... so flats, paying your rent. And also the social aspect of it, you are worried about not having friends, so you try to keep up with that (Canterbury).
- Lisa                It's a bit insane, I'm really busy. Like I've got my study, and that's always piling on, as well as work – I work at the café for two days a week so that I can cover rent and bills. Then I help out my Gran. At the moment that's twice a week. But she's not very well, and so it's only going to get worse. Actually, I'm quite stressed about that, about the amount of time I'm going to need to set aside for her because she's not

well and I need to give her more time, but I'm not sure how I can fit my study around it (AUT).

As students described these pressures, they spoke about these *demands* 'taking a toll' or 'a hit' on them, both academically and socially (18 respondents). For example, Sue (Canterbury) went on to describe the pressure as 'taking its toll on your grades, your mental well-being and also physically, being able to deal with that shit'. Similarly, Lisa (AUT), who described her difficulty helping her grandmother in amongst study and work, said her social life suffered: 'Catching up with my friends after all of that can be a bit of a stretch and I don't do it as much as I'd like to'.

**Figure 13** Demands of being a contemporary university student identified by respondents



In discussing the *demands* of these multiple priorities, many students specifically described a scarcity of time (31 respondents). A lack of time was described as a state of being 'busy' or 'hectic' (19 students), but also as a barrier to participation in activities on campus, with 15 students making unprompted references in interviews to the 'things I'd really like to do but don't have the time really' (Carly, Auckland) or 'if there were more hours in the day' (James, Canterbury). Comparisons of the busyness of contemporary

students were made to their earlier counterparts. One older student, Francesca (Auckland), had returned to university after an absence and reflected that there was a marked difference in the available time students have:

Francesca ... students don't have time anymore. It is definitely a culture of study and work, whereas when I first got to uni, there was still a whole lot of people floating around all the time, not working. Idleness was a valid activity, you know? It is not a valid activity anymore I don't think (Auckland).

Besides Francesca, four other students similarly countered the stereotypes of 'lazy students', arguing that it was 'total bullshit', 'a nice story older people like to tell themselves' or that 'maybe it was once that way, but it's so not true anymore'.

Besides these day-to-day pressures, the experience of being a contemporary student was considered to be one of 'constant competition' (17 respondents). Central to these fears appeared to be worries about being employable in their chosen field by the end of study. One of the most revealing indicators of this anxiety was a conversation during orientation week with Rose, a first-year finance and accounting student at Waikato University who had just arrived at university. We were sitting on a lawn overlooking orientation week when I asked about her impressions of university so far. Rather than describing her classes, the events she had attended or any friends she had made, Rose instead spoke about her dismay seeing all the students on campus the first time: 'Oh, they're all going to be competing with me for jobs'.

In speaking about this competition, some students described anxieties that they were 'not doing enough', 'not keeping up' or 'falling behind' from their peers. These two statements by Sara and Felicity are illustrative of these fears, both of which were made in separate conversations when I asked them why they had described their experience as a student as 'stressful':

Sara Why is it stressful? It's like this worry that there's always going to be someone with better grades, or more work experience, or more volunteer hours, or better networks or whatever. It's always feeling like, no, I can't have time off; I can, and I should, be doing more (Canterbury).

Felicity Um ... I'd say it's the constant competition, like in terms of grades but also having good work and volunteer experience. I thought it would get better, but it hasn't. At first, it was the pressure to get the GPA to get in, but now that I'm through everyone's competing for the few placements that there are and later on it'll be for jobs. It doesn't stop (Otago).

What was striking about Sara and Felicity's responses was that both students indicated that the 'constant competition' or the feeling that they 'should be doing more' was more than just academic grades: they also considered their work experience, their extracurricular activities and even their friendships and networks open to be judged by future employers. The breadth of these responses is reminiscent of Wendy Brown's (2015) claim that citizens are becoming transformed into 'homo economicus' in which all facets of lives are accounted for in marketable terms.

Further pressures described by interview participants were *demands* of making 'trade-offs' against an insecure future (14 respondents). As has been discussed, students 'juggled' multiple priorities day-to-day, such as study, work, extracurricular activities and family commitments. However, students spoke about 'weighing up' priorities across time, with students explaining that they 'negotiated', 'balanced' or 'calculated' how to spend time, energy and money in the present so that it might 'pay off' at a later date. A second-year student, Lily (Waikato), spoke about this dilemma extensively when I asked her about her experience as a student:

Sylvia How would you explain your experience as a student?

Lily It's hard! Like I'm busy all the time, which is really tiring. And, um, I'm always weighing up what to do. Yeah.

Sylvia What do you mean by that? That you're 'weighing up what to do'?

Lily It's quite hard to explain, really. I guess, um, I'm always wondering what's the best thing to do? You know, should I stick my head down, study hard, rack up lots of debt [...] or work longer hours at my job cos that would mean less debt but probably not as good grades? Is that best? Or should I spend more time trying to make friends now because networks matter and all that? And uni's supposed to be the time of your life, blah, blah. I don't know how to best strike that balance. So

I'm always guessing, um, how much am I going to regret this further on (Waikato).

There are three significant points to draw attention to in Lily's statement that were echoed among other students who spoke about these trade-offs. First, the process described by Lily of 'weighing up what to do' was highly uncertain: there was no right 'answer' of 'what's the best thing to do' as the decisions students like Lily were making were against an insecure and unknown future. It was, as Lily suggests, a 'guess'. Second, and touching on an earlier point, Lily's statement reveals how multi-faceted the priorities students described were. Study and good grades were important, but so too was keeping debt down and making connections, both regarding friends and networks. As Lily's remark suggests, these priorities were not necessarily compatible. Third, while these 'trade-offs' were discussed broadly, debt appears to be a significant contributor to the pressures students experience, alongside time. Debt will be considered in greater depth later in the chapter. For now, it is worth noting that debt could be a source of uncertainty for students in terms of whether to continue their study, reported by eight respondents. For example, Josie, a post-graduate student at AUT, described 'always calculating in every decision whether your future opportunities are going to be affected and, you know, whether to work or whether to continue with your studies'.

A concept that is evocative of the *demands* described by students is Andrew Dean's (2015) characterisation of student experiences as one of 'discomfort'. Discomfort, for Dean, is the consequence of a series of policies that encourage students to 'strive further, be more productive, and adapt more quickly to an increasingly complex and fast changing world', but which have made the lives of students 'less certain, less protected, and more stressful' (Dean 2015, p. 14-15). The concept of discomfort appears to effectively encapsulate the unsettled experience of the students in this sample. As discussed, students described juggling multiple pressures day-to-day: study with work; and extra-curricular activities with family commitments and meeting friends. Not surprisingly, many of the students in this study spoke about feeling stressed and having a lack of spare time. Moreover, as touched on, there appeared to be an underlying agitation among many students that they could always be doing something differently,

something more, whether that was academically, socially or politically. As noted, it was not clear what that different action for students should be, as students were 'trading-off' priorities against an uncertain future.

Nevertheless, despite the openness with which students discussed the personal impact of the *demands* they experienced, interview participants also tended to underplay the negative consequences of these pressures on their lives. In speaking about the *demands* facing them, 35 students spontaneously went on to frame the pressures on themselves as 'a good thing', arguing that they made them 'work harder' (11 respondents) or be 'more efficient' (2) and helped them develop skills for 'time management' (7), 'working under pressure' (5), 'multi-tasking' (3) or 'learning to delegate' (2). Students similarly claimed that the pressures of their situation were 'just the way it is' (14 respondents) or 'part of being a student' (8), that it was 'only a couple of years' (4) or that 'it could be worse' (3).

### 5.3 'It's the precautionary principle': Political action in a context of scarcity

In this section, I consider the implications of the *demands* experienced by students on their preferences for political action. In interviews, 58 students were asked whether their experiences as a student had affected their activity on campus (see Interview Guide Questions 3.4, 1.10, Appendix 4). Of these interview participants, twelve respondents volunteered directly that it had not. However, the remaining 46 students or 79% agreed that it had influenced their participation.

One impact volunteered by these students was the extent to which they could become active on campus (25 students). Simply, these students had too much on their plate, and these students spoke about significantly limiting their ability to take part in activities on campus. These statements were typical of these interview participants:

Carly                      Well you are really busy, right? Like ridiculously busy usually. Well, I find myself ridiculously busy. So it was hard to find the time to go and join a group (Auckland).

Andre                     I think it's ... I guess it does limit your time. You think I've got this great big student loan, you know, you don't have much money behind

you once you pay for rent, food and everything, so you don't have much time to do other things once you're also working. That is probably one of the reasons that I haven't done much political stuff (Victoria).

As touched on previously, 15 students made reference to the things they would do if they had more time. A further 12 students volunteered that they needed or had to moderate their involvement in clubs or political action because of heavy workloads: 'I'm taking a step back' (Fracturedfemur, Auckland); 'I've realised I've really put myself in over my head this year' (John, Massey); 'I don't want to put too much on my plate' (Rachel, Massey). Students also reported difficulties participating in activities on campus because they were 'not even on campus in the first place' (19 respondents). Among the students in this sample, the reasons volunteered for not being present differed, but included identified demands of work commitments (13 respondents), challenges with transport such as distance and parking (8), living at home (7), timetabling or online content for courses (5), having a partner or friend group who were not attending university (3), a lack of cheap food on campus (3) and no locker space (1).

Aside from barriers to participation, students claimed that the *demands* they experienced influenced the type of action they participated in (20 respondents). These students appeared cautious of taking part in some forms of political action in light of an uncertain future, and could be surprisingly open and frank when discussing this decision. One of the most striking examples was Max, a third-year student at Victoria University, who likened his hesitation to the precautionary principle in environmental management:

Sylvia            You mentioned earlier that you were stressed about your studies and worried about getting a job. I wanted to ask: has this affected your involvement in activities on campus at all, including political ones?

Max                Yeah, definitely.

Sylvia            In what ways?

Max                Well, I've thought about this a bit, actually. I think it's like the precautionary principle. You know what that is?

Sylvia Can you explain it to me?

Max We learnt about it in class. It's this principle from environmental studies that when you don't know the outcome for sure, but it's suspected that it might be bad, then, well, it's probably best not to do it. Err on the side of caution and all that. It's like that for me right now. I really don't know how bad it's going to be, but if I think, oh, shit, this is probably going to hurt my chances later on, then I'm not going to do it. And that includes politics. I think students steer away from political action that might hurt their chances later on.

Although not as clearly articulated, the idea of the precautionary principle described by Max was echoed by other students, who described themselves or other students as 'cautious' (6 respondents), 'scared' (5), 'hesitant' (3), 'afraid' (1) or were going to 'think twice' (1) about participating in some forms of political action.

It is important to note that the reported cautiousness of these students did not mean that they did not participate politically. Rather than a barrier to political action, these interview participants appeared to treat the *demands* they encountered as challenges to be negotiated. This negotiation will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 7. What is significant here is understanding the types of action students reported feeling comfortable engaging with, in light of the *demands* that they faced.

In this context of *demands*, interview participants appeared to have a preference for political action that was considered 'uncontroversial', either by being single-issue, non-partisan or non-political. For example, one student active in the climate movement, *Generation Zero*, explained that they felt that the organisation was 'not so scary' to potential members as participating in the youth wings of political parties 'because most people agree that, okay, climate change is a problem, that is cool', whereas partisan parties such as the Green Party were 'climate change and a whole lot of other stuff'. In a similar vein, a member of the *Student Volunteer Army* in Christchurch, for example, argued that 'people can really make a difference without worrying that it's going to come back to haunt them'. Students also described feeling comfortable supporting movements that were 'professional' or 'respectable' (8 respondents). For example, a student who was active in a group that pursued a professional approach towards

political action put it this way: 'It feels crude to say it, and I know it's not the only reason people get involved, but our professional approach means we look good on people's CVs'.

These ideas of uncontroversial and professional action will be recognised from the previous chapter. In reporting student aspirations for change, it was discussed that single-issue movements and non-partisan or non-political stances were valued for bringing about change 'no matter what', and that a 'professional' approach was considered necessary to be taken seriously and considered 'credible' and 'respectable' by those in power. Listening to student discussion about how the *demands* they faced informed their political action is suggestive of another dimension to the perspectives described in the previous chapter. Students appeared to value single-issue movements and non-partisan or non-political stances for their specificity and the ability to work with anyone no matter what, but also for being less controversial and 'safer' for students. Similarly, while a 'professional' and 'respectful' approach was considered by some students to be necessary to be taken seriously by other actors, this approach would not harm the future financial earning and employment chances of students.

By contrast to actions that were perceived as safe in a situation of *demands*, two types of political action were singled out by interview participants as especially risky for their prospects: youth wings of political parties and 'confrontational' forms of political protest. These statements illustrate how explicit students could be in describing their concerns about participating in these forms of political activity, especially in a context of surveillance:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Nicola | ... there are some people who are too scared to get involved, especially at university, in actual youth wings of parties because they are worried about future employment. [...] I think people are quite scared about politically aligning themselves. |
| Mahe   | It's just being realistic, right? I've got an insane amount of debt and, call me crazy, but, like, getting arrested protesting or something is not going to help me get a job to pay that off (Canterbury).   |
| Lily   | You know the thing where we're always told not to put stuff on Facebook that our potential employer might see? Yeah? It's like that.  |

You just don't want them to see that you've been politically active (Waikato).

In discussing this cautiousness, most students were matter of fact about these circumstances, for instance arguing that they needed to be 'realistic', 'it's just how it is' or 'you'd be stupid not to consider it' (14 respondents). Only one student described the situation as 'hypocritical' because their potential employers 'probably would have protested back when they were students, but suddenly it's held against us if we do'.

Listening to student experiences, especially those who had participated in more confrontational styles of activism, suggests there is cause for caution among respondents. In relation to youth wings, six respondents volunteered that they, or other students, had actively obscured their involvement in political parties when applying for jobs: 'they put in all this work, but it counts for nothing'. Perhaps most concerning were reports of surveillance by the police and university security of students who had been active in protest movements. At three universities, five older interview participants spoke about students who had previously been expelled from university or arrested for their activism, and identified that individual students had been targeted 'to make an example'. This conversation with Dan, who had been active in organising a protest movement, is worth quoting in its entirety as an illustration of the reported surveillance by security and the police of students. To ensure his anonymity, Dan's name has been changed and university is not shown:

Sylvia            What have been the repercussions in terms of surveillance? Is it a big problem?

Dan                Yeah, plenty. I wasn't ... I guess in a way I was a bit naïve about that sort of stuff to begin with. The police know who I am, it turned out they had a lot of information about who I am. So that stuff does exist. [...] We went through an interesting kind of phase with security on campus where at first they didn't know what to do. So they actually reacted to us, and they sort of physically tried to get involved, but I think they learned that that was sort of a liability for them. And, um, they were probably advised by the police to let it go. So after the initial ones where we had this kind of, you know, where security guards were really trying to intervene physically ... they got smart. Later on, they would just be there. And their whole line would be that we are just

here to secure your safety, not we're here to stop you doing this. But if you go back a bit further, they were learning too. And they were walking around with phones videoing people. [...] And they did all that other stuff as well, like tearing down posters, you know, trying to make us invisible as much as possible. [...]

They definitely monitor email traffic. People were really loose at the beginning about having a meeting and then putting the minutes up and sending a link around an email group. So the information was widely available. So you've got this secret plan, and you get there, and there is a whole platoon of security guards. So we learnt we had to be a bit more sneaky about that sort of stuff. I think that is a lesson that actually hasn't been heeded well, and groups that are still active now are still very loose with that stuff. And I don't think they know how much police and security have access to.

Besides Dan, three students at other universities similarly commented that security and the police had recently 'got smarter' and 'less blatant' in their approach and instead sought to 'intimidate' and 'diffuse' protesters by photographing or videoing students on campus, removing posters, monitoring email and 'just being there'. These students considered it to be a 'successful' tactic at deterring protest. Dan, for example, reflected that 'I suppose if I am to be honest, they were successful in, um, dampening the momentum of what had happened on campus. I think a lot of students after that were really tired. A lot of students, you know, were afraid of what the next step was'. At a different university, another student activist commented: 'It's hard to keep momentum when you're up against all that'.

Despite these stated repercussions, the apparent cautiousness of students could be a source of frustration for students who were highly active in youth wings or protest activity (7 respondents). These interview participants argued that students could be 'overly conservative', 'sensitive' or 'paranoid' in their involvement in political action. One respondent likened this discretion to a form of 'self-censorship'. At the same time, highly active students could also be quite understanding of the 'apathy' of other students. For example, two students who were active in left-leaning protest movements, Francesca and Tane, offered lengthy explanations for why students shied away from the

protest activity they were engaged with, which shifted the 'blame' for non-participation away from individual students to 'structures':

Tane I wouldn't call it apathy, you know, I don't believe in that. I don't think we have apathetic students. I think we have highly discouraged students. I think we have social structures that are set up to discourage students from being politicised. And they are very, very effective. They are you need a job, you know, you have no income, you don't have any spare time, the way that course structures are structured there is no common area, no common time during the day. This used to be the kind of thing that happened on campus; you had a common lunch hour or whatever. All of these things are set in a way that discourages students. [...] Anyway, it does manifest as apathy, right? That is what people see.

Francesca ... why did we have trouble engaging people? People were either working or living at home and travelling. [...] people just didn't care that we were there, they were like I'm trying to get good marks, I've got to get a good job when I leave here. I don't think people were born like that, it is just the system forced them to be like that, you know, that is what the structure did. It wasn't like people hated me, but I just remember there was this guy and he came up to me, and he was like trying to explain to me basically that he was having a tough time, just in his studies and how can he care about this issue?

While not describing these pressures as directly in terms of 'structure', 12 other respondents active in protest movements or youth wings described being sympathetic of 'apathetic' students who had 'way too much thrown at them', saying 'I don't blame them' (Tom, Auckland), 'they're busy, I get that' (Trevor) or that 'it's not their fault that they're apathetic' (Laura, Victoria).

The *demands* the students in this study experienced and their influence on their political agency are not well accounted for in some agency theories of student political action. In particular, a notable theory for explaining student political action since the 1970s, discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 32), is Inglehart's (1977) claim that alternative repertoires of political action are a symptom of a 'value shift' among students. According to Inglehart, as students have attained higher levels of education and standards of living, they have become less deferential and more elite challenging in their approach to political action, and are more likely to adopt new forms of political engagement

(Inglehart & Welzel 2005). In line with these theories, the previous chapter established that the students in this study did express critical attitudes toward politics and participated in alternative forms of political action. However, contrary to Inglehart's claims, the involvement of interview participants in these different forms of political action seemed to be informed less by their material well-being, but rather by its *absence*. The scarcity of time and finance that the students in this sample experienced, as well as their anticipation of future precarity, appeared to profoundly affect their political action. Besides the challenges of finding time to participate, many students described seeking out different ways of participating politically that cautiously negotiated the *demands* of being a contemporary university student. Rather than 'elite challenging', as suggested by Inglehart, this form of politics seemed to be one that was considered uncontroversial to external actors, by typically being single-issue, non-partisan or non-political, and professional in its approach. Put another way, if there was a 'democratic phoenix' among students, it was one that was under many pressures and wary of hurting its future chances.

#### 5.4 Student attitudes towards debt

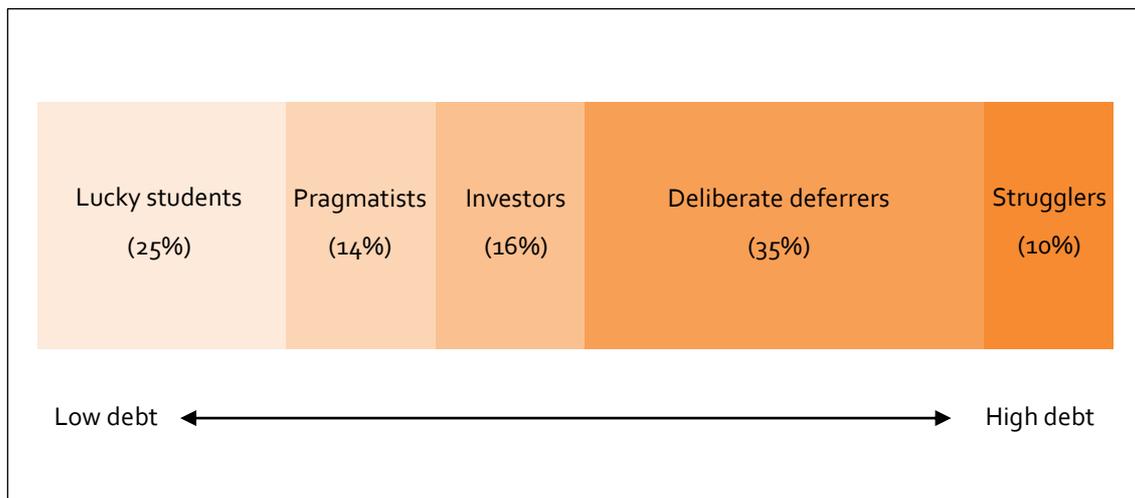
Student debt has been touched on already in the discussion so far as part of the 'trade-offs' that students made in the present against an uncertain future. In this section, I consider in greater depth student attitudes towards debt and how it affected them. As I will argue, student experiences of debt informed their political action, as suggested by political economy theories, but in a more nuanced way than might be anticipated. To investigate the impact of debt on students, 57 respondents were asked a broad question in interviews: 'how has debt affected you or your friends, if at all?' (see Interview Guide Question 3.3).<sup>8</sup> Among the students in this sample, there were five clusters of student attitudes towards debt, summarised in Figure 14. The first two clusters – *lucky students* (25% of respondents) and *pragmatists* (14%) – tended to report lower levels of debt, while

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<sup>8</sup> The nine international students interviewed are excluded from this analysis. Four students were also not asked directly about how debt affected them because of time constraints in interviews.

*investors* (16%), *deliberate deferrers* (35%) and *strugglers* (10%) indicated they had higher levels of debt. To test the validity of these clusters, these five categories were presented to six students separately in discussion after the research. While they are not mutually exclusive and two students indicated that they had moved between categories during their study, the descriptions were also resonant enough with students that they could recognise themselves and their peers.

**Figure 14** Attitudes towards debt expressed by respondents



In developing these clusters, I recognised earlier that there can be problems with giving labels to students, as it can flatten the data and mask the complexity of the perspectives (Chapter 3, p. 73). However, in this case, these categories are helpful for outlining some of the nuances within the reported experiences of debt among students: as I will discuss, having high levels of debt did not necessarily entail a shared experience and these categories help to reveal these distinctions. In discussing these clusters with students both individually and at presentations, they also appeared to be valuable to students themselves, who could recognise themselves and how their views aligned (or not) with other students. As I will consider, debt was not necessarily a topic that was widely talked about among students, so there seemed to be interest in learning about other student experiences. Where possible, the labels for the clusters of students have been derived from student descriptions of their debt.

#### 5.4.1 *Lucky students (14 respondents)*

When asked how debt affected them, one cluster of students spoke about themselves as 'lucky' and their circumstances as a matter of 'fortune' or 'chance' (14 respondents). These statements were typical of *lucky students* when asked how debt had affected them:

- Margot            I've been really lucky in that my dad has been able to support me throughout my degree week to week ... so I'm really fortunate (Victoria).
- Xavier            I'm lucky because I have been able to stay at home and I haven't had to work much, so I've been able to really focus on my studies (Otago).
- Trevor            Personally I've been quite lucky because my first three years were done with a scholarship so I've just started borrowing for fees this year.

'Luck' for these students had several different sources. For 10 of the 14 *lucky students* in this sample, luck was framed in terms of having no debt or relatively minimal debt as a result of high levels of family support or scholarships. For the remaining students, statements of luck tended to be focused on perceived fortune in the present or the future. Three post-graduate students who had scholarships at the time of interviews described themselves as 'lucky', despite having relatively high levels of debt. Luck was also framed by two students as family support that would be there if they needed to be 'bailed out'. Among *lucky students*, 'hard work' was never mentioned, even in the case of scholarships or where parents had specifically saved for the purpose.

The students in this sample who described themselves as 'lucky' appeared to be able to participate fully in campus life, both academically and socially. Unlike some other respondents, *lucky students* did not describe any significant adverse consequences from their experience of debt. These perceptions reflected their reported levels of employment and extra-curricular activities. Regarding employment during term-time, seven of the *lucky students* in this sample reported working. They worked fewer hours than other respondents: an average of 13.5 hours compared to the average of 16 hours in the entire sample. *Lucky students* were also more active in clubs on campus, indicating involvement with an average of 2.2 clubs on campus compared to 1.7 in the overall sample.

While considering themselves fortunate, *lucky students* volunteered that they were sympathetic towards students with debt. They appeared especially concerned about its consequences, such as describing it as ‘not good’, ‘unpleasant’, and ‘horrible for them’. However, ideas of ‘privilege’ seemed to form a barrier making it hard for some *lucky students* to be able to talk about issues associated with debt with their peers. Six of the *lucky students* in this sample reported that they did not usually discuss debt with their peers. When asked why, three of these students described feelings of ‘guilt’, including Finn:

Finn                    It’s a bit awkward, isn’t it? Because they’re going to be entering the workforce with a \$50k weight round their neck that’s going to be eating into their pay-checks over the next decade or so. And I don’t have any debt just because I was fortunate enough to have parents that were generous in their support for me. That’s a pretty hard conversation to have, right? (AUT).

Of the students interviewed, *lucky students* were some of the most reluctant to talk about their debt or lack of debt. Especially among students with no loan, debt was spoken about in an almost embarrassed manner, with answers given briefly and somewhat abruptly. With these students, I found in interviews that I often had to take a fairly active role as an interviewer to prompt further responses, while other students tended to volunteer information about debt much more readily.

#### **5.4.2 Pragmatists (8 respondents)**

The second cluster of interview participants that tended to have low levels of debt I describe as *pragmatists* (8 respondents). These students considered debt to be something that needed to be carefully ‘managed’ or ‘controlled’, and had proactively developed ‘plans’ and ‘strategies’ to either have no debt or to minimise it. These extracts illustrate how *pragmatists* described their approach towards debt:

Carly                    ... before I started, everyone constantly told me that I was never going to get a job. So I thought, I’m going to get out of this without being in the negatives (Auckland).

Adam            It is something that I've already started to deal with now. So I've already started taking action so that when I am out of the system, I'm going to be right on track (Victoria).

Rose            I know I can pay it off. I have planned carefully (Waikato).

The *pragmatists* in this sample spoke about a very diverse range of approaches to minimise their debt. These included a combination of staying at home (6 respondents), working long hours (5), establishing a 'business venture' (2) or buying property (1). One female student indicated that she had engaged in sex work to reduce her loan. Older students appeared especially likely to be *pragmatists*, with half of the *pragmatists* in this sample over the age of 25. These students spontaneously described calculations they had made about the amount of debt they took on and how long that would take to pay off once employed. Three of the younger students who adopted these approaches volunteered that they had done so as a result of encouragement by family members. More generally, across the entire sample, five students indicated that their approach towards their finances and debt had become more frugal as they progressed through their degrees.

Among respondents, *pragmatists* were some of the most open to talking about student debt, and often spoke with enthusiasm and pride of their work to minimise their loan. Nevertheless, while upfront about the steps they had taken to reduce debt, *pragmatists* also tended to reflect on the 'toll' their decision to reduce debt had taken on their ability to participate fully in campus life (7 respondents). These reported consequences of reducing debt speak to the 'trade-offs' and 'weighing up' of priorities discussed earlier (see p. 125). These consequences were partly academic, with four *pragmatists* mentioning the consequences of their employment on their grades. However, they spoke more extensively about the social costs of their experience of debt.

A particular concern for *pragmatists* appeared to be the social isolation they had experienced as a result of their decision to reduce debt. One example was students who had stayed living at home to reduce costs and keep their debt down. While cheaper, six *pragmatists* volunteered problems of feeling 'like an outsider' or finding it difficult to 'fit in' when they came to university to attend lectures. They spoke about feeling excluded

when other students had already developed friendship groups in halls or flats. Duffman, a student at Waikato University, provides an insight into the isolation she felt as a result of the decision to reduce debt:

Duffman            I was encouraged to stay at home so that I didn't accumulate a huge amount of student debt. Just don't go into debt, just don't go there. So I stayed at home. And it was really difficult because if you are in the halls, you are forming these new friendships and groups. And for someone like me who comes from the outside you go to lectures and they've already made groups of friends because they've already been in the halls for a week. And so it is really hard, you know, I spent probably the first two years mostly sitting by myself. Like you go to labs, and yeah you can get involved in a group, but then sometimes you find it awkward to sit next to them in lectures because they've got these pre-formed friend groups from the halls. And so it wasn't until third-year that people started relaxing (Waikato).

Duffman went on to indicate that if she were to do it again, she would take on the debt rather than experience the 'loneliness' she felt. Three students from the main centres also mentioned problems with travelling long distances associated with living at home. Carly was one of these students:

Carly                I didn't go to a lot of events when I was living at home because I'd have to get home and then, like, for ages I couldn't drink at things because I'd have to drive home and it takes, like, ages (Auckland).

The challenges *pragmatists* described engaging with campus activities were reflected in their participation in clubs on campus: all but two *pragmatists* reported involvement in one or no clubs on campus.

Initially, when asked about how debt affected their peers, *pragmatists* tended to describe concern for their peers, for instance arguing that 'they're pretty stressed'. Yet as their responses progressed, all but one of the *pragmatists* in this sample qualified their empathy. As demonstrated in these extracts, *pragmatists* could be quite forthright in their criticism:

Donald            I hate to be blunt, but, you know, it's their own fault (Lincoln).

Peter                It sounds horrible, but I'm relatively unsympathetic ... they're the ones who spent too much (Otago).

It is important to note that these criticisms raised by *pragmatists* appeared to be driven not so much by indifference or callousness, but rather personal frustration that the steps that they had taken to reduce their debt had often come at a significant academic and social cost.

#### **5.4.3 Investors (9 respondents)**

The third cluster of students I describe as *investors*, who had higher levels of debt. One of the most startling features of initial discussion with students with large loans was how laid-back they appeared towards their debt. For example, this exchange took place at the start of an interview relatively early on in this project:

As the student was filling out the questionnaire, they stopped when they got to the question about debt and looked up at me.

‘I don’t know how much I owe.’

I smiled encouragingly: ‘Just to the nearest \$10,000 or so is fine’.

‘No’, they repeated, ‘I really don’t have a clue’.

(Field notes, AUT, 4/2/2015)

What was initially a somewhat shocking exchange was repeated throughout the interview process. 15 respondents with debt indicated as they wrote the figure down on the questionnaire that it was a bit of a guess. One student, Mary (Auckland), wrote that her loan was ‘\$50,000-\$80,000ish?’ Four respondents reported having no idea of the approximate value of their loan and wrote question marks. Eleven students described their debt as an annual envelope from Inland Revenue that remained unopened.

As conversation progressed, this relaxed attitude towards debt was maintained by nine interview participants. These *investors* described feeling confident in their ability to ‘deal’ with their debt as a result of perceived high incomes once they graduated. These statements illustrate their confidence:

Luke                    I’m looking at \$50,000 of debt and rising, but I’m not too bothered by it. It’ll be worth it because people in my area get decent jobs. Education is an investment, right? It pays back (Canterbury).

Nerina I just know that it is something that I have and I can pay it off as I go ... I'm not worried because I am not in a market that is saturated, I'm in a market where there is demand (Victoria).

William I get that it sucks to be in debt, but your earning potential is pretty great when you graduate compared to people working minimum-wage jobs for 60 hours a week (Victoria).

Whether by chance or intent, these students had typically picked degrees that they considered to be in 'high demand' and promised 'good salaries'. All but one of the *investors* in this sample studied economics, commerce, management, law or engineering. Six of the eight *investors* in this sample were male. Like *lucky students*, no *investor* respondents volunteered any negative consequences of having debt on their academic study or social life. Also in line with *lucky students*, they had lower levels of employment during term-time than the overall average. While all but two of the *investors* reported working during the academic year, it was for an average of 10.5 hours per week compared to 16 hours per week for the entire sample.

Like *pragmatists*, *investors* initially tended to express worry about their peers (8 respondents). This statement from William was typical:

William ... generally, I don't know too many students that are, you know, impoverished. But I know there are some, and I do think it is a bit sad [...] and maybe there are some that need more provision from the government than they are given (Victoria).

However, as discussion progressed, *investors* tended to add qualifiers to their statements. Like *pragmatists*, one criticism these students raised was that high levels of debt were a consequence of an individual's 'lack of planning' or 'irresponsible' spending decisions (6 respondents). To return to William:

William I think part of it is just that people like to spend lots of money and students are no different. One of my friends from law school blows all her money on clothes with the first pay-check. One apparently needs new outfits; good for her (Victoria).

Like William, anecdotal examples of friends who had spent their student debt 'poorly' were raised by five other *investors* in this sample, from clothes, to snowboarding trips, to concert tickets.

An alternative reproach offered by some *investors* was of the subjects that students had chosen to study (6 respondents). Without prompting, these *investors* described feeling 'sorry' for students with high loan balances doing 'arts' degrees because their job prospects were 'pretty terrible'. This extract from an interview with Nerina illustrates this reasoning:

Nerina            I'm not worried because I am not in a market that is saturated, I'm in a market where there is demand for. Whereas arts students, unfortunately, they go through a trough and there is not much jobs on offer for them. Yeah, it is a real shame because it affects them in the sense that they can't make plans, like, first home buyers, you've got debt with you, and you're in a market in which you can't even pay your debt off (Victoria).

For four *investors*, respondents attributed these circumstances to individual choices, arguing that the students should have chosen a degree that would be more 'useful'.

#### **5.4.4 *Deliberate deferrers (20 respondents)***

The fourth and most numerous cluster of students in this sample I describe as *deliberate deferrers*, who made up 36% of those interviewed. Like *investors*, *deliberate deferrers* tended to have high levels of debt and initially spoke about their debt quite casually. When asked how debt affected them, these opening statements were typical:

Alice            To be honest, I don't really think about it! (Auckland).

Marmaduke     It is a bit depressing when I think about it, so often-times I don't think about it (Massey).

Fracturedfemur Well, it hasn't hit me yet! (Auckland).

Many *deliberate deferrers* spoke about the 'deferred' nature of the consequences of debt. Debt was something that would affect them in the future when they went to get a job (10 respondents), go overseas (8) or buy a house (7). The students tended to be matter of fact about the consequences: 'it will probably be bad, but I will deal with it then' (Felicity, Otago).

As discussion progressed, however, there were indicators that debt was an uncomfortable subject for *deliberate deferrers*. Students described the amount they owed as ‘painful’, ‘eye-watering’ and ‘scary’. These statements illustrate some of this unease:

Martin            It hasn’t affected me at the moment. But it is huge. I can’t see it being paid off. It is just floating in the background. It is crazy; I don’t know how it is going to be sustainable (Otago).

Pogal             It is at the point, like, my \$40,000 having just done my undergrad and not having thought about post-grad yet. It is so much money that it is hard to imagine (Auckland).

Nicola            It is kind of terrifying for me because it is going to be there waiting for me at the end.

Nine students framed their loans as so large that they could not understand its implications, describing it as ‘astronomical’, ‘unreal’ or ‘you can’t fathom it’. Debt was described as something they were resigned to: that it would ‘eat’ into their salaries (5 respondents), that they would probably never buy a house in the near future (4) or that they would never pay it back (4). Respondents volunteered ‘coping strategies’ they deliberately adopted to ‘try’ not to think about debt and ‘push it to the side’, but recognised that it was always ‘weighing on their mind’: ‘you think about it in everything you do’ (Josie, AUT).

Despite their worries over their loan, the *deliberate deferrers* in this sample appeared to be some of the most active participants in campus life. The *deliberate deferrers* indicated involvement with an average of 2.9 clubs on campus compared to 1.7 in the overall sample and 0.8 for *pragmatists*. While eleven *deliberate deferrers* in this study worked part-time during term-time, it was for an average of 12 hours per week among respondents, compared to an average of 16 hours in the overall sample, and was primarily described in terms of ‘topping up’ their loan and other forms of support for discretionary purposes.

Most *deliberate deferrers* in this sample also suggested that they did not feel like they ‘deserved’ greater support (13 respondents). In discussing their debt, these students were highly self-critical and argued that their experience of having debt was, at least in

part, 'my own fault'. Respondents described 'regretting' or felt 'guilty' about earlier 'stupid' and 'irresponsible' spending decisions: 'I spent it on things I probably shouldn't have' (Bob, Canterbury). This statement from Alex was typical:

Alex                    I haven't thought about my loan. It's because it is a hard thing to think about because some people are responsible with their money and can pay it off. Whereas me, I just borrowed, like, the full amount while I was living at home and saved it so that I could go on exchange and blew, like, \$20k travelling for seven months, which was borrowed (Victoria).

Among the 'luxury' and 'affluent' items students reported spending some of their loan on was overseas travel (5 respondents), sports activities (4), technological equipment (4), designer items of clothing (2) and alcohol purchases at bars (2), alongside day-to-day expenses of buying lunch and coffees at university (6). Five respondents, unprompted, admitted that they had borrowed student loan to save or invest the 'interest-free money', but had spent it on things they 'did not really need'.

#### **5.4.5 Strugglers (6 respondents)**

The last cluster of students I described as *strugglers*: students who described their experience of debt as a 'struggle' (6 respondents). *Strugglers* closely shared the anxieties of *deliberate deferrers* towards their debt, particularly the constant 'worry' that came with high levels of debt: 'it eats away at you' (Beatrice, AUT). However, unlike *deliberate deferrers*, these students reported finding it difficult or a 'struggle' to 'make ends meet' week to week. All but one of the *strugglers* in this sample were from the larger cities of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch where costs of rent and other living expenses such as transport were considered particularly high. In this context, the living expenses provided through student loans were considered 'not enough'. These accounts illustrate how students described their debt as a 'struggle':

Beatrice                My rent is way above what you can get in living costs, so I'm basically working week-to-week to get enough money just to pay the rent, let alone, you know, enough money for food to eat and stuff. And I can't get anywhere cheaper because it's, like, Auckland. So, yep, it is a struggle (AUT).

Michael ... this is actually the first year when my rent has actually fallen below what I get in living costs. So it was always just I had to find an extra \$20 on top of what I was getting to pay rent, then you have to pay for food and bills and things. And that really, really weighs on you and you kind of have to worry about where you are going to get money the next week. And that does kind of affect you, socially and academically and things (Auckland).

Among these students, part-time work was spoken about as being 'essential': 'It's not a choice' (Mahe, Canterbury). While the average hours worked during term-time for the sample as a whole was 16 hours, *strugglers* worked significantly longer hours, with an average of 25 hours per week. Like *pragmatists*, five of the six *strugglers* spontaneously reported consequences of this employment on their academic achievement: 'my grades have taken a fair hit' (Lisa, AUT); 'work has definitely come first quite a few times, and that doesn't always do good things for your GPA' [Grade Point Average] (Mahe, Canterbury). Because of the high level of time spent at work, four *strugglers* spontaneously described feeling like they did not 'fit in' on campus because they did not have the time or resources to participate fully in campus life. On average, *strugglers* in this sample were involved in 0.8 clubs on campus, compared to 1.7 in the entire sample.

## 5.5 'It's just part of being a student': Student debt and political action

Listening to how these five clusters of students – *lucky students*, *pragmatists*, *investors*, *deliberate deferrers* and *strugglers* – spoke about debt suggests it is impossible to talk about 'a' single student experience of the *demands* of debt. Most obviously, the loan sizes of the students in this sample varied dramatically, from no debt to up to \$110,000. Moreover, the attitudes of the students in this study suggests that having a similar sized loan does not necessarily form the basis for a shared experience among students. Consistent with studies by Emma Davies and Stephen Lea (1995) and Neil Harrison and colleagues (2013), student attitudes towards debt appear to have significant repercussions for their experiences as a student that are just as profound as their loan balance. Interview participants with high levels of debt varied significantly in their confidence in 'dealing' with their debt: *investors* described being relaxed about their loans, while *deliberate deferrers* and *strugglers* express worry and anxiety about the future. Conversely, while

*lucky students* with smaller loan balances appeared to flourish at university, the *pragmatists* in this sample who had minimal debt but worked long hours or stayed at home, described falling behind in their academic study or finding it difficult to 'fit in' at university. These different experiences suggest that loan balances only provide a very thin understanding of the impact of debt on contemporary students.

In terms of student political action, student attitudes are suggestive of significant inequalities among students in terms of their capacity to participate in on campus, academically, socially but also politically. On the one hand, *lucky students* with low debt, as well as *investors* and *deliberate deferrers* who had higher levels of debt, seemed to be able to participate in campus life fully. These students typically did not work long hours and did not volunteer any significant impacts of this employment on their involvement on campus. They generally described living comfortable and rewarding lives and seemed to embody the university ideal of a well-rounded, high-achieving citizen. Yet for the *deliberate deferrers* in this sample, in particular, this involvement was at the risk of future hardship and uncertainty, with their success underwritten by reported stress and worry about their future.

On the other hand, a second group of students, namely *strugglers* with high debt and *pragmatists* with low debt, appeared to be much less visible on campus. Debt for these students was spoken about as something that restricted, rather than enabled, their involvement in university. These students typically described staying at home during the first years of study to save money and do the 'right thing', or not being able to afford to live in the halls of residence. They took on high levels of employment during the academic year to either reduce their debt or to meet weekly expenses and spoke about making use of the two-hour parking slots on campus to save money or went home for lunch. These interview participants expressed regrets at having made few connections at university and that they felt like an 'outsider' when they came to campus.

Debt, then, did appear to have significant repercussions for student involvement in political activities, although not necessarily in the way suggested by some political economy theories. Existing research has long identified high levels of debt as a source of

risk for students, and with good reason (Callender & Jackson 2008; Dwyer et al. 2011; Robotham 2012; White 2013). However, the attitudes of the *pragmatists* with low debt in this study suggest there can be an additional layer of risk associated with *not* taking on debt for students. To borrow the language used earlier in this chapter, the decision to keep debt down was a 'trade-off' that these *pragmatist* students made against an uncertain future, and it is not possible to tell from the data collected what the future implications of this decision for those students will be. Nevertheless, it seems that the consequences of inadequate social support for students with smaller loan balances can be as significant as those students with high debt.

Most interview participants in this study appeared to be aware of these disparities in student experiences. Throughout interviews, students spontaneously made references to 'poor' students (12 respondents) or students who 'struggle' (5), and alternatively to 'the rich kids' (11) or 'affluent' students (9). When asked about their experience relative to other students, 21 respondents volunteered descriptions like 'gap', 'inequality' or 'divide' to describe the student body.

Students also tended to express concern for some of their peers. Amongst the students in this sample, 43 students or 61% of respondents spoke of anxiety about the well-being of other students at some stage during interviews. As has been touched on, interview participants spoke about being 'concerned' or 'worried' about the impact of the pressures associated with a scarcity of financial support on their friends or peers, describing the consequences as 'not good', 'terrible', 'really bad', 'unpleasant' and 'horrible for them'. Especially troubling was the reports of 13 students who volunteered examples of friends with mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which they attributed at least in part to the pressures on them. During discussion of these *demands*, one student voluntarily spoke about an acquaintance's suicide.

Despite these concerns, it was surprising that the students in this study did not appear to wish to challenge their circumstances substantially. In my observations across the eight universities, it was conspicuous that few student groups took up student debt as a campaign issue and students' associations rarely challenged it, despite levels of debt

among New Zealand students being unprecedented. In interviews, when asked about the issues that mattered to them, only two students raised student fees and debt. Furthermore, while four respondents volunteered that they thought it was 'unfair' that their parents had received a free education when they did not, none of these students when prompted thought that student fees should be significantly reduced or removed.

One reason for this apparent reluctance among students to challenge their circumstances appears to be a lack of knowledge of the history of student debt and support in New Zealand. After very few students in the initial interviews had raised the generational aspects of debt, I asked some probing questions in subsequent interviews about the history of student debt. Of the fourteen students questioned about this history, three knew that their parents or older relatives had a free education and one identified 'Ruthanasia'<sup>9</sup> as part of the introduction of student loans, which they had studied in class. The remaining ten students did not know any of its history. Although student loans had been introduced in her lifetime, one of these students responded 'Haven't they been round since the 1950s?' This finding corroborates with earlier discussion that students tended to consider their circumstances as 'just the way it is' or 'it's just part of being a student'. Although the introduction of student debt is barely a quarter century old, its history seems to be one that has become largely obscured to contemporary New Zealand students.

Lack of knowledge does not seem to be the sole reason for the reluctance of students to challenge debt, however. The attitudes reported by interview participants suggest students found it challenging to discuss the subject of debt among themselves, let alone to challenge it politically. In interviews, 37 students in this sample voluntarily expressed that they did not usually talk about debt. Underscoring this reluctance appeared to be individualised perceptions of guilt and blame. As noted earlier, *lucky students* tended to ascribe low levels of debt to a matter of chance and fortune and spoke about feeling 'awkward' about their relatively 'privileged' status, indicating that they

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<sup>9</sup> A term given to the period of neoliberal reforms from 1990-1993, named after the Minister for Finance Ruth Richardson.

tended to avoid discussing it with their peers. Guilt of a different sort appeared to be present among *deliberate deferrers*, who described personal 'guilt' or 'blame' for their previous spending decisions. At the same time, *pragmatists* and *investors*, while reporting some sympathy for their peers, seemed to reinforce this guilt by attributing low debt to hard work or poor study choices, with high levels of debt blamed, in part, on poor individual choices regarding spending patterns or degree choice.

In listening to these attitudes, it is striking that respondents, in their discussion of debt, tended to shift the focus away from the policies that contributed to these circumstances or of their cumulative impact on students, and instead towards individuals. While the reported concerns of most students for their peers suggest that they were not comfortable with the status quo, their worries tended to be directed specifically towards particular students and not the student body more generally. Of the 43 students who reported being 'concerned' or 'worried' about the impact of these pressures on their peers, 29 respondents argued that there were 'some' students that 'have it hard', rather than the more collective claim that 'students have it hard'.

In addition, interview participants tended to distinguish their situation from that of other students. Among the 43 students who expressed concerns about the impact of debt, only ten students used the collective 'we' or 'us' in their responses, as in 'we're all drowning in debt' (Renee, AUT). By contrast, the remaining 33 students used a language of 'me' and 'them' to discuss their situation compared to others: 'I'm okay, but I know that there's other students that struggle' (Greta, Otago). As discussed earlier, respondents tended to be quick at proclaiming that they were 'okay' – even among the students who described some of the most challenging circumstances reported in interviews. For example, Lisa, the AUT student discussed previously who found it difficult to do well at her studies while working two days a week and looking after her grandmother, went on to argue that she 'got by' and that there were 'others that need help more than me'.

Far from accounts that portray young people as 'selfish', the students in this sample, like Lisa, appeared to be acutely aware of their apparent 'affluence' within New

Zealand society. Without prompting, 18 interview participants reported that they were sceptical of what they described as ‘poor student arguments’, which emphasised that students generally were ‘struggling’ or ‘hard done by’. Instead, these respondents agreed that being a student could be a ‘challenge’ at times and that ‘some’ students had difficulties, but also argued that ‘on balance’ students were relatively ‘well-off’. Furthermore, interview participants argued that money should not be spent on them, but rather on ‘others that are worse off’ or other issues, such as ‘child poverty’, ‘homelessness’ and ‘fixing climate change’, or ensuring that government ‘moved back into the black’. For all their own personally held worries about the future, 15 students also volunteered and appeared to accept government narratives that students would on average earn much higher salaries than their peers who had not attended university.

## **5.6 Collective demands: The case of students’ associations**

Discussion so far has focused on the *demands* students individually described experiencing. It could be argued that there is significant scope for collective organisations such as students’ associations to build on the already existing concerns of students for their peers and challenge conditions under which students attended university. Yet my interviews with students and observations suggest students’ associations in New Zealand themselves are confronting a particular series of *demands*, especially a scarcity of finance and the security to act with independence. These *demands* appear to have become especially acute following the progressive introduction of voluntary student membership in New Zealand, first in two universities in 1999 before becoming universal in 2011. In this section, I consider how students described the pressures facing contemporary New Zealand students’ associations, before examining how the role of students’ associations was perceived to have changed in this post-voluntary student membership environment (see Interview Guide Questions 3.7-3.12, Appendix 4). Because of the small number of student officers in New Zealand, alternative pseudonyms have been used for all student officers with all university names obscured in this section to protect their anonymity.

In interviews, students volunteered two key *demands* they considered to be confronting students' associations in New Zealand. The first demand was for students' associations to clearly articulate their role and relevancy to students as potential members. Under voluntary student membership, the affiliation of students (and in many cases therefore also their income stream) was no longer guaranteed. The challenge this presented for students' associations was summarised by a student officer, Valerie, when asked how she considered her association to have changed:

Valerie            To me I think the role of students' associations have changed drastically in the past five years, and so now you've got this whole new wave of students, because those who were around before VSM [Voluntary Student Membership] have all gone and got jobs now, but now you've got thousands of students coming not knowing if they're meant to sign up for that or not, and not knowing what to expect from us, which makes it difficult.

Among the 20 student officers interviewed in this sample, 13 reported concerns that students' associations were not widely valued among contemporary students. These negative perceptions of students' associations were corroborated by the comments of other students interviewed who had weak ties to students' associations (17 respondents). When asked about their students' associations, these participants spontaneously described student officers as 'lame', 'totally wasting their time' or that 'everyone kind of hates them'.

The second challenge identified by respondents was for students' associations to articulate their relevance to university managers. Students' associations in New Zealand appeared ' beholden' to the university, especially for funding. At a majority of the universities, students' associations were contracted by the university via service agreements to provide key services to students. The student officers interviewed in this project tended to be upfront about the balance of power in this relationship. This statement from Lewis illustrates the tension of the relationship between students' associations and the university:

Lewis            I was never around to see what it was like before, but I mean basically half of our income, our operating budget, comes from them. So we like to fight them and things, but we are kind of on life support from them

to some extent, so it is difficult ... we don't have financial independence from the University. So we do lockers and things, so we get income from that, but if the University decided to put up a bunch of lockers and offer them for cheaper then we couldn't compete and lower our prices, but we also couldn't lose the income from that either. So they kind of have us in a bind like that.

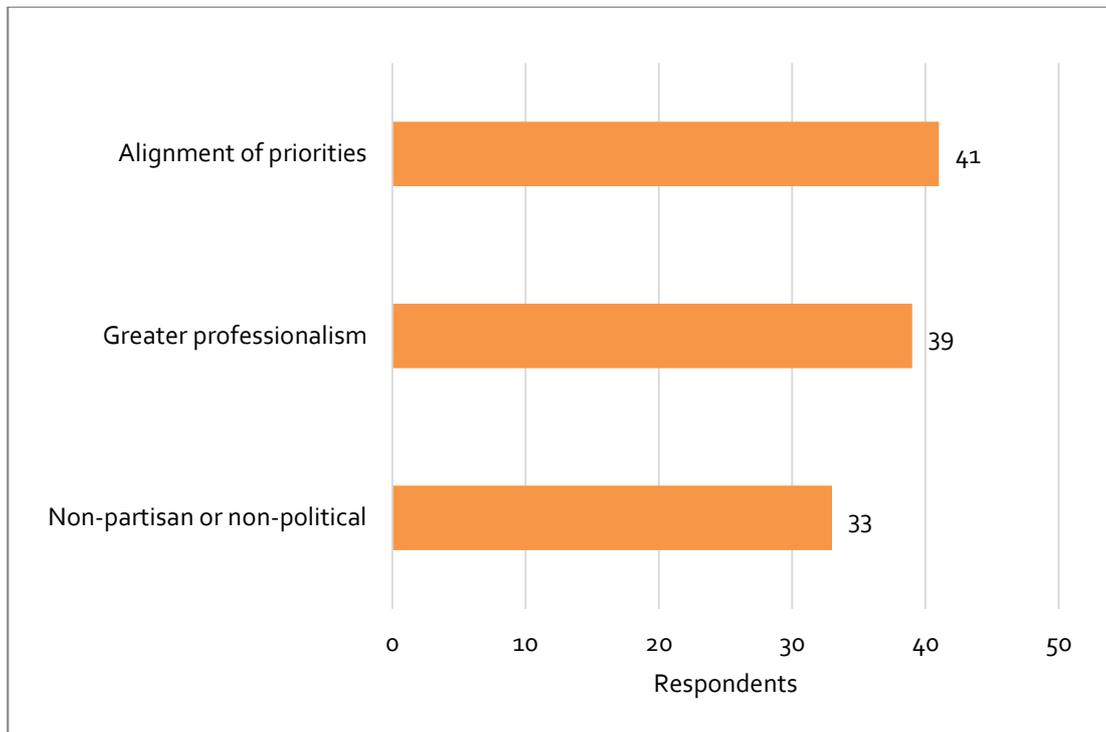
Like Lewis, student officers at all universities reported some anxiety that universities might further take on roles that had traditionally been the preserve of students' associations, further bringing into question their relevancy and their income stream. These concerns are especially stark at four universities where services that had previously been run by the students' association had been taken over by university managers, including the running of clubs, food on campus or student space.

Under these conditions of voluntary student membership and a marketised environment of service agreements, the position of students' associations appears to have become significantly weakened and vulnerable. Student officers characterised their support as 'insecure' (5 respondents) and 'precarious' (3), with one student officer going so far as to describe the situation as an 'existential crisis' for students' associations. At two universities, in particular, respondents argued that their university had 'deliberately' sought to 'undermine' the financial security and independence of the students' association. At these universities, interview participants used language like 'squeezing out', 'tried to knock them over', 'hostile' and 'fucked them over and over again' to describe the university's approach towards students' associations. Contracts and service agreements were described as key tools to ensure the compliance of students' associations, with respondents characterising them as 'controlling' (6 respondents), 'distrustful' (3), 'very specific' (2) and 'invasive'. At one university, student officers described their authority as having been undermined by the university, who demanded that the students' association 'prove' the extent to which they 'represented' the views of students.

### 5.6.1 How has the role of students' associations changed?

To consider the impact of these *demands* on students' associations, respondents in 62 interviews were asked if and how they thought the students' association had changed (see Interview Guide Question 3.8, Appendix 4). Although there was some divergence among respondents regarding their experience of this change, 63% of students who had been at university for three or more years shared a belief that recent changes to students' associations had been 'drastic' or 'huge'. As Alex (Victoria) put it, 'it is kind of crazy to think how much it has changed'. Among these interview participants, three major shifts in the role of students' associations were identified, summarised in Figure 15.

Figure 15 How has the role of students' associations changed?



The first change identified by students was that the priorities of students' associations had become increasingly aligned with those of university managers (41 respondents). These interview participants suggested that students' associations increasingly sought to work *with*, rather than against, university managers. Corroborating this reported alignment was student officers' descriptions of their

relationship with university managers. At all but one of the universities, current student officers framed their interactions with university managers in positive terms: 'we've got a really close relationship'; 'our partnership is really productive and supportive'; 'our partnership is mutually respectful: we respect them, they respect us'. At two universities, student officers illustrated the closeness of their relationship by volunteering that the student executive went to dinners with their vice chancellor throughout the year. The shared goals these student officers identified were improving student experiences of university and projecting a positive image of the university to the wider community.

The second change suggested by respondents was that students' associations had become more 'professional' in their approach (39 respondents). When prompted, students explained that indicators of this professionalism were a growing number of 'slick' and 'smart' campaigns (22 respondents), an increase in outsourcing of events to external professional companies (15) and a greater involvement of long-term paid staff in the day to day running of associations (13). In part, this professional approach appeared to be considered necessary to be considered 'responsible' and 'trustworthy' by university managers and to meet service agreement outcomes and key performance indicators. This demand to be professional did appear to cause tension for some student officers (8 respondents). As Andrew explained:

Andrew                   ... it is such a conflict of interest for student presidents who have to advocate for students and could be occupying registries and clock towers, but at the same time have to be professional and negotiate sometimes multi-million dollar service agreements.

Nevertheless, student officers tended to suggest that they had little option but to adopt a professional approach to ensure that the university did not further undermine their association. As one student officer summarised: 'they could pay an agitator to deliver a service or they could just internalise it. It makes no sense for them if they're having a problem with the students' association to keep funding them to do something they don't want to do'.

Besides gaining the trust of university managers, other student officers also argued this professionalism was necessary to meet the *demands* of student members (12 respondents). These interview participants suggested that student members wanted a 'credible' students' association that helped to 'strengthen' the 'reputation' of the university. One student officer, Clara, tied these apparent attitudes to the rise of consumerist expectations among fee-paying students when discussing the changes to her students' association:

- Sylvia            In your view, how has the role of the students' association changed?
- Clara             There's a few things. Most obviously, I'd say we're much more professional and responsible in our approach.
- Sylvia            What do you mean by that?
- Clara             Well, in the past a lot of the students' association people were busy fighting the university and, like, protesting for the sake of protesting. And that's great, I think there's definitely room for that. But that sort of approach is not as relevant for students today. Like what matters to students is that they're paying, you know, crazy amounts of money for a degree. They don't want to be told that their uni is crap. And they don't want a students' association that is undermining the reputation of the university that's giving them that degree.

Whether Clara's perceptions of changes in student attitudes reflect actual shifts in the student body is unclear. What was significant here was that student officers considered the expectations of the student body as a whole to have changed, and this belief appeared to contribute to greater aversion among student officers, like Clara, towards engaging in actions that they believed might potentially diminish the 'value' or 'reputation' of their members' qualifications.

The third shift identified by respondents was the increasing adoption of non-partisan or non-political stances by students' associations (33 respondents). Most explicitly, at four different associations, seven student officers in interviews outright rejected the relevancy of 'politics' for students and defined their role primarily as 'providing services' to the student body and improving the student experience. The extent of this belief was demonstrated in the startling step taken by one students'

association that had banned all 'political' clubs on campus to ensure that students, and by extension the association, were not considered 'political'. This ban included youth wings of political parties as well as special-interest or advocacy groups. Student officers at that university argued that political clubs were 'not what we are about'. Yet my interactions with students at that university suggested there was an underlying appetite for political clubs, at least among some students, and to ban them outright is a significant restriction of rights to participation.

Although not as explicit, non-partisan or non-political stances were also reflected in the increasingly uncontroversial issues that students' associations at other universities pursued (18 respondents). At four universities, these students commented that when their students' association adopted a political stance, it was usually about uncontentious and non-divisive issues that all students and the university could agree on, such as improving student flats, changing local alcohol laws or providing cheaper public transport. This extract from Haley illustrates this perspective:

Haley                   ... the campaigns that the students' association is working on are not politically divisive at all, like having warmer flats. Like nobody would disagree with that if you were left or right. Whereas in the past it would be asset sales or universal student allowance; that type of thing.

The student officers in this sample could be remarkably candid that this non-controversial approach was in large part to pacify the *demands* of the university. Of the 20 student officers interviewed, 15 openly said that the more 'political' they were perceived to be by university managers, in terms of challenging the university and advocating for students, the 'less likely' they were to get funding. Student officers tended to be conscious of the trade-offs they made regarding independence and ability to campaign. For instance, Josh argued that 'In terms of the issues we take, we do have to consider that, um, aspect to it when they are the primary funder. And so that does, you know, moderate it'. Another student put it more bluntly: 'you can't be radical because you don't control the money' (Johanna).

This non-confrontational approach was also illustrated in the approach adopted by students' associations when contentious issues did arise (12 respondents). At five

universities, there appeared to be a preference for dealing with potentially divisive issues privately 'in a dark room' with managers, rather than campaigning publically alongside students. While maintaining a positive relationship with the university and appearing 'professional' and 'credible', these student officers considered this an effective and influential strategy. Although these student officers acknowledged they did not directly assist student movements and might appear distant, they argued that they were indirectly supporting these groups by using their influence associated with being 'at the table' to be able to directly negotiate with university managers. Christina, for example, argued that her association had found new niches where they could maintain their 'credibility' while also shaping the political environment, saying 'there's some things we can do that others can't, and vice versa'.

Besides appealing university managers, a non-partisan or non-political stance seemed to be adopted to ensure students' associations did not alienate students. The demand that students' associations represent *all* students as potential members appeared to contribute to hesitation among some student officers from engaging in contentious political issues. In interviews, respondents spoke about the areas in which students' associations appeared especially beneficial for members, and which they believed should be further emphasised. Interview participants were particularly enthusiastic about some of the specific services that students' associations provided, such as student-run events (52 respondents), welfare, particularly hardship grants, food parcels and free breakfasts during exam time (43) and facilitating student clubs (38). However, in discussing these strengths, it is notable what respondents did *not* mention, namely the advocacy, campaigning or 'activist' roles that have been traditionally performed by New Zealand students' associations. Of the 20 student officers interviewed, 13 argued that they thought the advocacy or activist functions of associations had become less important to students: 'it is usually things like events and orientation that they really value ... but they don't really get the political side of it or the lobbying, campaigning side' (Valerie). Suzanne argued that 'students aren't really interested in the politics side of things, so there's not much point us fighting, you know, an uphill battle like that, it's better that we focus on what we do well'. Given this

perceived shift, student officers appeared to be reluctant to broach political issues to members who seemed to have 'no real interest in them anyway'.

Perhaps the most striking example of this cautiousness was a recently held debate at Victoria University, described by five respondents, in which the students' association had been petitioned to make its stance on abortion formally pro-choice. In recounting the debate, these respondents argued the 'vast majority' of students probably supported the motion. However, these students also worried that this 'vast majority' was not the same as 'all students'. So while these students may have personally supported the motion, they worried that the stance would 'not sit right' with 'all' students, particularly the more conservative or religious students. They therefore thought that the students' association should not pass the motion as not all students supported it. As one student described, 'there were some students who were, like, I support it but [...] there are some students that don't support it, so I don't know if we should be doing that because they're, you know, entitled to their views. It was a very respectful thing'.

Many interview participants appeared to consider this greater focus on the needs of student members to be an improvement. Of the 62 students who discussed students' associations in interviews, 43 respondents argued that, overall, the changes to students' associations in the post-voluntary student membership era had been positive. Comparisons were often drawn between contemporary students' associations and those in the recent past (27 respondents). Previously, students' associations were perceived to have been dominated by 'political party hacks', 'careerists' or 'activist types' that they felt were 'not your average student'. Students' associations were also claimed to needlessly 'fight' the university and get 'distracted' by topics 'irrelevant' to the student body. By contrast, the changes were argued to have 'forced' students' associations to 'think more broadly' and act in a 'less entitled' and 'more constructive' manner. In addition, the 'type' who became involved in students' associations was said to have become 'more diverse' and 'normal', and that elections were more meaningful with greater diversity of candidates.

### 5.6.2 A politicising 'hub'?

There are some striking parallels between how students' associations collectively appeared to respond to the *demands* they faced, and the accounts of individual students of how they personally negotiated the *demands* in their lives that were discussed earlier. Like the apparent application of the 'precautionary principle' to political action among some students, students' associations also appeared to pursue issues that were perceived as uncontroversial, non-partisan or non-political to avoid estranging university managers or potential student members. There was a similar emphasis on adopting 'professional' approaches among individual students and collectively in students' associations to appear 'credible' and not harm future opportunities.

The changes to students' associations in New Zealand and the apparent diminishing of the activist role suggests that students' associations may no longer seek to 'politicise' contemporary students in a manner that might be anticipated. As discussed in Chapter 2, social network theories have conventionally characterised students' associations as a 'foci' of social networks that can form a 'hub' for facilitating student political engagement and instilling a more 'activist' orientation in students (Crossley 2008; Crossley & Ibrahim 2012; Hensby 2013). However, like studies of students' unions in the United Kingdom and Australia (Brooks et al. 2015; Rochford 2014), the New Zealand experience suggests that students' associations may not fulfil this role in contexts of marketised university environments and voluntary student membership. Like these studies, the significant power imbalance between university managers and students' associations in New Zealand appears to significantly limit the capacity of associations to launch a forceful critique of universities or of local and national policies, even if some student officers wished to. The 'hub' of social networks around students' associations is also not necessarily controlled or facilitated by students. In most universities, managers appear to have come to moderate the relationships *between* students via service agreements and through the intervention of permanent staff employed by the university to work with the associations. Although some students'

associations still run student clubs and societies, others have lost control of this role entirely to university managers.

Moreover, some students' associations in New Zealand appear to actively discourage students from political participation. In this sample, most explicit were the student officers who claimed outright that their association was 'non-political' in the interest of maintaining positive relationships with the university. However, more subtle forms of discouragement also seem to be offered by student leaders who privately express support for student political action, but conduct the students' association's engagement with these political issues almost exclusively behind closed doors, away from the public eye. Rather than demonstrating solidarity with student resistance, some student officers in this sample appeared to deliberately distance their association from these student movements, and generally lent little – if any – public support and legitimation to these groups. This apparent disconnect is corroborated by the accounts of students in this sample who had been active in protest groups, and described the student body as being 'hollowed out' as a result of lack of support from students' associations (9 respondents). These students characterised the stance of students' associations as offering a type of 'meaningless sympathy' or 'totally gutless support'.

The student officers interviewed tended to claim this restraint helped strengthen the credibility and professionalism of their association, and consequently believed they were listened to and respected by university managers more than their more radical predecessors. However, there seems to be clear restrictions on this influence. In a voluntary student membership environment, some level of financial independence appears to be granted by universities to students' associations only with the implicit, but sometimes explicit, understanding that the goals of the association must be aligned with those of the university. The uncontroversial and narrow scope and focus usually pursued by students' associations in their political claims suggests that, even where student officers considered themselves to have some influence, in practice their power is very restricted.

## 5.7 Summary

This chapter examined the *demands* students experienced in contemporary university environments. At an individual level, the chapter opened by considering the multiple and overlapping 'pressures' and 'trade-offs' described by respondents as part of being a student. As I argued, these *demands* appear to limit the capacity of some students to participate politically, and informs a preference among many participants for political action that is cautious and uncontroversial. Closer examination of student attitudes towards debt further suggests there are significant differences among students regarding the extent to which they are able to participate on campus, both academically and socially. There also seems to be a tendency for students to treat their circumstances as individual, rather than collective, problems. I then analysed the *demands* experienced by students' associations, especially following the progressive introduction of voluntary student membership. In this context, I argued students' associations seem to be increasingly aligned with the priorities of the university, professionalised in their approach and tend to adopt non-partisan or non-political stances.

The *demands* students encountered, both individually and collectively, have strong resonance with political economy theories, and support challenges to agency theories that treat students as unencumbered individuals in accounting for their political action. In particular, the analysis presented brings into question the claim that student political action is informed by their material well-being. To the contrary, the political action of the students in this study appears to be influenced more by an *absence* of time and adequate financial support. Student attitudes are also suggestive of a need for greater nuance in political economy theories, especially relating to debt. While high levels of debt have long been identified as a source of risk in the literature, the experiences described by respondents suggests that the decision *not* to have debt may be just as profound for students.

For understanding student political action, the *demands* discussed in this chapter present a counterweight to the political attitudes and aspirations described in Chapter 4. Where student *desires* are suggestive of an underlying disaffection, instability and

potential volatility in student political agency, the *demands* students experience appear to contribute to a preference for political action that is cautious, avoids confrontation and is non-partisan or non-political. As will be examined in greater depth in the next chapters, these *demands* also seem to inform a politics that, in its emphasis on appearing professional and respectful, tends to measure itself by the standards of others. That said, while these *demands* appear to influence student attitudes towards political agency, these pressures do not necessarily mean that students are unthinking or uncritical as political actors. The next chapter considers these critical views among students by examining the third experience that appears to contribute to student political action, which I describe as *doubts*.

## CHAPTER SIX – DOUBTS

*I think people are somewhat afraid of politics, but it is more just in a not knowing how to tackle it sense.*

*~ Margot (Victoria)*

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters examined student *desires* for different types of politics and the *demands* they faced as students in contemporary university environments. In this chapter, I consider a third experience expressed by interview participants, which I describe as *doubts* in an era of political ambiguity. As I will argue, these *doubts* are suggestive of critical questioning and rethinking of political action among New Zealand students. However, I also suggest these *doubts* appear to contribute to hesitation and insecurity among some students about participating politically.

The *doubts* expressed by interview participants seemed to be widely felt. The chapter begins by examining student *doubts* about the effectiveness of political action, both regarding parliamentary politics, as touched on in Chapter 4, but also for other forms of participation beyond the ballot box. I then consider the often highly critical views among students of the validity of political arguments made by other actors, as well as their own. Discussion then moves to examine student *doubts* about the wider political community that they are part of as political actors. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of student *doubts* for social network theories that describe students as ‘depoliticised’.

## 6.2 'What's the point?' Reassessing the efficacy of political action

In a conversation with Greta, a second-year student studying health science at the University of Otago, I asked about her experience of voting for the first time in the previous election. Initially, Greta answered that voting was 'really important' and that she had 'encouraged' some of her friends to do so:

Sylvia                The last election would have been your first time voting, right?

Greta                 Yep.

Sylvia                What was that like?

Greta                 Yeah, it was cool. Voting is, um, really important, like, what the government does affects how you live your life and stuff, so it was neat to get to vote. Actually, before the election, I talked about it with my friends, and some of them weren't that interested, but I encouraged them to go and we all went to the election place together. It was quite fun actually.

However, as her response progressed, Greta's argument changed its focus. Rather than describing voting as a responsibility, Greta without prompting began to critically question its effectiveness as a form of political participation:

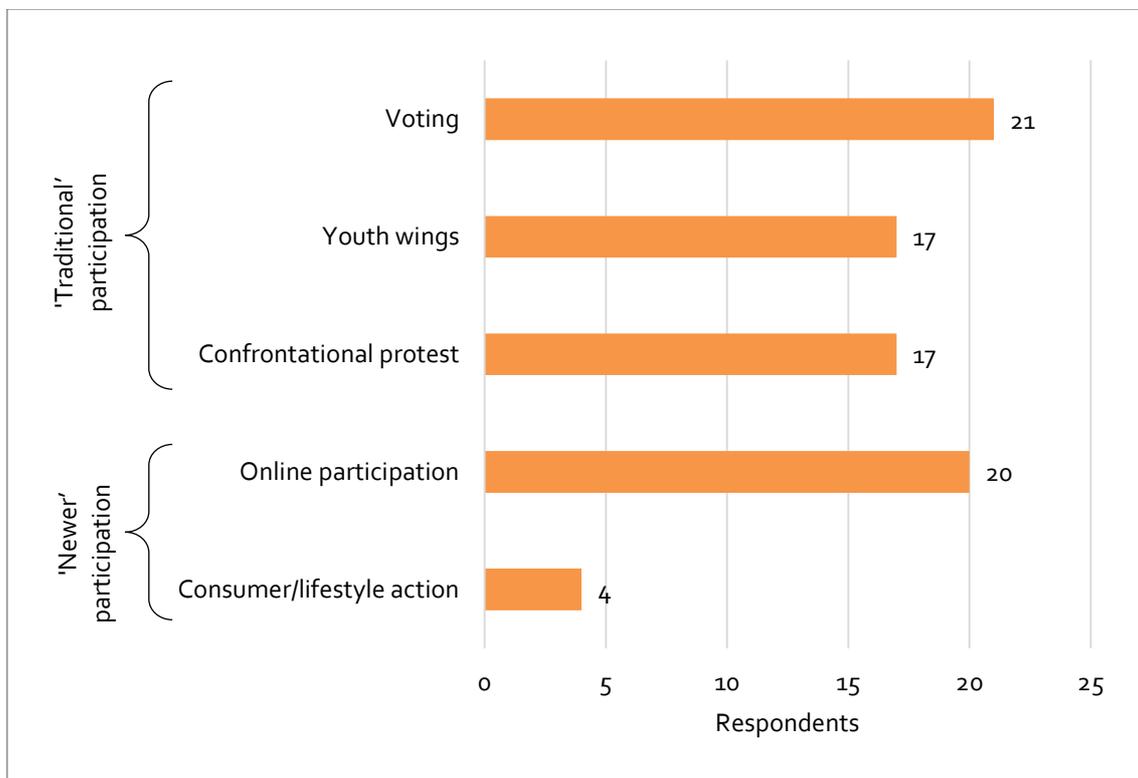
Greta                 I dunno, though. I guess, thinking back, there's all this emphasis put on voting and, like, I get it, voting's important and all that. But it's just this one thing. And I don't think it actually changes anything, you know? Since the election, pretty much nothing has changed anyway, it's all same old, same old. So it's kind of, like, what's the point? (Otago).

Greta's questioning of 'what's the point?' was echoed by other students in this sample. Without prompting, 20 other respondents described limitations of voting as a form of political participation. These *doubts* are related, but distinct from, the critical perspectives on formal politics reported in Chapter 4 (p. 84). Where those attitudes related to disaffection with the current practice of politics, here the *doubts* expressed by students appeared to be of the efficacy of voting as a form of political action. While still claiming that voting 'mattered', these students argued that it was a narrow form of participation in that it was 'only every three years' (7 respondents) and involved 'just checking a box' (4). As Beatrice (AUT) explained, 'you feel good about yourself, but on a scale of effort

required it's pretty minimal'. Similarly, five other interview participants spoke about voting forming a 'starting point' for their political activity, but that it did not 'do much' or 'make much of a difference'. Students also questioned the impact of a vote, with six respondents spontaneously speaking about being 'just one in, what, three million or so votes' (Sara, Canterbury) and questioning 'how much difference is your vote going to make, really?' (Lily, Waikato). For these students, their engaged but critical assessment of voting did not seem to be a barrier to their political participation, as all of these respondents reported voting at the last election.

*Doubts* about the efficacy of political action expressed by interview participants were not restricted to voting. As summarised in Figure 16, students volunteered *doubts* about a wide range of other forms of political participation, both within and beyond parliament, and 'traditional' and 'new'.

**Figure 16** *Doubts* about the efficacy of political action expressed by respondents



### 6.2.1 'Old school' participation: Youth wings and protest

One target of student *doubts* about efficacy was the youth wings of political parties. Although respondents were not asked directly about youth wings in interviews apart from nine students who were active in party politics, the topic was spontaneously raised by 24 other respondents in interviews. Among these students, there appeared to be an underlying scepticism of whether their involvement in youth wings would 'change much' politically (17 respondents). One of the most explicit examples of this doubt was offered by Ross, a post-graduate student at AUT. Having spoken enthusiastically and at length about an issue that mattered to him, I asked Ross whether he had considered becoming active in a political party, given his interests. His answer was abrupt: 'Ha! No way! They're not going listen to me, so why should I bother?' Although not as overt, other respondents expressed similar scepticism when speaking about youth wings. While six students acknowledged that some youth wings of political parties had achieved 'policy wins', interview participants tended to believe that their involvement would 'not do anything', suggesting instead that political parties were 'set in their way' and had already 'determined how things are going to be'.

Surprisingly, *doubts* about the efficacy of youth wings were voiced particularly strongly by members of youth wings themselves. While expressing frustration that other students were not more active in political parties, seven of the nine respondents in this sample who were active in youth wings volunteered frustrations that aspects of the 'party machinery' made it 'hard' or 'impossible' to 'change things'. These respondents, on both the political left and right, described the internal procedures of parties as 'slow' (4 respondents) and 'painfully bureaucratic' (3). Pogal's statement illustrates these frustrations:

Sylvia                      So what made your political views change?

Pogal                        Um ... I got really disillusioned once I started trying to get involved with politics because I felt that things were so slow. A lot of party structures were from 50 to 100 years ago and, like, having local electoral committees and policy branches, it is just ... it is so ... you know, there are moderating committees and councils ... It is so hard to

be an active member and feel like what you are contributing towards is making a difference.

A further source of disaffection for respondents was that their participation in the party was restricted almost exclusively to a supportive role, with their ideas and aspirations sidelined (6 respondents). Lily-Jane's argument was typical of these students:

Lily-Jane           .... we're good enough to be making phone calls and pamphlet dropping and all the ground work at election time, but they don't want to listen to us when it comes to our ideas about what we want our future to look like. [...] to not be listened to when we say, hey, this is what we want our future to look like ... it sucks. And sometimes you just want to walk away.

Without prompting, Pogal, Lily and three other respondents on both the political left and right said that they had become progressively 'disillusioned' (3 respondents), 'frustrated' (2) or 'cynical' (1) towards party politics during their involvement with youth wings. While these frustrations did not appear to have deterred them from participating, one student who had been active in more than one youth wing commented that 'it is hard to be an active member and feel like what you are contributing towards is making a difference'.

Besides party politics, interview participants also described *doubts* about the efficacy of 'old school' or 'confrontational' forms of protest or activism (17 respondents). Like when students spoke about voting, most of these respondents stated that they had participated in protests or demonstrations, claiming that 'I like a good protest as much as the next person' or 'I've been that person – it's great' (11 respondents). Nevertheless, these students went on to question whether contemporary protests would achieve 'outcomes' or 'results'. Although confrontational protest was described as 'fun', respondents also argued it could be 'pointless' (8 respondents), 'ineffective' (6), 'not constructive' (5), did 'not achieve much' (4) and that protesters could tend to 'march for the hell of it' (2). Six students similarly spoke of *doubts* that politicians were going to listen to the claims of protesters.

### 6.2.2 *Newer forms of participation*

Many students interviewed in this study also appeared to be sceptical of 'newer' ways of engaging politically. Online participation, such as via social media, was one form of political action that was questioned. Although no students were asked directly in interviews about participating in politics online, 37 respondents spontaneously spoke about social media or online forums in discussion. In many respects, the students in this sample appeared positive about the role of social media and politics online. Students considered online forums, especially Facebook and Loomio,<sup>10</sup> useful platforms for organising, both politically and non-politically (15 respondents). Coming across incidental political information online appeared to be valued by students, with nine respondents volunteering that online information had opened up opportunities for them or helped to change their political views. Online action groups were identified as being particularly successful at engaging students with select committee or local government submission processes (11 respondents). Students tended to be impatient when information or processes were not available online, from voting to room bookings on campuses (10 respondents).

Despite these benefits, the students in this sample also spontaneously volunteered *doubts* about the effectiveness of online forms of participation (20 respondents). Perhaps the most striking criticism was offered by Felicity (Otago). When discussing the approach used by her organisation to engage with members, Felicity argued without prompting that:

Felicity            We use Facebook lots for organising group events and, like, putting the information out there so people know we, you know, exist. But I think it is such crap when people go on about how young people are all doing politics online, blah, blah. It's, like, show us some respect; of course we know that 'liking' something on Facebook isn't going to change the world (Otago).

Although not as direct, other students in this sample similarly spoke about the shortcomings of online activism. Although respondents were not questioned directly

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<sup>10</sup> An online tool for group decision-making developed by New Zealanders.

about the topic, participants argued that online activism could tend to 'preach to the converted' (6 respondents), be part of an 'echo-chamber' (3) and encourage 'slacktivism' (2). Concerns were also raised that online submissions for local councils or select committees were vulnerable to being 'pushed to the side' (3 respondents) or 'ignored' (3) because of their uniform 'cut and paste' format. By contrast, some students spontaneously argued that face-to-face contact was more 'valuable', 'effective', 'powerful' or 'genuine' than 'arguing with people online' (11 respondents), with six members of organisations indicating that they had deliberately adopted strategies in an effort to encourage students to meet face-to-face.

There were also indications that the students in this sample were sceptical of 'consumer' or 'lifestyle' forms of political action. When respondents were asked how they had sought to act on the issues that mattered to them, if at all (Interview Guide Question 2.6, Appendix 4), only four respondents spontaneously reported that they had made personal lifestyle changes or consumer choices, such as 'buying right' (2 respondents), changing their diet (2) or going plastic-free (1). This finding was somewhat unexpected, given that over half of interview respondents identified environmental issues as an area which they were concerned about, and encouraging individual responsibility has been central to some high-profile environmental campaigns. However, the absence of these individual choices in the responses of students may be not so much a reflection of the actual actions of students, but rather what students considered significant and effective. In particular, although it was a small sample size, it was striking that all the students who discussed consumer choices readily questioned the extent to which these approaches could affect political change. Of the four students who reported making lifestyle changes, three spontaneously spoke about their limitations: 'when you look at the whole world it doesn't really mean much' (Renee, AUT); 'I was, like, yeah, I can do this, but it is not changing much' (Mary, Auckland). Without prompting, a further two of these participants also questioned the applicability of these approaches to students, given demands on their finances, living arrangements and time: 'well I bike, but that's just because it's cheap' (Donald, Lincoln); 'students can't afford a kilo of organic flour' (Margot, Victoria).

Despite these critical views about efficacy, there seemed to be an exception to the *doubts* expressed by students, and that was volunteering. Among the 70 students in this sample, no student spontaneously spoke critically of volunteering as a form of political action, an absence that was made more conspicuous by the *doubts* that were raised about almost every other well-recognised form of political participation. This apparent lack of *doubts* was intriguing given that volunteering was discussed in 22 interviews. The data available is not able to fully explain why. In part, it is likely that critical views of volunteering were present among some respondents in the sample, but that they were not discussed in interviews. However, it is possible that the often strongly felt aspirations of students to 'do something' to enact tangible change, discussed in Chapter 4, could contribute to students being less likely to view volunteering critically.

In examining student *doubts* about efficacy, it is necessary to clarify that these sceptical views did not appear to significantly restrict the political participation of students. For five students in this sample, *doubts* about the effectiveness of political action did seem to contribute to a reluctance to participate politically. One example was Ross, a post-graduate student at AUT. As was discussed earlier in this chapter (p. 169), Ross spoke with enthusiasm about an issue that mattered to him before rejecting youth wings of established political parties as a useful form of political action, arguing that they would not listen to his concerns so why should he 'bother'. I then asked Ross whether he had considered being politically active in any other ways. Without prompting, Ross volunteered that he thought protests were 'not up to much' and that online petitions were 'pretty useless'. After listing these *doubts*, Ross wryly commented that 'I guess I'm way too critical for my own good'. Four other respondents also identified that they were 'not convinced' or 'sold' on any particular forms of political action: 'there's nothing that I can really 100% get behind' (Rex, Otago).

However, for most students who expressed *doubts* about efficacy, this critical approach did not seem to deter their involvement; they participated despite their *doubts*. Apart from youth wings, all but eleven respondents who expressed *doubts* of the effectiveness raised them about activities that they also reported engaging with, whether

that was voting, attending a protest, joining an organisation, signing a petition, making a submission or recycling. This participation in conjunction with identified *doubts* about that action brought a degree of ambivalence to student accounts of their participation. As discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 113), respondents could be enthusiastic advocates for the organisations or action they were part of, including wishing other students would be similarly active. However, they also tended to be highly critical and matter-of-fact about their involvement, such as arguing that they were ‘just being realistic’ or ‘under no illusions’ about the impact of their participation.

### 6.3 Questioning the validity of political arguments

Student *doubts* were not restricted to the efficacy of political action, but also appeared to entail an underlying questioning of the validity or legitimacy of political arguments made by other actors. One of the most striking indicators of this critical approach to political arguments were the frequent rejections among students of what they considered to be overly ‘simple’ claims made by other actors, whether that was political leaders, media commentators or other students. These statements, made in passing throughout interviews, were typical of 42% of respondents:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| Trevor | Let’s not descend into hyperbole (Auckland).  |
| Sara   | It’s not black and white [...] there’s always another side to the story (Canterbury). |
| Renee  | I don’t buy that argument, it’s too easy (AUT).                                       |
| Jane   | Yeah ... I’m not convinced, aye (Massey).   |
| Donald | I don’t know much about it, but I know it’s not that simple (Lincoln).                |

These statements that ‘it’s not that simple’ resonate with findings reported in Chapter 4 (p. 120-121) that students valued ‘hearing both sides’ of the story in political discussions, particularly from people with different experiences or opinions from themselves.

One target of student *doubts* about the validity of political arguments were the claims made by politicians. These *doubts* have already been touched on in Chapter 4 (p. 84-85). Amongst the students in this sample, there appeared to be underlying scepticism

of the claims made by politicians, which was not necessarily expressed as disillusionment or alienation, but rather a willingness to question and doubt their arguments and motives. As noted, this scepticism did not appear to detract from a belief among students that New Zealand's democracy mattered, including among those respondents who described themselves as 'not political'. Rather, students appeared to consider formal politics important, but described 'being realistic' about party politics as currently practised, both on the political left and right. Far from naïve, students described taking 'into account' the 'agendas' of some politicians (8 respondents) or accepting their views 'with a grain of salt' (2). In interviews, 14 respondents similarly spoke about the opinions of politicians being 'biased', suggesting their claims were 'just their view', 'that's just them' or 'of course they're going to say that'. Students spontaneously spoke about media bias and ownership (9), the involvement of spin doctors and lobbying in politics (3) and tight controls on what MPs could say and do (2).

Outside of parliament, the students in this study also expressed *doubts* about the political arguments and claims made by other students on campus. Respondents appeared especially critical of the arguments and claims of two groups on campus, in particular. The first were members of youth wings of political parties. In many respects, student criticisms of youth wing members could be harsher than towards politicians. All but three interview participants who volunteered information about youth wings spoke about 'negative perceptions' of youth wings on campuses. At the heart of this distrust appeared to be a belief that youth wing members were 'party hacks' that were 'blindly following the party's urging' (16 respondents). One of the more striking examples of these *doubts* were two respondents who argued that students in youth wings were 'brainwashed':

Lee                    I have this friend who is very, like, I dislike the National Party. He is an Islander. So I asked him, why do you dislike the National Party? And he didn't really explain, he just said, oh, they are crap, it is rubbish. So I was, like, why? And he couldn't explain to me. So I made my own assumption that he probably doesn't know what the National Party really is, probably he has been raised in his family and ...

Abraham            Brainwashed.

Lee                    Yeah, brainwashed, fed information that they are crappy (Massey).

Although other respondents did not argue youth wing members were 'brainwashed', they were similarly critical that the political views of party members were 'inflexible', 'close-minded', 'biased', 'blindly aligned', 'lacking independent thought' and that they would 'always criticise the other side no matter what'. For example, William (Victoria) argued that 'I think it is actually quite sad that some people assume that their political party is always correct, never really give it the opportunity to, you know, prove itself', while Rex (Otago) claimed that 'party hacks are just close-minded, they'll defend their party line no matter what, even when there are obviously some problems'. None of these respondents who spoke about these criticisms had participated in the youth wings of political parties.

In expressing *doubts* about the political views of youth wing members, interview participants questioned their motives as political actors (18 respondents). These respondents claimed that youth wing members were active for the 'wrong reasons', namely for 'personal gain' rather than a 'genuine' desire for change. For nine students, these *doubts* about the motives of youth wing members appeared to be linked to their *doubts* about the effectiveness of political action. For instance, Sara (Canterbury) argued that membership in youth wings did not 'actually achieve anything, so why would they be part of that other than for their own gain?' Like Sara, other participants argued youth wing members were suggested to be 'careerists' (9 respondents), 'in it for the CV' (6) or were 'people who like the game' (3). Five students also suggested that certain 'types' or 'personalities' tended to become active in youth wings, although these students did not specify what these 'types' were.

The extent of student *doubts* about the motives and claims made by youth wing members seemed to be considerable. Of the nine students in this sample who were active in youth wings, eight respondents on both the political left and right identified 'negative perceptions' of youth wings among students as a key challenge that they faced as an organisation. More strikingly, these *doubts* appeared to contribute to difficulty among youth wing members interacting with other students. Without prompting, five of these

students stated that they actively obscured their involvement in youth wings from their peers or hesitated to let other students know of their participation. For example, Michael reflected that it was 'quite a challenge if you are sort of involved in politics, just meeting people and telling them that you are involved', while Pogal suggested that being a member of a youth wing 'limits your ability to interact with other people sometimes, it makes it hard'.

Besides youth wings, the second group on campus that was the target of student *doubts* were 'old school' protesters or 'activist-y types' (15 respondents). Like discussion of youth wings, students were not directly asked about so-called 'old school' protesters, with respondents voluntarily sharing these attitudes in interviews. As touched on previously, these students tended to indicate that they had previously attended a protest or were 'sympathetic' of the political claims of protesters (11 respondents). However, they were also critical of the arguments presented by protesters. These students argued that claims made by protesters could be too absolute by being 'overly negative' or that they 'exaggerate how bad things are'. These statements were made by two students when describing 'old school' protesters:

- Lily                    I totally get what they are complaining about, it worries me too. But they're like everything's bad, rah, rah, everything's horrible. I don't want to rain on their party or anything, but clearly it is not all that bad! There's just no balance to it, you know? (Waikato).
- Max                    [The protesters] were, like, the government is terrible and all evil, that sort of stuff. Okay, I get that it could be better, and in many ways I support what they say, but actually, for the most part, I think it is just a bunch of people in a shitty situation doing the best they can (Victoria).

Like criticisms of youth wing members, these students spoke with frustration that protesters' claims lacked the nuance they believed needed to be present in politics. For example, respondents argued that the claims of activists were 'predictable' (6 respondents), 'dogmatic' (2), 'automatic' and the 'same old stuff', or that protesters 'always take the same argument no matter what' and were 'deaf to any argument that is contrary to their world-view'.

Similar to youth wing members, the motives of so-called 'activist types' were brought into question by some interview participants (12 respondents). This scepticism appeared to be informed both by student *doubts* about the effectiveness of protest action, discussed earlier, but also by the perceived personality of 'old school' protesters. These statements illustrate the focus on the character and motives of protesters:

Tom                    Even though the people might change, almost like a reincarnation, there is always the same type of people fulfilling the same role. [...] they really comprise of Type 1 personalities. And they're more emotionally driven, more reactionary, more knee-jerk (Auckland).

Bob                    It's a bit mean, but actually I think a lot of the protest-y types are more about drawing attention to themselves than actually, you know, changing things (Canterbury).

Alex                    ... you've obviously got your radical lefties who have kind of petered out a bit because they were very dependent on dominant personalities. You know, the Vic uni versions of John Minto.<sup>11</sup> But it is not very sustainable because it is too reliant on personalities so when they're not there, there is no one to organise it. So they've done little protest-y things (Victoria).

Like these respondents, nine other students argued that 'activist types' were 'out of touch' and had a 'misguided idea that we're still in the 1980s'. These respondents suggested that protesters were more 'focused on their little niche issues' or 'scoring points on things that are, like, irrelevant for everyone else', rather than focusing on 'what students actually care about'.

While the students in this sample could be distrustful and even hostile towards political actors who they judged to be insincere or inflexible, they tended to respond much more positively to political actors that they perceived to be 'genuine'. Without prompting, enthusiasm for 'genuine' politics was discussed explicitly by 11 respondents. These examples were typical of these students:

Margot                I think there is a huge value in our generation for being genuine [...] They like people doing things for genuine reasons that they believe in at heart (Victoria).

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<sup>11</sup> John Minto has been a prominent New Zealand left-wing activist since the 1980s.

- Lily                    When they're kind of genuine about doing things, when students see that they really care, then students engage. It's not that hard, really (Waikato).
- Xavier                 If students see that they are actually genuinely concerned, that they're not just scoring points or, um, using it for their own ends or something, then students will listen (Otago).

What students specifically meant by 'genuine' was ambiguous. Some students spoke about being 'genuine' in terms of 'authentic' motivations, such as reporting admiration of other students or political actors who were considered to 'really care' about particular issues (13 respondents) or who were 'sincere' (5), 'real' (3) and 'honest' (2) in their approach. Interview participants similarly approved of action that was for 'genuine reasons', particularly those that were 'well-researched' (7 respondents), based on 'independent evidence' (4) or were 'clear cut'.

In discussing student *doubts* about the motives and arguments of other actors, it needs to be acknowledged that although interview participants could be critical of the claims of other political actors, they also tended to report equal if not greater doubt of the validity of their *own* political claims. These *doubts* have been touched on in Chapter 4 (p. 89-90), when it was noted that 61% of the 44 students who spoke about frustrations with formal politics also volunteered that their own knowledge was limited. Similar *doubts* were raised by respondents in a range of arenas beyond parliamentary politics. During interviews, 57 respondents or 81% of interview participants at some point questioned their knowledge and interpretation of the topics at hand, qualifying their (often articulate) responses with statements such as 'I'm not sure', 'I don't really know' or 'this isn't my speciality'. On average, these qualifiers were raised eight times in interviews. Some students were also acutely aware of 'bias' within their knowledge. In addition to eleven respondents who directly described themselves as 'more strongly biased' towards a particular view, other students qualified their reported knowledge as 'anecdotal' (13 respondents), their 'own perspective' (9), 'maybe it's just me' (5) or being 'not sure what it's like for others' (11). Only 13 students or 18% in this sample did not report any *doubts* about their political knowledge. Of these latter students who appeared

confident in their views, all were highly active in a political club or protest group on campus.

#### **6.4 *Doubts as rethinking political agency***

The *doubts* about effectiveness and the validity of political claims expressed by the students in this sample raise several implications for theory that are worth pausing to explore. Beginning with agency theories, student *doubts* about the efficacy of participating in party politics support arguments that non-participation in formal politics cannot be understood by solely focusing on the perceived information or motivation deficit of individuals (Henn et al. 2005; Kimberlee 2002; Hay 2007; Pilkington & Pollock 2015). Especially when read together with student disaffection with formal politics, discussed in Chapter 4, the students in this sample did not appear to be lacking as citizens, but rather seemed engaged with political debates, with a healthy scepticism of its practice.

Listening to these critical attitudes suggests that accounts of non-participation in formal politics need to take into consideration the institutions and processes that appear to inform frustration among students. In Chapter 4, it was discussed that the students in this study appeared far from disinterested in parliamentary politics. However, most students interviewed, on both the political left and right, tended to consider political parties to be ‘stuck in their ways’ and not necessarily responsive to their concerns. They expressed strong concerns that party messages did not contain the nuance that they believed needed to be present in approaches to political issues. These critical attitudes have strong resonance with those reported by studies of young people in Europe and North America (Sloam 2008; Loader 2007; Mycock & Tonge 2012). In the New Zealand context, it is striking that these *doubts* were voiced both by students who were not active in youth wings *as well as* those who were. Indeed, the youth wing members interviewed were some of the most vocal critics of political parties in this sample, questioning whether they were being listened to and whether the party took their views seriously. That youth wing members themselves raised *doubts* of effectiveness suggests that there

is substance to student scepticism and criticism of the responsiveness of political parties to their concerns.

However, student responses in interviews also suggest that these *doubts* of efficacy cannot be considered the sole driver that informed their reluctance to participate in young wings. Here it is necessary to turn back to the analysis of Chapter 5, and the *demands* students experienced in contemporary university environments. The students in this study tended to be sceptical of the efficacy of youth wings. However, as discussed, they appeared to be anxious about the consequences of participating in youth wings on their future chances and choices (p. 133). Unless they were planning to have a career in party politics, being active in a youth wing was believed, at best, to be unhelpful for future employment opportunities post-study, particularly but not exclusively on the political left. At worst, students were concerned that participation in youth wings might seriously detract from their prospects, especially regarding employment. It was considered much safer to stay away. Both these experiences of *doubts* and *demands* seemed to inform the apparent rejection of participating in youth wings among students in this sample. Recently, however, agency theories have tended to primarily focus on the critical attitudes of students, giving less attention to their fears (e.g. Mycock & Tonge 2012). While this emphasis opens out analysis of the institutional arrangements that may be contributing to non-participation in formal politics among young people and students, it cuts off analysis of the particular policies and ideologies that also appear to be informing their hesitation to participate.

In the case of youth wings, what is especially notable is that the intersection of experiences of *doubts* and *demands* seemed, together, to contribute to mistrust towards other students who are members of youth wings. When discussing youth wings with respondents, it was startling how extensive the suspicion and even antagonism of some participants was towards their peers who were youth wing members. As touched on, this antagonism was to the extent that a majority of youth wing members in this sample described finding it difficult to interact with other students once they disclosed their participation in youth wings. This hostility was initially puzzling. Despite their

demographic and political differences, students tended to describe similar concerns and interests. When students discussed the issues that mattered to them, their responses held a high degree of consistency, including between those who reported mistrust of particular youth wings and the members of youth wings themselves. As examined in Chapter 4 (p. 113), students also described aspirations to meaningfully contribute to a political community or, as Luke (Canterbury) put it, to 'be part of something big'. These *desires* would seem to form a solid basis for participation in youth wings by students. Yet interview participants tended to be quick to characterise youth wing members as 'careerists' or 'party hacks' to the point where youth wing members reported difficulties interacting with other students.

Examining student attitudes suggests that their experiences of *demands* and *doubts* may inform this distrust. On the one hand, the *demands* students personally experienced and their anxiety about their future appeared to contribute to an assumption that members of youth wings were only active for self-interested purposes, at least in part, such as to further a career. Sara's (Canterbury) remark of 'why would they be part of it if not for their own gain?' reflects this belief. On the other hand, student *doubts* about the effectiveness of youth wings seemed to contribute to a perception that youth wing members must be 'blindly aligned' with a party line or unaware of the nuance and complexity of the political issues at hand. What is ironic about this assumption is that the youth wing members in this sample shared these *doubts*, if not more strongly than their peers.

This antagonism towards youth wing members suggests student *doubts* about efficacy and political arguments can potentially be divisive for students, and is returned to later in the thesis. However, student *doubts* of the efficacy of political action are also suggestive of a crucial third 'D' for understanding the experiences that inform student political action, in addition to *demands* and *desires*. Take the case of traditional forms of protest. At the opening of this thesis, it was noted that there does not seem to have been a notable increase in student protest in New Zealand, despite the apparent rise in student dissent internationally. Student attitudes provide insight into this seeming absence of

protest. A lack of protest does not appear to be simply a matter of apathy or deficit on the part of students, as suggested by student *desires* for different types of politics. Nor do their political aspirations seem to be undercut solely by the *demands* of being a contemporary student. Rather, a more complicated process appears to be at play in which students are expressing *doubts* about the efficacy of protest as a means of political change, including among students who have participated in protest.

A conversation with Mahe (Canterbury) helps to illustrate how all '3 Ds' appear to contribute to these attitudes towards protest. Throughout his interview, Mahe spoke about his discontent with the political status quo, which would seem ample motivation to participate in protest. However, as cited at the beginning of Chapter 5, Mahe also memorably spoke about the challenges of 'doing politics while being \$40,000 in debt, working two jobs and living in a mouldy flat'. These multiple *demands* that Mahe concisely described might seem an adequate explanation for why he had not participated in protests, despite his *desires* for political change. Yet when speaking about protest, Mahe then went on without prompting also to raise *doubts* about protest as a means of affecting change. For Mahe, protest was 'old school'. He was ambivalent about its effectiveness, questioning whether it would 'actually do anything' or if it would just be 'yelling at a brick wall'. All '3 Ds' appear to contribute to his perspectives.

Underlying student *doubts* about the effectiveness of political action appears to be an intriguing rethinking among students of what it means to express political agency in contemporary society. This apparent willingness to reconsider political action is returned to in greater depth in the next chapter. For now, there are two significant points that student *doubts* of effectiveness, and the validity of political claims, raise for agency theories of student political action.

First, the expressed *doubts* of students complicate accounts that suggest the rise of protest is related to disaffection at the ballot box. Particularly in notions like 'democratic phoenix' (Norris 2002, 2011), the relationship between frustration with formal politics and protest can implicitly be treated as somewhat assured: frustrated citizens will take to the streets. Yet the results of this study are an important reminder

that the relationship between disaffection with formal politics and protest is not necessarily automatic nor causative. The students in this sample were politically sceptical, but sceptical towards many types of politics, including protest. Indeed, the sceptical attitudes of the students in this study suggests that frustration with formal politics and protest *were* related for the students in this sample, but not in the causal way implicit in some agency theories. Rather, student frustration with formal politics and protest seems to be related, in that students seem to have *doubts* about both of them.

Second, the breadth of student *doubts*, including of 'newer' forms of participation, further brings into question some claims of alternative repertoire agency theories. In Chapter 4 (p. 112), I argued that students did not necessarily consider alternative repertoires to be an 'alternative'. Student *doubts* raise an additional challenge to claims such as Russell Dalton's (2008, p. 92-93) that young people are 'choosing' to adopt alternative forms of political action as they offer an 'expansion' of political agency. The students in this sample did describe participating in these different forms of political action. However, students also expressed *doubts* about its effectiveness. Students seemed far from convinced that these actions necessarily offered a more effective form of political action or an expansion of their agency. They tended to be quick to describe limitations with these alternative avenues of participation. These *doubts* are a crucial addition to alternative repertoire agency theories. That students appear to doubt their political action, including activities that they participated in, suggests that their approach is less of an unencumbered and confident adoption of these repertoires, and instead a contingent and unstable negotiation of different avenues of affecting change.

## **6.5 Doubts about community: Rethinking assumptions of students as political actors**

The discussion so far has focused on student *doubts* of the efficacy of political action and the political arguments of other political actors. I argued that these *doubts*, while potentially divisive, are suggestive of an underlying rethinking of political action among students. However, *doubts* also appeared to inform hesitancy and uncertainty among some of the students in this study.

One apparent contributor to this hesitancy has been touched on already. Earlier in the chapter (p. 174), I noted that students could be unsure of the validity of their political claims. In some cases, these *doubts* about knowledge appeared to contribute to cautiousness of participating politically among some respondents. For example, 17 students volunteered that they did ‘not know enough’ to be able to support and defend their views to others confidently or that they would ‘need to find out more’ before they became active politically. These responses were unexpected given that when asked how they sought to affect change on an issue that mattered to them, if at all, over half of these students also volunteered that they tried to ‘talk to others’, ‘have conversations’ or ‘pull people up’ about political issues. For these students, their willingness to participate in these discussions appeared to be restricted to particular fields where they felt confident in their knowledge. For instance, 11 respondents volunteered that they only discussed political topics with others when they felt ‘educated’, ‘well-informed’ or ‘knowledgeable’ about a field; ‘I’ll tell people my opinion but only when I feel I really know the subject’ (Annie, Otago).

Besides these personal *doubts* about knowledge, a more pervasive source of *doubts* among the students in this sample appeared to be uncertainty about the political community that they belonged to as political actors. Simply, respondents tended to be unsure of the political views of other students, and these *doubts* of community seemed to inform hesitancy among some students of participating politically. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how interview participants expressed these *doubts*, before considering the role of the university in informing these *doubts* and their implications for social network theories that suggest contemporary students are ‘depoliticised’.

In 59 interviews, participants were asked whether they thought other students shared their political views (see Interview Guide Questions 2.4, 2.9, Appendix 4). Among these respondents, a minority agreed that they thought ‘most’ other students shared their political views (13 respondents). These students typically argued that ‘people mostly believe the same things’ but that ‘we just have different paths to get there’ or that ‘they have different ways of doing that’. All but two of these students were highly active

in clubs on campus, and they included eight of the nine respondents in this sample who were active in youth wings.

For the remainder of the students in this sample, however, there was greater uncertainty of other students as political actors. One indicator was student *doubts* about what the political views of other students actually were. When asked whether they thought other students shared their political perspectives, 28 students or 47% indicated that they did not know what other students thought: 'It's hard to gauge' (Mary, Auckland); 'I have no idea' (Lily-Jane, AUT); 'I wouldn't really know' (Jane, Massey). Some students on both the political left and right remarked that they knew what their close friends or their 'bubble' thought and that they, therefore, tended to 'assume' that most students thought the same (13 respondents). However, these students were also quick to suggest that this perceived consensus was 'probably an illusion' (Pricilla, Lincoln) or something that was 'nice to pretend exists but probably doesn't' (Greta, Otago).

When elaborating on their *doubts* about the political views of other students, these interview participants made references to gaps between their expectations and their actual experiences as students. One aspect of this gap has already been discussed at the start of Chapter 4 (p. 79), when I discussed the perception among some respondents that being a student was 'supposed' to entail political activity and their disappointment that it had not happened 'like I thought it might' (19 respondents). Besides these unfulfilled expectations of political activity, interview participants also volunteered stereotypes of students as more 'left-leaning' than the rest of society, but that they felt that this perception no longer applied to contemporary students in New Zealand (13 respondents). Most of these participants suggested that students might be more left-leaning in relation to 'socially liberal' values, such as freedom of expression. For instance, students at six universities spontaneously spoke about the 'massive' support among students for the marriage equality legislation that passed in 2013. However, regarding economic values, participants doubted that contemporary students could be considered left-leaning. These responses were typical:

Chelsea I guess the general perception is that at university everyone is more liberal than in the rest of the world, but I don't know if that is true necessarily (Auckland).

Trevor I think there is quite a popular perception of students being a really distinct political segment [...]. But I don't know if the student vote necessarily is as much of a coherent thing as we like to think it is.

Instead, these respondents argued that student economic perspectives 'probably' reflected the wider population, with a high proportion of students on the political right as well as the political left. Respondents also made a distinction between 'liberal' arts students and 'right-wing' commerce or business students (17 respondents). As Paul (Auckland) summarised, 'if you're doing arts you'll probably support the Greens, if you're doing business or commerce probably more likely to support National'. However, in discussing these distinctions, ten of these respondents then went on to question their own assumptions, identifying that 'I've met right-wing students in my tutorials' or that 'I do know some business students that are more left-leaning'.

Perhaps because of these *doubts* about the political views of contemporary students, the topic of student political action appeared to be a source of interest for many participants. In interviews, 45% of the sample made passing remarks that they found the topics covered in discussion as 'interesting' or 'quite fascinating'. I was also surprised when a further 43 respondents indicated in their responses that they had previously thought about or discussed some of the questions that were being asked in interviews. While it is likely that this interest contributed to the decision of these students to participate in this project, it was striking that these students included 15 respondents who might be conventionally described as 'apathetic' in that they did not participate in any clubs or had not voted. For instance, Chelsea (Auckland), a student who was active in no clubs on campus, responded to a question about student political action that she had 'made a list about this the other day'. These statements are suggestive of an underlying appetite among the students in this sample to understand the cohort that they were part of as students.

Besides uncertainty of the political views of other students, interview participants appeared to feel isolated politically. Surprisingly, the students in this sample tended to believe that other students did not share their political views. In interviews, 59 students were asked about the extent to which they felt their views were similar or different to other students (see Interview Guide Question 2.9, Appendix 4). Of these students, 38 respondents or 64% reported that they felt that their political perspective was in the 'minority' on campus. This perception is somewhat ironic: a *majority* of students in this sample felt they were in the 'minority'. The following comments illustrate this perspective and were from students who indicated support for both left-wing and right-wing political parties:

Kurt                 I don't think that many students share my views, I'd say I'm in the minority. But I don't really know (Massey).

Sue                   I feel like a minority! Because I surround myself with people who are like-minded I sometimes think we are a majority, you know? (Canterbury).

John                 Um, I wouldn't be surprised if I was in the minority [...] but I haven't talked to many people about it (Massey).

Carly                 I've found friends, you know, I've got a really nice bubble [...]. Um, it is hard to tell. I wouldn't be in the majority group, definitely (Auckland).

That most students in this sample considered themselves in the 'minority' was unexpected. In particular, it runs against the finding, discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 92-93), that there was a surprising degree of similarity between the responses of students when asked what issues concerned or mattered to them, despite the diversity of the sample. It also appears contrary to the stated interest of students in New Zealand's democracy and debates of student (political) action, including those who described themselves as 'not political'. Yet while many respondents spoke positively about sharing political views with friends or in their 'bubble' (22 respondents), it was concerning how many respondents, both on the political left and right, described feeling politically 'isolated' (9), 'on my own' (3) and 'a bit like everyone is against you' (1).

Given these expressed *doubts* about the political community they were part of as students, I asked additional probing questions in interviews about whether, and in what ways, this uncertainty affected their political action, if at all. For a minority of students in this sample, *doubts* about the political perspectives of other students did not appear to substantially inform their political activities (11 respondents). These students spoke about feeling confident talking to other students about their political views, even if they did not know what other students thought: 'it's never bothered me' (James, Canterbury). These students were all highly active in clubs on campus, although over half were active in societies that were not related to politics.

Most respondents, however, claimed that they tended to be more cautious or hesitant revealing their political perspectives to other students who they did not know well. Especially striking were conversations with 22 respondents who described having a 'bubble' of friends as a political 'safety net'. These statements are typical of these interview participants and were from students who indicated support for both left-leaning and right-leaning political parties:

- Finn            I've got my close group of friends and I kind of stick by them. I guess I just know where I stand with them. I don't really talk about politics outside of that; you don't really know what you're going to get otherwise (AUT).
- Carly           I've definitely got my little bubble of arts students and then I try to only socialise with them because otherwise you get a bit depressed (Auckland).
- Lily            I have a really close bubble of friends, which is great because we're quite like-minded about this sort of stuff. And then I don't have to deal with all the others (Waikato).

Outside of their 'bubble' these students spoke about being much more reserved and 'guarded' when publicly expressing their political views, such as describing 'keeping my views to myself' or that 'I don't really tell people what I think'. These students volunteered that they were 'not confident' defending their views or that 'it makes me nervous' (11 respondents). They similarly expressed worry that in raising their views discussion might become 'confrontational' (8) and therefore 'awkward' (7), or that they

might inadvertently offend others (6): 'if I don't support the majority opinion then, you know, it might not sit well with some people' (Andre, Victoria). Among the students in this sample, 12 students volunteered that politics was a topic that they actively avoided talking about, unless asked directly, because they did not want to 'muck up friendships' or that 'you don't want that friction, so I just don't go there' (Annie, Otago).

Student discussion of 'bubbles' was corroborated by the descriptions of two students. Although from different universities, these respondents, Alex (Victoria) and Ross (AUT), volunteered similar characterisations of the particular networks that they believed formed among students in contemporary universities:

Alex [Students are] isolated to their network. So as an individual walking around, I would say they are all isolated from the people they're walking around, but they're not isolated alone. Like they're really highly connected, but to their bubble (Victoria).

Ross Students have all got their own network, I guess, and are often quite tight with them. But outside that your interactions are pretty minimal. So, like, you're only going to talk to the people in your bubble, but not necessarily other students around campus. You really have to go out on a limb to meet new people around here, which is kind of crazy when you think about it really (AUT).

These descriptions might appear at odds with some of the other analysis provided in this thesis. As discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 120), students tended to be enthusiastic about how diverse the student body was, and expressed enjoyment of connecting with others that had views different from their own and 'hearing the other side of the story'. Yet while enthusiastic about these interactions in theory, student discussion of their uncertainty of the views of other students and their characterisation of their friendships as 'bubbles' suggest that the extent to which these aspirations were actually practised may be limited.

### **6.5.1 'Isolated to their network': Making friends at university**

Respondent *doubts* about the community they were part of as students raises wider questions of the social networks among students in contemporary universities in New Zealand. To investigate these networks, respondents were asked in 55 interviews about

how easy they had found it to make friends or connections at university (see Interview Guide Questions 3.5, Appendix 4). Although there was significant variation in the descriptions among students of their experiences, 44 respondents at seven universities expressed concerns that they or other students had found it 'hard', 'challenging' or 'difficult' to make friends at university. Thirty of these students described worries that some students were 'isolated' or 'lonely' as a result of these difficulties. These concerns resonate with the expressed anxieties of respondents, discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 102), that some students, as well as people more generally, were becoming isolated or disconnected from communities.

Amongst the students who spoke about making friends at university, there were two dominant narratives or 'storylines' offered. The first group of students reported that they had personally found it quite straightforward to make friends at university (26 respondents). In discussing this ease, these students attributed it to some key elements of the university environment, for instance living in halls of residence in their first year (15) or having smaller classes (6), or their own personal choices, such as joining many clubs (9) or having an open personality (7). Nevertheless, these students also spoke about worries that other students might be finding it more difficult. This statement from Elizabeth was typical of these students:

Sylvia                      How easy did you find it to make friends and connections at university?

Elizabeth                 I found it easy, I guess because I am quite a friendly person and I'm not too shy around other people. And I was in the sorts of classes that were, you know, the types of classes that were, um, I don't know, taught in a way that encouraged discussion. [...] Although in saying that I think a lot of people find it quite difficult and find it quite isolated at university which is a shame and I am quite concerned about it because I feel like it should be a place where it is easy to make friends and to meet like-minded people (Victoria).

Among respondents, the students who considered it relatively easy to make friends were amongst the most active in clubs on campus, reporting involvement in an average of 2.5 clubs, compared to 1.7 amongst the sample as a whole. These students also tended to be active in key organisations on campus, with these respondents including 17 of the 20

students' association officers in this sample and eight of the nine interview participants who were active in youth wings.

A second, slightly larger group of respondents described finding it challenging to make new friends at university (29 respondents). For the most part, these students did not appear to be 'bowling alone' in the sense suggested by Robert Putnam's (2000) influential theory that a society that once 'bowled together' in extensive networks increasingly 'bowl alone'. Contrary to this account, interview participants did seem to have social networks, such as maintaining friendships from high school or through employment during term-time. However, these networks appeared not to be formed at or closely associated with their university. While these existing networks meant that these students described 'always having someone to sit with in class', they also claimed that they had not made many new friends at university as a result. Marianne, a first-year at Waikato University, illustrates this reliance on existing networks:

Marianne        I'm, like, in the science-y classes, so it is not really a social environment and so I just sit next to strangers and hope for the best and hope they are a nice person and talk to me. But I have a few friends in my classes already so I just sit with them so I haven't needed to make friends (Waikato).

While existing friendships appeared to form an initial buffer for students, a statement that was made with troubling frequency among these respondents was 'I didn't make new friends at university until third year', described by 19 respondents. One of these students was Bex, a fourth-year law and Māori studies student:

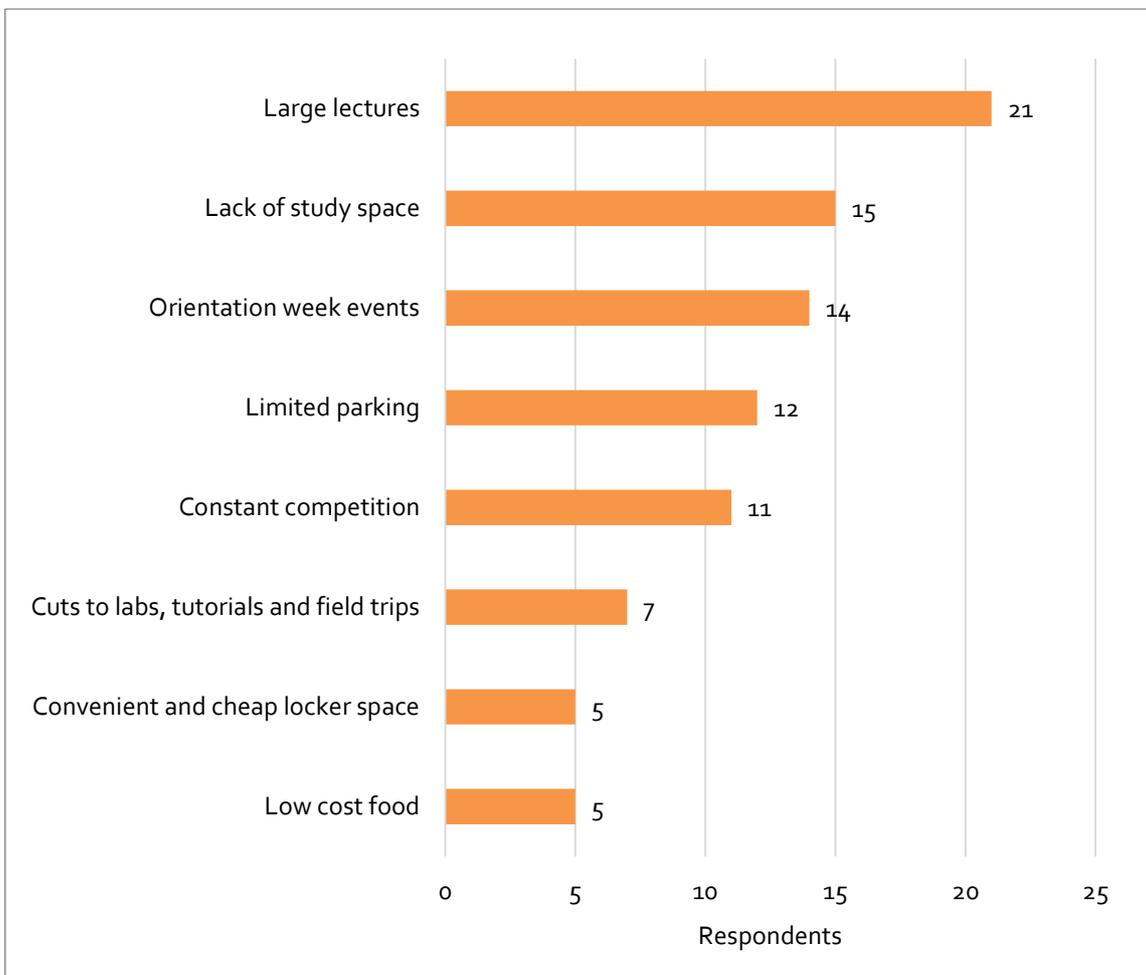
Bex                I actually didn't have many friends at uni until my third year. So I knew a lot of people from my classes and I talked to a lot of people and things, but I didn't actually have friends there. And it was my own downfall. I think it was because in, like, first year and second year I had a boyfriend who didn't go to university and so that is where I spent all my time and energy. And then when that was over it was, like, oh, shit, I've got no friends! (Victoria).

While these students might not have been 'bowling alone' as suggested by Putnam (2000), ten older students nevertheless reflected that their early years of university had

been 'lonely' (4 respondents), 'isolated' (2) and 'bleak' and that they did not feel like they 'fitted in'.

In expressing these regrets, respondents tended to individually 'blame' themselves for 'clinging' to their school friends or for being 'shy' (18 respondents). Chelsea (Auckland), for instance, claimed that 'it's my own fault', while Finn (AUT) suggested 'I should have made a bigger effort'. However, when prompted, interview participants volunteered specific elements of contemporary university environments that they believed contributed to these challenges, summarised in Figure 17 (see Interview Guide Question 3.6, Appendix 4).

**Figure 17** Elements of university environments that contributed to difficulties making friends identified by respondents



The most common aspect of university environments that respondents identified that made it challenging to make friendships was the teaching style (21 respondents). Large lectures, in particular, were described as ‘impersonal’ and not conducive to making lasting relationships. As these respondents explained:

Mary ... you’re never going to sit next to the person again so what is the point of having a conversation before class, people just don’t really do it. It is kind of weird to talk to the person sitting next to you (Auckland).

Indie In the big first year lectures, if you start talking to someone next to you, they’ll think you’re weird. So you just don’t go there (Otago).

By contrast, students identified labs, tutorials and field trips as key avenues through which to make friends at university because they enable students to get to know each other over an extended period (11 respondents). However, at five universities, students spoke about progressive cuts to funding or support for labs, tutorials and field trips that undermined sites that enabled friendships to form. The rise of online teaching was described as having made it more challenging to make connections at university, as well as changes to timetabling that had removed common lunch hours (7 respondents).

The physical space of universities was also considered by some respondents to be inhibitive to the capacity of students to make friendships. Although the particular aspects of this environment differed across universities, they included a lack of student study space (15 respondents), limited accessible and affordable parking (12), convenient and cheap locker space (5) and low-cost food (5). Nine students at four universities volunteered that there were few areas on campuses that were not ‘tightly’ regulated by university managers or the students’ association and could be truly described as a ‘student’ space. For example, one student characterised their university’s student space as ‘about as welcoming as an airport lounge’.

Besides the physical space of universities, students spoke about the challenges of making friendships in highly competitive university environments (11 respondents). In Chapter 5 (p. 127), it was discussed that one of the *demands* of contemporary university environments described by students was constant competition, usually associated with

worries about getting a job. Students elaborated on the effect of this 'constant competition' on their capacity to make friends. Eight students claimed they were, or had been, too focused on their studies to be able to connect with other students. For example, Fracturedfemur, an Auckland medical student, characterised her first year as not being a 'friend looking zone', while Annie (Otago) spoke about 'being buried in books and not really being able to be on the lookout for friends'. However, three other students also volunteered *doubts* about the motivations of other students wanting to connect in highly competitive environments. A law student, Nina, explained these doubts in particular depth, suggesting that there was sometimes 'that uncomfortable element of there are people who are actively seeking to network for their own gains, and it makes you kind of doubt your friendships sometimes, whether you are just being used or whether you are using someone'.

Lastly, interview participants argued that the type of activities that were run during orientation week were not conducive to supporting the formation of long-term friendships (14 respondents). Across five universities, these students volunteered that they did not consider their university to be a 'welcoming place' when they first arrived. Although some students appeared to enjoy orientation events, other interview participants spoke about the events as being 'overwhelming', 'crazy in a bad way', 'scary' and that 'steins aren't typically places where you'd meet people or make friends or anything'. Some of the most direct criticisms of orientation weeks were voiced by international students (5 respondents). For example, one Malaysian student described being 'shocked' and 'puzzled' by the orientation events offered at his university, which he summarised as 'bar night, drinking night, party night, grand ball'. He questioned: 'it makes me think, how can the students in charge do these kinds of events? How can they spend the time and money to do that kind of events? I don't know why?' While he thought the events might be seen as a way for students to 'get together', he argued that those events would not 'make relationships last. You meet people in a bar and it is fun for that night, but they won't really be your true friend'.

## 6.6 Depoliticised students?

Setting aside discussion of student political action temporarily, the lack of social networks described by some respondents has worrying wider implications for student well-being. Questions about how easy students found it to make friends at university were initially asked to interrogate the development of social networks among students, but they revealed a large group of students who spoke about not making friends at university until their third year of study. These difficulties are troubling, particularly given 61% of respondents also reported anxiety about the well-being of other students at some stage during interviews. The apparent isolation of some students is contrary to the ideal of university campuses as offering an opportunity to bring disparate groups together and forge solidarity and understanding across differences (Harris 2012).

In terms of student political action, the difficulty described by many interview participants making connections at university suggests that universities may no longer 'politicise' students in the way that might be anticipated. Social network theories have typically characterised universities as 'politicising' environments, in that they geographically concentrate students together, usually with greater amounts of spare time than other citizens (Crossley 2008; Crossley & Ibrahim 2012). Yet these 'politicising' social networks seemed to be conspicuously absent at times in New Zealand. Despite the overall increase in the size of the student body in New Zealand, the apparent lack of networks among many students suggests that the likelihood of a 'critical mass' forming that can facilitate student political action may be reduced.

If following social network theories, the apparent absence of networks among some respondents might suggest that students were increasingly 'depoliticised' and 'neutered', or that their agency is being eroded' (Crossley & Ibrahim 2012; Hensby 2013). Nevertheless, listening to the attitudes of New Zealand students suggests that accounts of students as 'depoliticised' or 'neutered' are too absolute. In Chapter 2 (p. 46), it was discussed that the language of a 'politicised' and 'depoliticised' student body maintains an implicit dichotomy in their approach, despite the warnings of some agency theories that top-down conceptions of what young people 'ought' to be doing politically

can establish a 'false dichotomy' between participation and apathy (O'Toole et al. 2003, p. 53; Henn et al. 2002). Extending this argument, the perspectives of the students in this study suggest this dichotomous approach is concerning for a further two reasons.

First, there is an implicit assumption in these approaches of what 'politicisation' entails: traditional forms of protest. The problem with this expectation is that it imposes a conception of what political action should entail on students. Students are either protesting and politicised, or they are depoliticised. Yet while New Zealand students appear to not be engaging significantly with traditional forms of protest, neither can they be considered 'depoliticised' or 'neutered'. In adopting the binary language of 'politicised' and 'depoliticised', there is little effort to investigate how students conceive of protest or how it might fit, if at all, within their broader understanding of their political agency. By contrast, enabling students to discuss their political action in their own terms opens out a much more nuanced political terrain between apathy and protest. Far from an automatic outlet of student frustration, protest for New Zealand students appears to be questioned as much as other forms of political action, both formal and informal. The language of students as 'depoliticised' or 'neutered' cuts off analysis of the contours of this more complex political landscape.

Second, the responses of New Zealand students suggest that top-down accounts of students as 'depoliticised' may bolster the 'apathy' that these approaches often seek to challenge. Explanations of student 'apathy', including by some of the students in this sample, tend to be made to try to account for why students were not politically active as expected. Yet in focusing on explaining why students are 'depoliticised' and overlooking its absences, these approaches may unintentionally reinforce the idea that students actually *are* 'apathetic' or 'depoliticised'. The risk here is that, if repeated often enough, students themselves might believe these accounts of 'apathy' in contexts of *doubts* in which students seem uncertain of other students as political actors and interested in understanding the political action of their peers. Many respondents interviewed described already feeling politically isolated, and characterising students as 'depoliticised' may only reinforce these beliefs.

When the focus is taken off the idea of students as ‘depoliticised’, an interesting dynamic emerges from the attitudes of the students in this study. The apparent absence of university-based networks among many interview participants *did* seem to inform their political action, but not in the way anticipated by *network* approaches. Rather than ‘neutering’ students, the absence of networks appeared to contribute to cautiousness and hesitancy among some students towards speaking out politically.

In particular, student responses suggest there is exposure and risk for students associated with acting politically when they cannot be certain how their peers might react. Often acutely aware of the limits of their knowledge, many students in this sample appeared nervous about whether their actions or views would be supported or censured by other students, and whether they would have the confidence to defend themselves should they be confronted about their actions. These *doubts* appeared to influence a preference among some respondents for political action that was considered ‘acceptable’ and uncontroversial. With some exceptions, most political action students engaged with seemed to be safe. It was safe in the most obvious respect that students did not risk being arrested, and understandably so given the high debt many students had and their anticipation of a precarious future. However, it also was safe in that it did not risk confronting or upsetting others – both those in positions of political power as well as other students.

This self-consciousness in an era of *doubts* is another angle to political economy theories that suggest student political action has become narrowed in a neoliberal era (Mirowski 2013; Brown 2015). These theorists have argued that political action has become less confrontational as students become more concerned with their future opportunities and neoliberal approaches are internalised. As has been discussed in Chapter 5 (p. 132), the attitudes of the students in this study did in some respects appear to support these claims. However, the *doubts* expressed by the students about their peers also suggest that their concerns of how other students might judge them may further contribute to this preference for non-confrontational forms of political engagement.

There is an additional observation that can be made here relating to the manipulation of student political action. In discussing their activities on campus, 16 students spoke about the behind-the-scenes support they received by organisations external to the university, both on the political left and right. With some exceptions, the support students described seemed relatively benign, usually in the form of funding, handbooks and mentoring programmes, as well as their attendance at training, conferences and lectures. However, what is concerning about this support in a context of *doubts* is how critical it appeared to be for student confidence and self-belief in their ability to defend their views and actions to their peers.

It is not possible to provide explicit examples here, as all students drew directly from the material provided by these organisations in interviews, and citing these statements would compromise their anonymity. Nevertheless, the considerable influence of these external organisations on student confidence and sense of agency is suggested by the frequent references students made to these organisations in interviews. Of the 16 respondents that spoke about these external organisations in interviews, 14 participants without prompting made an average of eleven references to information that they had acquired from attending conferences, workshops and mentoring programmes run by these external organisations: 'we learnt that ...'; 'what they told us was ...'; 'my mentor says that ...'; 'they suggested that we should ...'. One student described this information 21 times in an interview. Two students spontaneously came prepared for interviews with material that had been given to them by organisations, and drew my attention repeatedly back to that information in their responses: 'it says here that ...'; 'well, the book recommends ...'; 'what they suggest, um, it's somewhere in here ...'.

This apparent reliance on these programmes and key individuals external to the university is not necessarily harmful *per se*. However, in a context of *doubts* this knowledge appears critical for giving students the confidence to speak out politically. This reliance is troubling, as it potentially leaves student political action vulnerable to being reshaped by these external organisations and individuals, including to reduce the

political challenge potentially provided by student political action, and will be returned to in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, the *doubts* students expressed about their peers are also intriguing as they seem to be shared – even if students themselves do not know it. Listening carefully to the attitudes of the students in this sample presents a striking array of contradictions. Student apathy was treated as the norm, with some respondents going to considerable lengths to seek to explain or sympathise with the apparent indifference of their peers. Yet student responses in interviews are suggestive of an underlying interest in political debates, albeit not necessarily defined as ‘political’, and shared *desires* for different ways of engaging politically. Most students also described feeling in the minority politically. However, when asked about the issues that mattered to them, their responses contained a surprising degree of consistency, despite the demographic and political diversity of the sample. Students also spoke with enthusiasm about being part of the diversity of universities, and of being able to engage with the perspectives of others with views different from their own. Yet their uncertainty of what other students at university thought suggests these aspirations may be more in theory, and not necessarily practised. Simply, students appear to have much more in common than they think.

## 6.7 Summary

This chapter considered the *doubts* students experienced in an era of political ambiguity. The chapter opened by examining the scepticism of students about the effectiveness of a range of political activities, within and beyond parliament, both ‘old school’ and ‘new’. I analysed the critical attitudes among students of the validity of political arguments made by politicians and other students, as well as of their own knowledge. Discussion then examined student *doubts* about the political community they were part of as political actors.

The expressed *doubts* of students extend and challenge existing theory in several respects. Regarding agency theories, the breadth of student scepticism about the efficacy

of political action suggests that the relationship between disaffection at the ballot box and protest cannot be treated as assured nor causative. Student *doubts* about 'newer' forms of participation also suggest that adoption of these types of political action may be less unencumbered and confident than sometimes portrayed in alternative repertoire agency theories, and instead a more contingent and unstable negotiation of different avenues for affecting change. In terms of political economy theories, the analysis extends these approaches by proposing an alternative dimension to accounts of the apparent preference of students for non-confrontational political action: political action appears to be 'safe' in anticipation of a precarious future, as suggested by political economy theories, but also in terms of worries of how other students might judge them. Regarding social network theories, the analysis challenges characterisations of students as 'depoliticised'. As I argued, these approaches impose a preconception of what political action should entail, while potentially bolstering student 'apathy' in contexts in which students have *doubts* of the community they are part of as political actors.

For understanding contemporary student political action, the *doubts* presented in this chapter provide a conflicted series of experiences. On the one hand, the underlying critical questioning and scepticism among students of political action is suggestive of a volatile rethinking of political agency that may contribute to experimentation with political action. However, student *doubts* also seem to inform cautiousness and hesitation about participating politically, especially where students feel isolated politically. In the next chapter, I discuss these experiences of *doubts* in conjunction with the *desires* and *demands* expressed by students, and outline a particular approach to political action that appears to be emerging among New Zealand students at the intersection of these '3 Ds'.

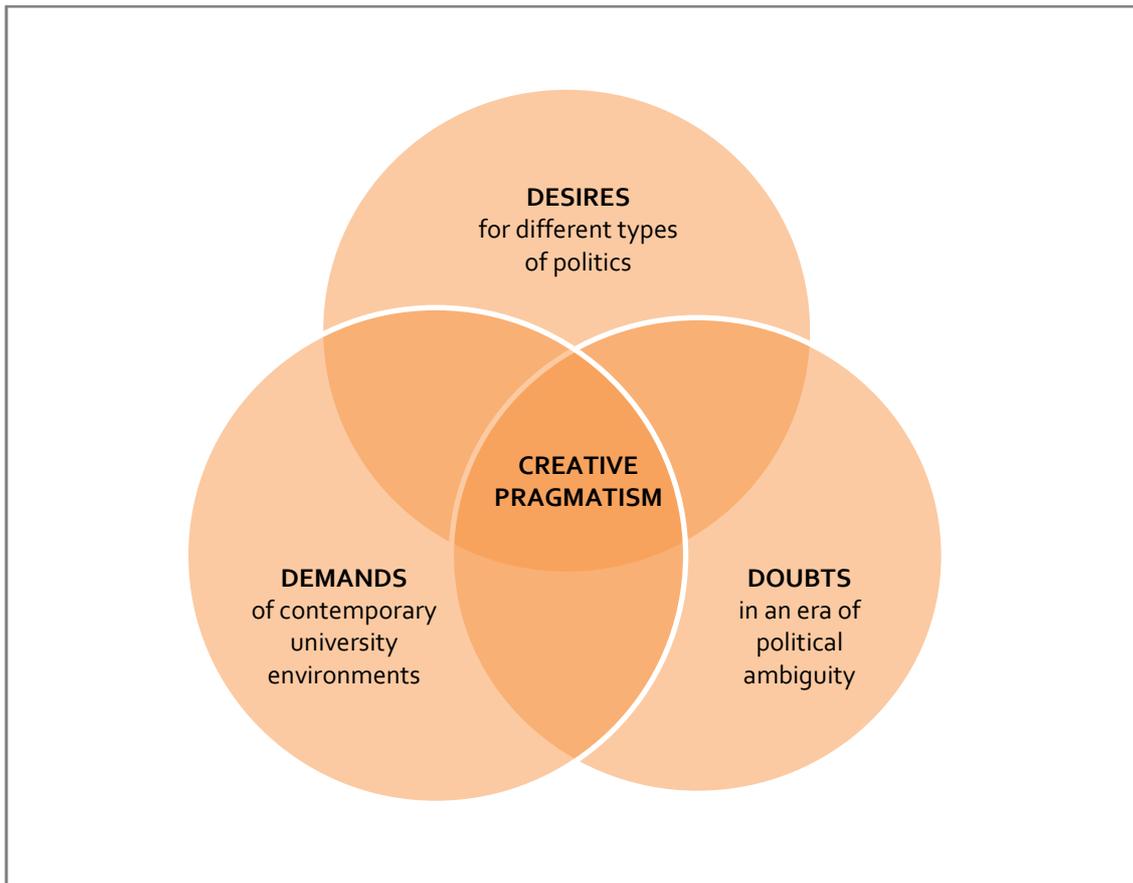
## CHAPTER SEVEN – CREATIVE PRAGMATISM

### 7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I argued that three particular experiences inform the political action of New Zealand students: *desires*, *demands* and *doubts*. Regarding *desires*, students appear to have aspirations for different types of politics that, while not necessarily coherent, are nevertheless suggestive of an underlying interest in political change. Students also experience *demands*, the distinct pressures that they encounter as part of being contemporary students, which they seem to consciously and cautiously negotiate. Student *doubts* in an era of political ambiguity appear multi-faceted, encompassing their questioning of the efficacy of political action and the validity of political arguments, as well as their uncertainty of the political community that they are part of as students.

In this chapter, I consider a particular type of political agency that seems to be emerging among many New Zealand students, informed by their experiences of *desires*, *demands* and *doubts*. In this chapter, I propose the concept of creative pragmatism as a way of understanding and synthesising this approach (Figure 18). As I will argue, everyday understandings of the term pragmatism capture the ‘realistic’ and ‘sensible’ politics that many students appear to be engaging with. This understanding of pragmatism, I contend, is suggestive of the ingenuity and creativity students can display in negotiating challenging conditions, but also their tendency towards political action that is narrow in its scope and does not challenge underlying power relations. I then consider the second definition of pragmatism as a political philosophy, and suggest it provides a way of thinking through the volatility that appears to underlie the political action of contemporary New Zealand students, particularly their apparent willingness to question existing forms of political engagement and believe that a different politics is possible.

**Figure 18** Creative pragmatism at the intersection of the '3 Ds'



## 7.2 Being 'realistic'

In everyday language, the term pragmatism is usually associated with a sensible approach; a realistic orientation to the world that is the 'opposite of starry-eyed idealism' (Dryzek 1997, p. 99; also Hartford 2011). Pragmatism is linked to a willingness to put principle to the side or 'to settle for a glass half empty when standing on principle threatens to achieve less' (Westbrook 2005, p. *ix*). Pragmatic people are concerned above all with practical results, and are associated with a 'can do' attitude and impatience with those of a 'should do' disposition.

When applied to politics, pragmatism is typically associated with a willingness to set aside traditional ideological stances and constructively work towards political change. It is often admired for being a sensible, rather than dogmatic, approach that addresses political problems in incremental bites (Hartford 2011). This type of

pragmatism has long been associated with New Zealand's political culture (Mitchell 1969; Armstrong 2012; Eaqub 2015; Moon 2013, p. 132-133). Bruce Jesson (1989, p. 26), for instance, described New Zealand as having a 'nuts and bolts' politics rather than 'abstractions and ideas'. However, New Zealand is not alone in having pragmatism linked with its culture: the United States, United Kingdom, some central European countries and Australia have also had their politics described as pragmatic (Westbrook 2005; Worsnip 2012; Karlson 2014; Cooke 2016). Recently, pragmatism as a 'sensible' politics has received revived attention, associated with the rise of electoral centrism exemplified by Third Way politics in the Labour parties of Anglo democracies, and centre-right parties that maintain their commitment to neoliberal approaches but seek to moderate its excesses through social concessions (Temple 2000; Driver & Martell 2000).

In this section, I argue that this everyday meaning of pragmatism as a sensible politics provides a way of understanding the type of political agency many of the students in this study appeared to express. An underlying theme of the previous three chapters has been the 'realistic' attitudes of respondents towards their political action and political environment. Far from idealistic, students tended to pride themselves for engaging with the world as it is, rather than as they would like it to be.

One way that students expressed this pragmatism was their 'realistic' assessment of the political environment. The students in this study tended to be highly critical of the motivations and claims of other political actors, whether politicians, the media, other public figures or their peers. This perspective was vividly summarised by Alex (Victoria) who suggested that student political attitudes had an element of cynicism, but also that they were 'just being realistic':

Alex                    I would say [students are] political in the sense of politically switched on and they understand it and they know that it's kind of bullshit, but not blindly aligned to something, so not partisan.

Sylvia                What do you mean by they know it is bullshit?

Alex                    Well it is, like, well, of course, the prime minister is lying, duh, and the GCSB [Government Communications Security Bureau], something is not right there and, like, just ... it just seems fake, and if it is bad it is

just poor media handling, and there is nothing genuine about it, and the media is the same, and it is just, like, this game that is going on [...] Like a cynicism about it, but I think that is just being realistic. Just kind of questioning, yeah (Victoria).

This 'realistic' orientation towards politics described by Alex is corroborated by student responses in interviews, discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 84) and Chapter 6 (p. 175). Far from naïve, interview participants tended to spontaneously describe formal politics as a process that was 'controlled', 'manipulated', 'biased', a 'game' and 'professionalised', and that public figures could have 'ulterior motives' and 'agendas' that were 'biased' and needed to be taken with a 'grain of salt'. That said, most student perspectives did seem to fall short of cynicism, despite this scepticism. As noted in Chapter 4 (p. 89), interview participants tended to also offer the 'other side of the story' in their accounts, and spoke with nuance about these criticisms only applying to 'some' public figures. They also appeared to retain an open mind about the motives of public figures, such as arguing that decisions they considered misguided were made 'because they don't understand'.

Besides a 'realistic' orientation towards the political environment, the pragmatism of the students in this study was demonstrated in how they accounted for their own circumstances. As discussed in Chapter 5, students acted politically in a context of significant *demands*, in which they experienced multiple pressures day-to-day and tended to anticipate a precarious future. In speaking about these challenges, respondents appeared to be remarkably matter of fact and 'realistic' about its implications for their political action. In interviews, students tended to candidly acknowledge that these *demands* informed their political action, exemplified by Max's use of the metaphor of the precautionary principle to explain his approach to political action. Other respondents similarly spoke about needing to be 'realistic' and that 'you'd be stupid not to consider it' in terms of the types of politics they were willing to participate in within a context of *demands* (Chapter 5, p. 131-132).

As touched on previously, the 'realistic' attitudes of students towards the political environment did not appear to significantly deter their engagement with

politics. To the contrary, most students in this study tended to pragmatically emphasise the 'practical' steps that they could take to shape the political environment, despite their experience of *demands* and *doubts*. As noted in Chapter 4 (p. 105), a small number of students did report uncertainty of 'where to start' or how 'best' to participate (7 respondents). However, most respondents seemed willing to set aside their critical attitudes in order to engage, arguing that taking action, while not perfect, still 'did something'. This preference for 'practical' action was most vividly demonstrated by 37 students who spoke about aspirations to 'do something' to 'make a difference', discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 106). These students expressed enthusiasm for pragmatic, 'can-do' styles of politics, in which problems were broken down into 'clear' and 'achievable' steps and solutions were developed to bring 'real', 'concrete' and 'immediate' results.

Less obviously, the pragmatic focus on 'practical' action among the students in this study was reflected in the numerous small-scale and informal actions students described undertaking, discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 118). As noted, many interview participants voluntarily spoke about doing modest and mundane actions, such as 'having conversations', 'smiling at others', 'being nice' or 'sitting next to people who look lonely in class'. These actions could be dismissed as common courtesy. However, students accounted for these actions as part of their agency, suggesting that these attempts to forge connections with other students may be a practical and tangible way in which students sought to shape their social world and build solidarity.

A further indicator of pragmatism among respondents was the frustration of some interview participants with what they perceived to be 'overly cynical' students who were not pragmatic enough (10 respondents). One of these students was Tom, who spoke about his dislike of cynicism among some students:

Tom                    It's almost like a badge of honour to a degree. It is, like, look at me, I'm so cynical ... they equate cynicism with being intelligent or being smart. I understand how the world really works; I understand that, you know, it is a very dirty thing; I don't believe what people say; I'm not going to take part; look how morally superior I am (Auckland).

Like Tom, other students described being ‘fed up’ or ‘annoyed’ with students were too ‘cynical’ (4 respondents), ‘sceptical’ (2) or ‘aloof’ and took ‘take the easy way out’, ‘wipe their hands of it’, ‘give up’ or ‘throw up their hands and say I don’t know where to begin’. For example, Bob (Canterbury) explained that ‘I don’t have much time for people that think they’re better than this and so don’t get involved. If they don’t like what they are seeing, then why don’t they get stuck in and make it better?’ Similarly, Lily (Waikato) – despite voicing her own *doubts* of political action – described her frustration that students were ‘waiting for the perfect option, which is never going to exist. They just need to accept that and get on with it’.

At a collective level, pragmatism also appeared to underscore the approach adopted by many students’ associations in New Zealand. As discussed in Chapter 5 (p. 161), student officers seemed increasingly willing to set aside their traditional activist stances and advocacy roles in favour of constructively working towards political change *with*, rather than *against*, the university. For example, a student officer, Fred, argued that:

Fred                      Now that they [the university] see that we are providing good things to students and that, um, we are not as controversial and not trying to put the university in the spotlight, then they are more open to give us more funding. So we can actually provide for the students instead of providing to, you know, bad-mouth the university in a way.

There are two points highlighted by Fred’s statement. First, as touched on previously (Chapter 5, p. 154), it is striking how candid he was that the university gave his association more funding when they did not challenge the university. Second, Fred did not appear to be particularly frustrated by this position, but rather pragmatically focused on how he and his association could constructively act to ‘actually provide’ for students, rather than ‘bad-mouth’ the university. Like Fred, other student officers similarly spoke about working with the university as being more ‘constructive’, ‘positive’ and ‘beneficial for students’, instead of ‘needlessly fighting’ the university (13 respondents).

### **7.3     Ingenuity and creativity**

In politics, pragmatism is often admired for its ingenuity and capacity to develop strategies for political change within actually existing political contexts (Harford 2011).

In New Zealand, for instance, pragmatism has at times been a source of national pride, linked to a pioneer culture of the resourceful and adaptable ‘man alone’ (Trotter 2012; Eaquib 2016). This resourcefulness and adaptability, in challenging circumstances, is evocative of the approach to political action the students in this study appeared to adopt in a context of *demands* and *doubts*. Rather than preventing political action, the *demands* and *doubts* students experienced instead seemed to prompt a rethinking of political action among students, in which they re-evaluated what was possible or ‘realistic’ politically and experimented with new forms of political engagement.

This apparent experimentation and ingenuity is highlighted with the use of the term ‘creative’ in the concept of creative pragmatism. In Chapter 2 (p. 42), it was discussed that the process of waiting is usually associated with a surplus of time and being left behind, but has also been suggested to be a period of improvisation in developing countries where there is significant youth unemployment (Honwana 2011). The New Zealand students in this sample faced the opposite challenge of waiting: they faced a scarcity of time, rather than a surplus. However, like the process of waiting, this scarcity appeared to prompt interview participants to develop, with similar imagination and improvisation, methods of engaging politically that worked around experiences of *demands* and *doubts*.

One illustration of this negotiation and improvisation is offered by Max, the student at Victoria University who memorably compared his approach to political action to the precautionary principle in environmental management. As discussed (p. 131), Max was upfront that there were some forms of political action that he did not want to participate in, including confrontational forms of protest. He was explicit about his reasons for not doing so: it was perceived to be too risky for his future opportunities. Yet in speaking about his cautiousness, Max went on to clarify that he did not consider it to prevent his participation in politics:

Max                    I think students steer away from political action that might hurt their chances later on. But that’s just some types of politics; students still participate, just differently.

I asked Max to clarify what he meant by this 'different' participation. Max explained that he had peripherally become active in an organisation that was single-issue and non-partisan, and which sought to bring about the political change he believed was necessary. He considered this group to be effective as it brought about change 'no matter what', while also being good for his future opportunities:

Max                    They're great. They're all about getting change no matter what, so they're willing to work with pretty much everyone. I think that's important because they do make a difference. But if I am going to be really honest in light of what I said before, I'd also say that it works for me too, because they're really respected by, like, everyone so it's not going to hurt me down the track.

As has been discussed already, the type of action Max participated in could be interpreted as being informed or co-opted by neoliberal approaches in that it was non-partisan, respected by 'everyone' and 'safe'. There may be some basis for this claim, which will be discussed in the next section. However, there is also an element of creativity in this approach that needs to be acknowledged. The organisation that Max was part of had opened out a political space that 'worked' for students like Max, in that it engaged his *desires* for political change, while also not 'hurting' him 'down the track'.

The organisation Max was involved in was not the only student group to similarly open out a space for participation that engaged student *desires* for a different politics, while also taking into account their experiences of *demands* and *doubts*. Across campuses, there were numerous student organisations in a variety of fields that appeared to have developed forms of participation that were considered 'safe' and 'respectable' for individual students, while concretely shaping the political environment. I will not name these organisations out of respect for their anonymity, as many were relatively small. However, among these groups, there seemed to be a shared pragmatism in their approach. These organisations tended to be focused on incremental and achievable steps that were considered 'feasible' and would make a 'tangible' difference, rather than seeking change that might be more thorough, but also more abstract, gradual and potentially more controversial. These groups tended to overlook ideological divides, often through formal adoption of a non-partisan or non-political

stance. There was also an associated professionalism, which appeared to be driven by a desire to be taken seriously and respected by everyone, both within and beyond the university, as well as being 'safer' and more 'acceptable' for students to participate. It is perhaps not surprising that some of these organisations were spontaneously characterised as 'smart' by five students in this sample.

This negotiation and experimentation is often not accounted for in political economy theories. As discussed in Chapter 2, political economy theorists have argued that student agency has increasingly become disabled or co-opted (Giroux 2011; Graeber 2013). Among the students in this sample, this explanation was echoed by some of the left-leaning activists in this sample, such as Tane and Francesca, who explained student 'apathy' by reference to the social structures that they suggested 'discouraged' students from participating politically (p. 136). Yet the attitudes of the students in this sample suggest that these conditions are considered by students less as barriers preventing their engagement, and instead more as parameters to be negotiated. While acknowledging there were some actions they would not participate in, the students in this sample for the most part appeared to pragmatically emphasise that they could still be active within their circumstances. To borrow Robert Westbrook's (2005, p. *ix*) phrase to explain political pragmatism, the glass was not half empty for students, but rather half full.

Students' associations in New Zealand similarly seemed to experiment and negotiate within parameters. As discussed in Chapter 5 (p. 158), some student officers who participated in this study did reject the relevance of politics to students' associations entirely (6 respondents), with one association going so far as to ban all political clubs on their campus. However, most student officers in this sample considered politics to still be relevant to their association (14 respondents). These officers spoke about worries that they might become 'irrelevant' to students without some engagement with political issues. For example, Alan argued that there was a need to 'put our name to campaigns or issues that really affect students' to ensure that the association did not become 'unresponsive', while Christina suggested her association needed to be ready to 'take a stand when something important comes along'. Participating politically for students'

associations was challenging in a context of *demands*, however. Student officers explained that they had to 'not criticise the university unnecessarily' to ensure that 'at least we'll be at the table' (Leon). At the same time, student executives described needing to be considerate of potential members. For instance, one student officer reflected, 'it is really hard to voice our opinions on political issues here. We don't want to isolate people, but then again we want to have a stance because otherwise we won't be effective at all'. As Tracy summarised, 'we need to be smart about how we do this, or else we'll be irrelevant'.

What appeared to result from this negotiation was a politics of creative pragmatism. On a case-by-case basis, student officers spoke about identifying political issues that they believed needed to be addressed, but which they considered to affect all students and therefore would not alienate any members. They also selected topics which they thought the university would consider reasonable. Not surprisingly, relatively few political issues appeared to make it through this criteria, but they typically included 'non-divisive' topics, such as student well-being and mental health, transport costs and availability, alcohol laws, the conditions of student flats and in some cases pay rates of students, including as tutors. The campaigns that students' associations then ran on these issues were considered by students to be professional and slick, and which they believed would not undermine the respectability of the university or the value of student qualifications, while still benefitting students.

This approach seems to be a significant break from the activism of earlier students' associations, raising concerns that students' associations may be increasingly eschewing their traditional activist role (Chapter 5, p. 161). However, it also needs to be acknowledged that in a post-voluntary student membership era student officers seem to have creatively opened out a particular space for political advocacy: one that does not alienate potential members or the university, but which also improves the circumstances of students. Student officers' description of this approach as one of thought out 'strategies' and 'choosing battles' is suggestive of the careful experimentation that this negotiation entailed.

In increasingly commercialised university environments, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2010, p. 2) has voiced unease that universities are generating a cohort of ‘useful machines’ rather than well-rounded and critical citizens. However, the care with which students described negotiating and experimenting with different forms of political engagement within the parameters of contemporary university environments is suggestive of something more complex. The students in this sample appeared savvy and astute in their ability to ‘realistically’ anticipate the priorities of the university, funding agencies and other students. They then demonstrated a capability to carefully, consciously and pragmatically develop forms of action that were inclusive and agreeable to all parties, as well as being ‘safe’ in terms of not harming the future chances of students and not exposing them to the censure of their peers or the wider community. At the same time, these approaches also engaged student *desires* for change, connection and contribution by bringing about tangible, practical and constructive political outcomes. This negotiation is no small task, and students displayed significant ingenuity in developing these approaches.

#### **7.4 Political action as tunnelled and (dis)respectful**

For all its creativity, pragmatic politics has its limitations. In this section, I suggest that some key criticisms of pragmatism provide a way of thinking through the potential challenges associated with the creative pragmatism displayed by many of the students in this study. Two criticisms are especially relevant for this discussion: first, that there is a tendency for pragmatic approaches to be narrow in their vision for politics and, second, that the idea of what is ‘practical’ and ‘realistic’ may implicitly stifle dissent.

The first criticism of pragmatic politics is the narrowness of its scope. In focusing on what is ‘practical’, critics of pragmatism argue that it can tend towards incremental, piecemeal and technocratic change. Not only is there a lack of vision associated with this approach, but it can potentially fail to challenge the ideologies and distribution of power that underlie the circumstances pragmatic politics seeks to address (Karlson 2014; Orr 2016).

A helpful way of understanding this narrowing of vision is through the concept of 'tunnelling'. The behavioural economists Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir (2013) have argued that, in times of scarcity, there is a tendency for our actions to 'tunnel', to focus single-mindedly on managing the scarcity at hand. This focus can be beneficial as the objects inside the tunnel are brought into sharp focus. However, everything peripheral to the tunnel – such as wider ideologies and the distribution of power – can tend to be neglected, including other, potentially more significant, concerns (Mullainathan & Shafir 2013, p. 29).

The concept of tunnelling helps to illustrate a potential shortcoming with the creative pragmatism demonstrated by many of the students in this study. Two elements of scarcity seemed present for students. On the one hand, students considered there to be a scarcity of time to confront the socio-economic and environmental problems confronting societies or the planet. As discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 106), the status quo was considered untenable by many interview participants, with change 'urgently' required. On the other hand, students experienced scarcity in their own lives, especially as a lack of time, adequate financial support and an absence of confidence in future security.

In this context of scarcity, the political action of many students appeared to tunnel. Complex and interconnected political topics tended to be broken down by students into single issues and treated separately in manageable portions and achievable steps. The problems dealt with were often brought into sharp focus, with student groups in a range of fields producing detailed research to back up their proposed changes or 'solutions'. However, in its emphasis on the concrete and tangible steps that could be taken, issues outside that focus tended to be neglected by the students in this study, including those that could completely alter the political status quo.

Perhaps the most striking issue outside of this 'tunnel' that most students seemed to overlook was their own circumstances. Other researchers, notably Karen Nairn, Jane Higgins and Judith Sligo (2012, p. 167), have suggested New Zealand students consider student loans to be 'facts of life, if regrettable ones' (also Dean 2015, p. 16). Corroborating this analysis, the students in this study similarly tended to describe the *demands* they

faced as 'part of being a student', with some students framing these conditions positively, suggesting that it made them 'work harder' or that 'it could be worse' (p. 148). Interview participants also appeared to treat these conditions more as fixed parameters to be worked around in expressing political agency, rather than barriers to their political action (p. 132). Yet while less immediate and directly focused on 'solutions', changing the conditions under which students are politically active is likely to profoundly affect the capacity of students to act to challenge the political status quo.

The second key criticism of pragmatic politics is that it can implicitly stifle dissent. Critics argue that the idea of what is 'practical' and 'realistic' can work to undermine their opponents by deeming them 'idealists' and their views too 'unrealistic', 'unprofessional' or 'radical' (Worsnip 2012; Cooke 2016). Focusing on 'what works', often vaguely defined, is also claimed to divert attention away from the value judgements and ideologies that implicitly underlie these beliefs, while reinforcing the status quo.

Ideas of what was 'practical' and 'realistic' similarly appeared to be central to the political action of many of the students in this sample. However, rather than shutting down the arguments of the opponents of students, ideas of what was 'realistic' seemed to reduce the political challenge offered by the action many students engaged with. In particular, there was a tendency of students to develop forms of political action that are based on perceptions of what others consider acceptable, whether political leaders, university managers or corporate leaders. As discussed in Chapter 4 (p. 111-112), this inclination seemed to be informed in part by a desire to be taken seriously and willingness to work with everyone so that they might affect change 'no matter what'. However, this focus on the priorities of others also appeared to be influenced by concern that their participation might 'hurt' their future employment prospects (Chapter 5, p. 132), as well as concern of how other students might 'judge' their actions (Chapter 6, p. 189).

It is important to clarify here that the tendency of students to measure their political action to the standards of others is not necessarily a sign that students had

uncritically internalised neoliberal values as might be suggested in some political economy theories. As was discussed in Chapter 6 (p. 174), many students spoke with scepticism of the claims and motivations of these political actors privately in interviews, suggesting that this politeness cannot be interpreted solely as a sign of complacency or lack of critical awareness.

Nevertheless, this apparent focus among many students on what others consider acceptable suggests that their political action may be unlikely to challenge the underlying power relations or ideologies that contribute to the circumstances that students are attempting to challenge. It also suggests that some students may be uncomfortable resisting and challenging illegitimate power in the public sphere. Indeed, interview participants could be unfailingly polite, respectful and even deferential to those with political power. There also appeared to be a preference among many respondents to adeptly negotiate the demands of multiple stakeholders, rather than confronting those actors they sought to challenge.

What is especially troubling about this tendency of students to express deference to those in power was that it appeared to be supplemented by hostility towards other students who did pursue more confrontational forms of politics. As was touched on in Chapter 6 (p. 182), interview participants tended to judge their peers more harshly than other political actors, and could be their own worst critics. These attitudes were initially puzzling, given the nuance with which they spoke about other political actors external to the university. As I noted, students tended to be unwilling to paint all politicians with the same brush, despite their disillusionment with the conduct of some of those in political office, and usually went on to qualify their criticisms and offer 'the other side of the story'. However, most respondents did not extend this benefit of the doubt to some of their own peers, such as those who were active in party politics or confrontational protest movements. Rather than acknowledging that those students were 'doing the best they can', interview participants instead tended to speak in absolutes, such as of youth wing members as 'brainwashed' (Chapter 6, p. 175-176). Likewise, although many respondents described admiration for the protesters of the

twentieth century and student activists overseas in the twenty-first century, they tended to speak almost with contempt of 'activist-y types' among contemporary New Zealand students. Some female respondents who had been active in feminist groups also described the vicious attacks that they had received online from other students.

The contradiction of this respect for some, but disrespect for others, is concerning. A longstanding argument of citizenship studies has been the importance of learning not just how to act dutifully or with responsibility as citizens, but also how to challenge, resist and dissent illegitimate power practised by dominant state and economic actors, processes and institutions (Barry 2006; Hayward 2012). Yet the students in this sample tended to be considerate towards those with power, whether politicians, university managers or corporate leaders, and many appeared to design their political action to what would be considered 'credible' and 'respectable' by those actors. At the same time, that respect seemed not necessarily to extend to their peers, and there could be a remarkable absence of support and solidarity among students. This deference to the expectations of those with political power, coupled with an apparent lack of solidarity among students, potentially leaves the political action of students exposed to being reframed in ways that may restrict the political challenge offered by student agency.

### **7.5 'A search for another way of doing things'**

The discussion in this chapter has so far focused on student political action as pragmatic in the everyday understanding of the term as a 'realistic' politics that, while displaying creativity, also tends towards incremental political change that presents a limited challenge to the underlying distribution of power. However, there is a second meaning of the term 'pragmatism' that I suggest helps to highlight the undercurrents of contemporary student political agency. As well as being a 'sensible' approach to politics, pragmatism is a school of philosophy, associated with the writing of Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey. Emerging towards the end of the nineteenth century in the United States, the classical pragmatist philosophical tradition sought to offer a 'mediating philosophy' that reconciled the optimism and spontaneity of idealism and its

confidence in human values, on the one hand, and the fatalism and pessimism of sceptics, on the other (Westbrook 2005; Talisse 2014).

In this section, I argue that this philosophical understanding of pragmatism captures the underlying critical rethinking of political action that appeared to be emerging among the students in this sample, especially in their *doubts* and *desires* for politics. *Doubts* and *desires* are central to pragmatist philosophy. Robert Westbrook (1991, p. 357) describes classical pragmatist philosophy as ‘a way of knowing the world without certainty’ and of working in a space where doubt is always present, while not giving up on a strong ideal that something can be better. The students in this sample similarly seemed to share this belief that different and better types of politics were possible, even though they may have been uncertain what that politics might be.

The critical attitudes of students towards political action have been underlying theme of the previous chapters. Although students could be enthusiastic participants in a range of political actions, both formal and informal, they also tended not to be content with the political status quo and actively questioned the efficacy of various forms of political engagement. As discussed, while this critical attitude could be interpreted as cynicism among students, further conversation with respondents suggests that it may instead be part of a careful and at times earnest consideration of how students can most ‘effectively’ participate: a rethinking of political action. An engineering student at the University of Auckland, Tom, articulated this fine line between cynicism and a belief in ‘another way of doing things’ particularly clearly:

Tom                    If you talk to people you do hear a lot of, oh, what is the point of doing that, but even then I wouldn’t call it cynicism. Maybe to a degree but, like, they do believe that there is another way of doing things, something that is going to be a lot more effective. So it is cynicism to a degree but it is not nihilistic (Auckland).

This apparent confidence that there is ‘another way of doing things’, described by Tom, is corroborated by student responses in other interviews. In discussing their political action, many interview participants spontaneously characterised their political action as an open-ended ‘work in progress’, for instance ‘I’m still working on it’ (Spot, Auckland);

'I'm still not sure what's best' (Finn, AUT); 'I don't think people have the answers yet' (Margot, Victoria) (19 respondents). Other students in this sample spoke more generally about their interest in alternative forms of political engagement, suggesting they were 'looking for different routes' (5 respondents) or 'better ways' (4) of participating and were 'trying out' or 'playing around' with political action.

Student experiences of *demands* and *doubts* both appeared to contribute to the apparent openness among respondents to different ways of participating politically. Regarding *demands*, a scarcity of time and energy appeared to prompt some interview participants to reconsider how they could 'best' participate (16 respondents). A medical student at the University of Auckland, Spot, explained this predicament at length with particular clarity:

Spot ... we were discussing some health issues the other day with the medical students; they're all worried about it, all of us wanting to do something about it, but just thinking about it, okay, what do we need to do. We need to research, literature review, gather data, contact MPs. This takes time, and we all have five, six assignments going on. So it is, even making banners for the TPPA [Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement] for us it is, like, cool, we want to do that, advocate on leaking housing, but that involves an afternoon of sitting down there painting cardboard boxes whereas there is a patient upstairs which we are supposed to be learning how to save. It is hard to describe, but there is a sort of contrast there. You know, striving for something where the outcome is somewhat uncertain, broad, big issue. Or patient, how many milligrammes of this do I have to give, if my consultant quizzes me the next day am I going to be able to save this patient's life? (Auckland).

Besides these *demands*, *doubts* seemed to inform openness among students to other ways of engaging politically, reflected in the consideration respondents appeared to give to their involvement. When asked how they had initially become involved in a club on campus, 55% of interview participants reported that it had been because a friend or peer suggested they should 'come along'. However, the decision to then remain and become active in the organisation did not appear to be taken lightly. In interviews, 24 students described at length 'weighing up' or 'evaluating' the 'pros and cons' of their involvement. On the one hand, students related their participation to their political

aspirations or *desires*, such as the perceived capacity of an organisation to bring about political change, a sense of contribution and connection with others. On the other hand, student involvement appeared not to be complacent: respondents in interviews actively questioned whether the organisation they were part of 'fully' reflected their views and values (10 respondents) and whether their participation in that group was the 'best' use of their time and energy or if they could be 'more useful' or 'effective' elsewhere (9).

There is a certain irony here that needs to be acknowledged. Students appeared to believe that there was 'another way of doing things' politically. However, that belief did not necessarily extend to their own circumstances. Contrasting the openness with which they spoke about their political action, students tended to treat their situation as fixed parameters to be worked around, such as describing their conditions as 'part of being a student', 'just the way it is' or that 'it could be worse'.

Nevertheless, the apparent belief among students that another politics is possible brings into question the explanatory reach of some political economy theories. Philip Mirowski (2013, p. 144), for instance, has argued that political actors are increasingly 'seduced' into believing that neoliberal approaches are adequate for political change. This theory assumes that students were unaware and uncritical of the problems of their political actions. However, at least for the students in this sample, almost all respondents volunteered *doubts* about their involvement. Max, the Victoria University student who spoke about the precautionary principle, is a good example of this underlying questioning of political action. Like many other students in this sample, Max was enthusiastic about the political action he participated in and could be claimed to have been 'seduced' by these approaches. However, his participation was not uncritical or without reservations. When describing his action, Max spoke openly and without prompting about his uncertainty of its effectiveness, qualifying that the 'old [ways of doing politics] doesn't work, but neither does the new so that pretty much leaves everything up in the air'. It was not clear to Max what that different political action might be – everything was 'up in the air' – so he spoke about participating in these forms of

political action because they seemed to be the best on offer for now. Nevertheless, Max's *doubts* persisted.

This apparent rethinking of political action by students like Max helps to identify a vital political space outside of political economy theories. Although student political action did seem to have a tendency to tunnel and to avoid confronting underlying power relations, student *desires* and *doubts* are suggestive of an undercurrent of volatility and instability in student political agency. Max, himself, provides a helpful way of understanding this apparent volatility. As was described in Chapter 6 (p. 177), Max expressed frustration with protesters who he thought offered overly absolute accounts of the government to be 'all evil', instead arguing that the government was 'just a bunch of people in a shitty situation doing the best they can'. This idea of 'people in a shitty situation doing the best they can' could in many respects also apply to Max's approach towards politics as a contemporary student. Like other respondents, Max was doing what he could 'in a shitty situation', while being quick to acknowledge the limits of his action. Far from his agency being 'robbed' or 'subsumed', Max's political imagination appeared to be unsettled and open to different ways of participating politically, although he had not yet determined what that action was.

## 7.6 Summary

This chapter proposed the concept of creative pragmatism as a way of understanding and synthesising a particular type of political agency that appears to be emerging among students, and which seems to be informed by student experiences of *desires*, *demands* and *doubts*. As I argued, the concept of creative pragmatism captures the 'realistic' orientation of students towards the social world and their own circumstances, and their tendency to emphasise the 'practical' steps that could be taken to shape the political environment in this context. I suggested this everyday understanding of pragmatism is suggestive of the ingenuity and *creativity* students display in negotiating challenging circumstances, but also the tendency of their action to tunnel and to avoid confrontation. However, I suggested the second definition of pragmatism as a political philosophy also provides a way of understanding the political agency of students. Like pragmatist

political philosophy, the type of agency students expressed appears to be one in which uncertainty is always present, but in which they have not given up on a strong ideal that there are better ways of engaging politically. This apparent willingness to question and believe that a different politics is possible is suggestive of an underlying instability to their political action.

## CHAPTER EIGHT – CONCLUSION

### 8.1 Introduction

This thesis aimed to reconsider how university students are expressing their political agency in contemporary university environments in New Zealand. In this concluding chapter, I articulate the answer to the thesis aim, summarise the research analysis and discuss the implications of this thesis for research and practice. Regarding future research, I suggest that student political action needs to be considered more holistically. For practice, I argue that greater attention should be given to the political context of student political action, particularly the role of political parties, student debt and university environments in informing student agency. I conclude by discussing the implications of analysis for students interested in social change and argue for types of politics that acknowledge and better engage the creative pragmatism of students.

### 8.2 Reconsidering contemporary student political agency

At the outset of this thesis, I identified that there is a tendency within some academic and popular commentary to consider contemporary students as apathetic, selfish or complacent. However, in this thesis I argued that there is more to the political action and attitudes of New Zealand students than has previously been understood. My thesis is that a particular type of political agency appears to be emerging among New Zealand students that can be understood as creative pragmatism. As I argued, the term creative pragmatism describes the ‘realistic’ orientation among students towards the social world and their own circumstances. The concept helps to highlight the creativity and ingenuity of student agency, but also its tendency towards incremental and non-confrontational action. I also suggested the second understanding of pragmatism as a political philosophy offers a way of understanding the undercurrents of contemporary student

political action, particularly the apparent willingness of students to question their political action, while not giving up on a strong ideal that different types of politics are possible.

In addition, this thesis provides a conceptual framework of '3 Ds' for understanding student experiences that appear to inform their political agency: *desires*, *demands* and *doubts*. Student *desires* refer to their aspirations for different kinds of politics. Far from apathetic, the students in this study expressed critical but engaged attitudes towards politics, including a belief that formal politics 'still matters even though it's crap' and an interest in learning more about New Zealand's democracy. When asked about the issues that they were concerned about, student responses were the enthusiastic and earnest, and difficult to reconcile with perceptions of students as indifferent or disinterested. Respondents also spoke about valuing 'types of politics' that brought tangible change, provided a contribution to a broader community and enabled meaningful connection to others both within and beyond the university. As I argued, these expressed *desires* are suggestive of an underlying discontent with the political status quo and interest in political change.

The second 'D', *demands*, refers to student experiences in contemporary university environments. Individually, students experienced multiple and overlapping 'pressures' and 'trade-offs' as a result of a lack of time and adequate financial support, as well as worry that their actions in the present would negatively affect their future opportunities. There also seemed to be a tendency for students to treat their circumstances as individual, rather than collective, problems. Collectively, students' associations also experienced *demands*, especially following the progressive introduction of voluntary student membership. In this context, students' associations in New Zealand appeared to be increasingly aligned with the priorities of the university, and tended to adopt professional, non-partisan or non-political approaches. As I argued, these individual and collective *demands* appear to limit the capacity of some students to participate politically, but also to inform a preference among many students for political action that is cautious and uncontroversial. There also seems to be a tendency for

students in a context of *demands* to develop and engage in forms of political action that other actors external to the university consider acceptable and respectable.

The third 'D' refers to student *doubts* in an era of political ambiguity. One aspect of these expressed *doubts* was student questioning of the effectiveness of political action and their scepticism of the political claims made by politicians, public commentators and other students alike. Far from complacent, I argued these attitudes are suggestive of an intriguing willingness among students to rethink and experiment with political action. However, students also appeared to have *doubts* of the political community that they were part of as students, expressed as feelings of political isolation and uncertainty of the political views of other students. These *doubts* of community, I argued, seem to contribute to hesitation and insecurity among some students of participating politically outside of their 'bubble'.

This thesis extends and challenges conventional understandings of student political agency in several respects. In Chapter 2, three dominant approaches to the study of student political action were critically reviewed: agency, political economy and social network theories. Agency theories seek to explain political action primarily by reference to the capacity of students to consciously act with intent to shape the social world. The analysis presented in this thesis lends support to agency literature that suggests that, far from apathetic, contemporary students are critical of and disaffected with the current practice of formal politics (Henn & Foard 2012; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Pilkington & Pollock 2015; Mycock & Tonge 2012). Like these theories, the students in this study appeared not to have rejected politics outright, but rather expressed an underlying interest and engagement with New Zealand's democracy. They also demonstrated reluctance to paint all politicians with the same brush, and seemed responsive to those public figures who they believed genuinely took their concerns seriously.

Nevertheless, this thesis highlights some oversights of existing agency theories, especially alternative repertoire approaches. Although the students in this sample did appear to participate in political action that could be considered 'alternative' to

traditional forms of participation, these forms of political action tended not to be treated by respondents as a 'substitute' to more conventional forms of action as suggested by some agency theories (Dalton 2008). Rather, students seemed pragmatically willing to participate in both 'traditional' and 'new' forms of political action, so long as they were considered effective. The focus among students on what was 'practical' and 'achievable' also appeared to inform their engagement with actions that were more mundane and modest than suggested by alternative repertoire theories, and certainly not as grand as Pippa Norris' (2002) metaphor of a 'democratic phoenix' might suggest. This thesis also challenges agency theories that implicitly treat students as unencumbered individuals, such as those that claim that student political action is informed by their material well-being (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart & Welzel 2005). To the contrary, the forthright account among students of the *demands* they experienced, and their apparent preference for political action that was pragmatically safe in anticipation of a precarious future, suggests that the political action of New Zealand students is informed more by an absence, rather than a presence, of material well-being.

Besides these oversights, this thesis extends agency theories by suggesting that the critical perspectives of students may encompass forms of political action well beyond the ballot box. Reflecting existing agency literature, the students in this sample tended to speak with healthy scepticism about the efficacy of participating in formal politics and of the motives and political claims of politicians (Henn & Foard 2012; Sloam 2008; Cammaerts et al. 2013). However, students also expressed *doubts* about a much broader range of political activities than suggested by agency theories, including traditional forms of protest, online forms of participation and lifestyle politics. The breadth of these critical attitudes suggests that the relationship between disaffection at the ballot box and protest among students cannot be treated as causative. Nor can the adoption of alternative repertoires of political action be considered as confident and assured as sometimes portrayed in agency theories (Dalton 2008). Rather, as I argued, the breadth of the *doubts* described by participants in this research is suggestive of a more contingent and unstable, but also a more thorough-going, process of rethinking political agency among students that is evocative of pragmatist political philosophy.

The second set of theories examined were political economy theories, which emphasise the ways student agency is informed by the social, political and economic environment. The analysis presented in this thesis brings greater nuance to accounts of student political action that can be overly absolute, such as those that describe student agency as 'disabled' (Giroux 2011, 2014; Graeber 2012). Although the *demands* the students in this study experienced did appear to inform their political action, I argued these circumstances tended to be treated by respondents more as parameters to their political action, rather than barriers.

This thesis also challenges political economy theories that suggest student agency has been co-opted by neoliberal approaches (Mirowski 2013; Brown 2015). In some respects, New Zealand students did seem to have internalised neoliberal approaches in how they described their political agency, especially narratives of individuals as agentic change-makers 'making a difference'. However, these were not the only aspirations of the students in this study. Respondents expressed more collective values of contribution and connection, as well as empathy for their peers, which do not sit easily with these political economy theories. To ignore these aspirations overlooks the resistance and volatility that appears to underlie contemporary student political action.

The third literature considered was social network theories, which accounts for student political action via the density and nature of the connections among students. This analysis in this thesis brings into question the language used by these approaches to describe an absence of networks among students. Universities have typically been characterised in social network theories as 'politicising' environments, with a lack of connections, or particular types of networks, claimed to potentially 'depoliticise', 'erode' or 'neuter' the likelihood of students to participate in protest (Crossley 2008; Crossley & Ibrahim 2012; Hensby 2014). However, this thesis suggests this language is overly dichotomous. One reason is that this approach assumes that traditional forms of protest counts as 'politicisation', which cuts off analysis of student *doubts* and apparent willingness to rethink a broad range of political actions, including traditional forms of

protest. A further concern is that accounts of students as 'depoliticised' may further bolster the 'apathy' that these approaches often seek to challenge. Given many of the students in this sample already appeared to feel isolated as political actors, characterising students as 'depoliticised' may only to reinforce those beliefs.

When the focus is taken off the idea of students as 'depoliticised', this thesis suggests that the absence of networks among students *did* inform student political action, but not necessarily in the way anticipated by social network theories. Despite reporting similar political interests and a love of hearing perspectives different from their own, the students in this study tended to be uncertain of what other students thought politically and these *doubts* seemed to contribute to cautiousness among many students in how they participated politically. As I argued, there appears to be exposure and risk associated with acting politically when students are not certain how their peers might react. This uncertainty is intriguing because these *doubts* seem to be widely shared among students, even if students themselves do not know it.

### **8.2.1 Implications for future research**

The analysis presented in this thesis suggests there is scope for future research to consider student political action more holistically. Perhaps most critically, there appears to be scope for research to not only examine the attitudes of students and young people towards participation *in*, or engagement *with*, particular existing forms of political action, but also to investigate the often incoherent and unstable aspirations and desires *for* different types of political action. At a time of growing political disaffection, there is a real risk that the frustrations of students and young people will be portrayed as a narrow cynicism if the focus is solely on their scepticism towards particular forms of engagement, and not their aspirations for different ways of engaging politically. The openness among the students in this sample to other means of doing politics, while not necessarily knowing what that politics entails, arguably requires a similar openness in research approaches so as to allow students and young people to discuss the progressive development of their political agency in their own terms.

A related point is for future research to reconsider the spaces in between recognisable and traditional forms of political action. In an era of growing volatility in political action and socio-economic inequality, a risk is that research will focus on an increasingly narrow band of recognisably 'political' movements or repertoires. While these movements may be at the vanguard of new ways of engaging politically, solely focusing on these actors can create a skewed account of agency that implicitly portrays it as something that stops and starts, and those actors not involved as 'depoliticised' or 'apathetic'. Unusually in the study of political action, this project deliberately sought out a broad cohort of students who were on both the political left and right, as well as those who were active in politics and those who might conventionally be described as 'apathetic'. Including students who do not easily fit into existing theories helped to develop a more well-rounded account of the aspirations and challenges of being a political actor as a student in the twenty-first century. The breadth of this sample in a context of *doubts* in which other students tended to be uncertain of other students as political actors brought underlying common ground to the fore that students themselves were not necessarily aware of.

More generally, there is scope to consider the extent to which the concept of creative pragmatism might be applied, adapted or extended to other students. Especially among the English-speaking democracies, New Zealand students appear not to be alone in experiencing frustration with the political status quo, as well as unprecedented levels of student debt and increasingly commercialised university environments (Brooks 2017; France 2016). Despite an apparent rise of student protest globally, students in these democracies are frequently characterised as 'disabled' or 'depoliticised', and there is space here to rethink how these circumstances might be understood with more nuance. A further line of inquiry, both in New Zealand and abroad, would be to consider how student political aspirations and the creative pragmatism considered in this thesis might shift through the years after they leave university and enter the workforce.

There is also considerable potential for further research specifically to be carried out in the field of student debt, both in New Zealand and internationally. While this

study did find that debt appeared to be effectively excluding some students from participating politically, it was not able to comment on the extent to which these patterns might be exacerbating or reworking already existing inequalities. Future research could consider the relationship between student attitudes and experiences of debt to their social background, and how these shape their participation in campus life and democracies more generally.

In part because of the broad scope of this research, a final field that emerged during research that was not fully explored, but which is suggestive of a valuable avenue for future research, is the development of 'dude-bro' culture in New Zealand. During this study, there were several troubling instances at multiple universities in which women and some minorities were targeted or objectified by mostly male students, with these actions typically defended as 'boys being boys'. These instances are concerning, especially given their similarity to 'lad' or 'frat' culture in the United Kingdom and United States (Sundaram 2016). Research in these countries has pointed to strong links of this culture to a rise of sexual assault on campuses, but also its relationship to commercialised universities and corporate sponsorship (Phipps & Young 2014; Armstrong & Hamilton 2014; Reisz 2015). With some exceptions, there have been no similar studies in New Zealand, largely out of concern for the profitability of universities. Because of the relatively small number of universities in New Zealand, there is considerable scope to carry out a university-wide investigation of the impact of 'dude-bro' culture, similar to this study that conducted interviews with students across all universities.

### **8.3 Refocusing on the wider context of student political action**

A number of practical implications also arise from the analysis in this thesis. In the opening of this thesis, it was identified that students are often 'blamed' for a lack of protest or for failing to participate in ways that are expected. Yet the reported attitudes of the students in this study suggest that rather than pursuing a deficit approach that focuses on the perceived faults of individuals, greater attention needs to be given to the wider political context of student political action. In this section, I consider these

implications in three fields: first, political parties and other organisations that are not student-led, second, student debt and, third, university environments.

### ***8.3.1 Political parties and other organisations***

The students who participated in this research, while critical, demonstrated an underlying interest and engagement with political issues and New Zealand's democracy. Consistent with agency theories, this apparent civic engagement among students raises valid questions about the role of political institutions themselves in contributing to the seeming 'disengagement' of students in established forms of participation.

Particularly striking in this study is the apparent frustrations of students that political parties across the political spectrum, as well as other organisations students were part of, tended to treat them as understudies, and not as actors in themselves. New Zealand students often appeared to be relegated to supportive roles within political parties and organisations, doing the ground work of distributing information and collecting donations but having little say in an organisation's overall direction. They described rarely being given meaningful opportunities to be politically in the driver's seat and well-supported as political actors. Not surprisingly, many of the students in this sample, on both the political left and right, seemed to have become frustrated and disillusioned with organisations that were happy to make use of their energy and enthusiasm, but unwilling to take their concerns seriously. They appeared to feel taken for granted, and many described walking away as a result.

That students expressed these frustrations is potentially a considerable loss for these political parties and organisations. Despite their frustrations, students appeared not to have withdrawn from public life. To the contrary, there seemed to be a strong sense of civic engagement among students, not necessarily to vote for candidates or help out organisations that were unresponsive to their concerns, but in the broader sense of wanting to work together to address collective problems. Students appeared to aspire to contribute to a political community, but that contribution had to matter.

This stated frustration, but also willingness to engage, suggests there is a need for organisations that work with students to reconsider their internal processes to be more responsive to the concerns of students and to foster greater diversity of opinion, no matter how difficult. Particularly within political parties, politics that is treated as a matter of tailoring messages to capture an elusive middle ground can also be a type of politics that is narrow in its vision of what is possible politically, and appears to have little purchase on the democratic imagination of students. The question of ‘why bother?’ was raised by many of the students in this study across the political spectrum, and there seems to be a real risk that party politics may increasingly appear unresponsive and irrelevant to the concerns of students.

### **8.3.2 Debt and the wider policy context**

Besides political parties and external organisations, listening to student attitudes raises questions about a much broader policy context. Underlying the analysis in this thesis is a double standard that needs to be acknowledged. Students are expected to be politically ‘engaged’, while taking on high levels of debt to pay for their education, living in poor conditions and working long hours to meet week-to-week expenses. They are told to ‘make a difference’, while worrying about the future implications of their actions and lacking the security to be able to act politically with confidence. And they are encouraged to ‘be the change’, while experiencing stress and anxiety that they were not ‘enough’.

These conditions are not of students’ own making. Like other English-speaking democracies, the rapid rise in student debt over the past two decades is not an accident nor the misjudgement of individuals. High levels of part-time work is not a choice, and anxiety and stress are not ‘just part of being a student’ – despite the claims of some students who participated in this research. Rather, these conditions are the result of a series of policies implemented by successive New Zealand governments that, in theory, have sought to make higher education more open, accessible, equitable and efficient.

The analysis presented in this thesis suggests that this theory of student debt has not eventuated in practice. Yes, more students in New Zealand are attending university than ever before. Yes, there are some students who appear confident about ‘dealing’ with

their debt. Yes, some students may use interest-free loans as 'free' money and might regret their spending decisions later. However, listening to the attitudes of the students in this study is also suggestive of an underlying precarity and vulnerability among students, both those with high *and low* levels of debt. This inequality and strain cannot be picked up in analyses that dominate policy debates about support for students that evaluate the consequences of debt through analysis of average payback times (e.g. Engler 2014).

What is particularly striking about the analysis presented in this thesis is what a gamble debt seems to be for students. Despite growing up in one of the most radically reformed neoliberal democracies, and a quarter century after the student loan scheme was first introduced, most students in this sample did not appear to adopt neoliberal models of citizenship and tended not to treat debt in the manner proposed by rational economic actor models: that students will select a course of study that will bring about the greatest personal returns. Instead, respondents appeared to make 'trade-offs' against an uncertain and insecure future in taking on debt. For the students in this study, there seemed to be no one 'right' answer to how they negotiated debt. Should they take on high levels of debt in the present, have a well-rounded experience at university, make friends and form crucial social networks, but at the risk of future vulnerability? Or should they work long hours during study, stay at home and save money, but make few lasting connections? Not surprisingly, there seemed to be an underlying agitation among the participants in this study that they could always be doing something different, academically, socially and politically.

Furthermore, this thesis highlights the impact that debt appears to have on students both with high *and low* levels of debt. While high levels of debt has long been considered a source of risk and vulnerability (Callender & Jackson 2008; Dwyer et al. 2011), the attitudes of the students in this sample suggests that the decision *not* to have debt may be just as profound as taking on large amounts of debt. Moreover, ideas of privilege and guilt appear to intersect to make debt a challenging subject for students to discuss collectively. Rather than focusing on the policies that contribute to their

collective circumstances, ideas of privilege and guilt seemed to reduce the challenge of student resistance to their circumstances, in the form of their empathy for their peers, by individualising their compassion towards 'some' students.

These apparent privately felt anxieties should give us pause for thought at a time when a growing number of reports suggest student well-being is declining (NZUSA 2015, p. 21; Braybrook 2015). While the relationship of debt to these indicators is not straightforward, the underlying agitation among the students in this sample that they were not doing 'enough', coupled with the concerns of respondents for the well-being of some of their peers, suggests there is a need to rethink the systems that are in place to support students financially. Greater provision of support services for students is critical in the immediate future, particularly the removal of caps on access to mental health services (NZUSA 2015, p. 1). However, in themselves, these processes are inadequate if not considered in conjunction with a wider shift in how students are supported financially.

This analysis in this thesis also identified some implications of debt for student political participation that are concerning. Debt is usually justified in policy debates as making higher education more 'equitable'. Yet far from 'equitable', debt appears to be contributing to significant inequalities in political participation among students. The analysis presented in this thesis suggests that, in practice, debt is turning political participation into a luxury available for some students, rather than a right. Moreover, among the students in this study who were able to actively participate, many were understandably cautious about their future. Although these students pragmatically demonstrated impressive creativity in navigating these challenges, they tended to participate in a 'tunnelled' politics that was agreeable and safe. The combined risk here is that the democratic imagination of students is being squandered, either by undermining the capability of students to participate politically, or in encouraging a politics that seeks out narrow political openings within the many challenges of their lives.

These political consequences of debt are not ones that can necessarily be ‘fixed’ by tinkering at the margins of New Zealand’s student loan scheme. Debates around student debt have recently been revived in policy discussions as the total balance of student debt in New Zealand reaches \$15 billion. These debates have almost exclusively been dominated by arguments of whether interest should be reinstated on student loans, such as Ron Crawford’s (2016b, p. 346) proposal to re-introduce interest to make the scheme more efficient, or Max Lin’s (2016, p. 25) suggestion in the Child Poverty Action Group report that re-introducing interest could be considered as a way to alleviate student hardship in the immediate future. However, these modifications may be beside the point when the existence of the student loan scheme itself is creating deep inequalities within a generation, with the consequences of this debt still largely unknown – economically, but also socially and politically. So long as there is student debt and an inadequacy of student support, these inequalities seem likely to persist.

### **8.3.3 *University environments***

Universities have a share in these concerns of the wider context of student political action. The students in this sample were politically active in a context in which there seemed to be a conspicuous lack of social networks, or more simply friendships, among some students that were established at university. Respondents tended to blame themselves for the difficulties they had making these connections at university. Yet the analysis in this thesis suggests that the wider context is critical in determining this lack of social networks. One aspect of this wider context is debt and the associated demands of part-time work or commuting long distances contribute to these challenges. However, university environments also play a role in the difficulties many students appeared to have forming friendships.

It is possible to interpret this lack of connections among some students as a deliberate and successful attempt on the part of universities to diffuse student political action. There is a well-recognised tension that student political action in an increasingly commercialised university environment may potentially be seen as a risk to the marketing and profitability of universities (Chakraborty 2013; Rochford 2014).

Reflecting these arguments, there were troubling reports among some of the students in this sample of campus security and police surveillance being inappropriately used to threaten, single out and intimidate student protesters.

Nevertheless, the difficulty of some students appeared to have making friends should concern university managers. Universities are arguably increasingly positioning themselves as providing an education for global citizens (Larner 2012). Yet contrary to these goals, many students in this study seemed not to know the community that they were part of as students. While students described enjoying seeing the diversity of students on campus and appeared to desire connection with others with views different from their own, the students in this sample appeared, in practice, to not to be living this diversity.

There are some practical but important changes that could be made by universities to help facilitate connections between students. In particular, the analysis in this is suggestive of the value of common student spaces that are not closely monitored by the university or students' associations on behalf of the university: common rooms, meeting rooms, notice boards and locker storage. Although most universities are offering new spaces intended for students, they also appear to often be tightly controlled, with students in this sample indicating that they felt little sense of ownership over them or that they felt like a visitor using them rather than part of a broader student community. Besides student spaces, student responses are also suggest that common times are important, such as a lunch hour. While it could be argued that changes to timetables would make them less 'efficient', there currently seems to be few opportunities when student timetables do not clash for students to meet collectively. Cheap food sources appear to matter for supporting students to remain on campus, as does available and affordable parking or transport options, such as bus services. So too does tutorials and fieldwork, especially at first and second year levels, and childcare services.

Besides these specific changes, the analysis presented in this thesis suggests universities may need to relinquish some power and autonomy back to students'

associations. The student officers in this sample tended to be highly aware and understanding of why universities might be reluctant to give students' associations autonomy. Like any elected body, student officers could at times focus on trivial issues that did not necessarily concern all students or make decisions that could bring poor press, and there was a lack of consistency in executive members year to year. As students themselves acknowledged, the involvement of university managers or the use of contracts had in many respects made student events and organisation more efficient and polished.

Yet the findings of this study also caution us that a vital sense of community, collective ownership and agency is at risk of being lost with the gradual removal of autonomy from students' associations. In the push to be taken seriously and meet service requirements, students' association events are increasingly contracted out to professional events managers to provide the best possible experience for students. However, the analysis presented suggests that this approach helps to reinforce a notion of students as spectators or consumers of a student 'experience', rather than active members and contributors to a community. While there remain many opportunities for students to engage with individual clubs, few students seem to be given opportunities to participate as active organisers or volunteers in major campus-wide events. Contracting external event managers also appears to reflect a significant lack of trust in students to independently organise themselves in what the university considers an acceptable and responsible manner.

#### **8.4 Students and solidarity**

In this final section, I turn to the implications of this thesis for students themselves. A key intent of this thesis was to document and acknowledge the tensions and challenges of political action not otherwise visible to a new cohort of university students in New Zealand. Despite the demographic and political diversity of the students who participated in this research, there was a surprising degree of consistency in student responses. Respondents appeared to share frustration with the political status quo and tended to be sceptical of the motivations and claims of other political actors, but also

uncertain about the robustness of their own beliefs. They were inclined to be anxious that they were not doing 'enough' and to worry about the consequences of the pressures facing contemporary students for some of their peers.

What is striking about these seemingly shared attitudes among interview participants is that students appeared for the most part to not be aware of this common ground, and that is both one of the biggest challenges but also opportunities for students as political actors. That students appeared uncertain of the political views of other students potentially leaves the student body politically vulnerable to manipulation by external actors. Many of the students in this sample described feeling politically isolated and held a belief that the student body was 'apathetic'. Acting politically in this context seemed to take courage and brought risk and exposure for students. At the same time, many respondents appeared to limit their action based on what they thought others would consider acceptable, professional and realistic – whether politicians, university managers, corporate leaders or other students. The risk here is that in a rush to bring about change and 'make a difference', the democratic imagination that underlies the critical attitudes of students will be co-opted to deliver more of the same, rather than a more collective and fundamental challenge to how we interact politically.

Instead of delivering tangible and immediate 'outcomes' and 'solutions', the analysis presented in this thesis suggests the value of types of politics that acknowledge and engage the creative pragmatism of students. In part, this acknowledgement entails giving greater attention to elements of the political environment that appear to inform a pragmatic preference among students for narrow or tunnelled political action. In particular, there seems scope to acknowledge the *demands* students privately experienced, and legitimise them as public issues. There was a tendency for students in this study to describe the challenging circumstances they experienced as individual and inevitable problems. This focus is understandable given there appear to be considerable disparities in student experiences, from their loan balance, to their confidence in the future, to who they 'blamed' for their circumstances. These differences need to be acknowledged. Nevertheless, anxiety, vulnerability and inequality is not 'part of being

a student', and there is considerable potential for students' associations, in particular, to legitimise these individual experiences as collective problems. The analysis in this thesis suggests there is already an underlying empathy among students to build on: the students in this study expressed concern for their peers, worries about loneliness in their communities and anxiety about future precarity.

The narrowing aspects of the creative pragmatism discussed in this thesis is also suggestive of the value of directly addressing student *doubts* about the political views of other students. As noted earlier, acting politically appeared to take courage for many students. There seemed to be a concerning tendency among the students in this study to judge their peers more harshly than other political actors. This apparent double standard is profoundly counter-productive, as it fractures the student body, leaving unaddressed the role of the policy environment, institutions or university managers in contributing to these circumstances. As such, this thesis suggests that there may be considerable value in nurturing a collectively supportive environment among students, and providing renewed opportunities for students to reconnect with their peers.

Some elements of this environment have been touched on already in this chapter, such as reclaiming common spaces as student areas and challenging the continual cut back of courses, tutorials and fieldwork. However, the *doubts* about community expressed by many of the students in this sample are suggestive of the importance of engaging in types of politics that are made by students, for students. That some student organisations pursue slick and 'smart' campaigns is understandable, as they are geared towards appearing professional and responsible so that their claims might be taken seriously by others within and beyond the university. Yet while they may be more polished, these approaches also tend to provide a pre-finished product to students that can potentially be remote and impersonal, and less an organic achievement of a community of citizens. In a context of *doubts* of community, there seems to be scope for forms of political engagement that are focused less on demanding specific outcomes from others, and more on creating denser connections and solidarity among students.

The findings of this study also point to ways that students might potentially be engaged through their creative pragmatism, in particular by nurturing their identified capacity to critically question political action and conviction that there is another way of doing politics. The students who participated in this research did not seem to be content with the political status quo and seemed to be actively rethinking their political agency. Although these students did not necessarily articulate what an alternative politics might be, the analysis in this thesis suggests that there is value in this capacity retaining its openness and imagination, rather than a politics that is focused on incremental 'solutions' with unrelenting positivism, or which is informed by what others consider acceptable. As such, supporting the creative pragmatism of students may instead involve encouraging students to not necessarily be polite and respectful, but rather to provide space for dissent, resistance and solidarity.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Timetable for interviews

Dates	Location	University	Interviews	Notes
November 2014 – January 2015	Christchurch	Canterbury University	2	Pilot interviews
		Auckland University	2	
		Otago University	1	
<i>Break</i>				
2-5 February	Auckland	Auckland University	2	
		AUT	2	
9-13 February	Wellington	Victoria University	6	
16-20 February	Dunedin	Otago University	7	Orientation week
23 February – 2 March	Auckland	Auckland University	5	Orientation week
		AUT	5	
3-6 March	Hamilton	Waikato University	3	Orientation week
9-13 March	Palmerston North	Massey University	4	
12-13 March	Wellington	Victoria University	5	
		Massey University	2	
<i>Break</i>				
23-27 March	Auckland	Auckland University	2	
		AUT (North Shore)	2	
		Massey (Albany)	4	
26 March	Hamilton	Waikato University	2	
<i>Break</i>				
11-29 May	Christchurch	Canterbury University	4	
		Lincoln University	2	
	Interviews via Skype	Auckland University	1	
		AUT	2	
		Victoria	2	
		Otago University	3	

## Appendix 2: Characteristics of interview sample relative to national student body

Characteristic		Interview count	Interview proportion (%)	National population (%)
Gender	Female	38	54	56 <sup>1</sup>
	Male	32	46	44
Age	24 and under	53	76	64 <sup>2</sup>
	Over 25	17	24	36
Ethnicity	New Zealand European	42	60	60 <sup>1</sup>
	Māori	9	13	9
	Pasifika	6	8	7
	Asian	14	20	25
	Other	3	4	7
Religion	None	43	61	-
	Christian	16	23	-
	Islam	5	7	-
	Buddhist	5	7	-
	Other	1	1	-
University	University of Auckland	15	21	25 <sup>3</sup>
	Victoria University	15	21	13
	University of Otago	11	16	14
	Massey University	8	11	14
	Auckland University of Technology	8	11	14
	University of Canterbury	6	9	9
	Waikato University	5	7	8
	Lincoln University	2	3	3
Length of study	Average years at university	-	3.6	-
Level of study	Undergraduate	49	70	-
	Postgraduate	21	30	-
Study type	Full time	63	90	70 <sup>4</sup>
	Part time	7	10	10
Domestic/ International	Domestic	61	87	85 <sup>5</sup>
	International	9	13	15
Degree studied	Humanities, social sciences and creative arts	15	21	24 <sup>6</sup>
	Economics, commerce and management	15	21	22
	Natural science, agriculture and environment studies	13	19	17
	Health science	8	11	10
	Law	7	10	6

	Engineering	6	6	5
	Other	4	6	9
Debt	Yes	57	81	82 <sup>7</sup>
	No	13	19	18
	Average debt	-	\$32,000	\$22,000
Employment during term-time	Yes	47	67	65 <sup>8</sup>
	No	23	33	35
	Average hours worked	-	16	14
Living arrangements	Flatting	39	56	-
	With parents	16	23	-
	Halls of residence	11	16	-
	Single apartment	3	4	-
	Own home	1	1	-
Voted in 2014 election	Yes	49	70	63 <sup>9</sup>
	No	10	14	37
	Not able to vote	11	16	-
Political party most supported	National Party	17	24	32 <sup>10</sup>
	Labour Party	15	21	25
	Green Party	19	27	27
	Internet/MANA	4	6	5
	ACT Party	2	3	2
	Māori Party	2	3	2
	New Zealand First	1	1	2
	Conservative Party	1	1	1

<sup>1</sup> Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.6

<sup>2</sup> Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.1

<sup>3</sup> Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.30

<sup>4</sup> Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.16

<sup>5</sup> Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments, ENR.10

<sup>6</sup> Education Counts 2016, Provider-based enrolments: The field of study of the courses studied at tertiary education, FOS\_ENR.3

<sup>7</sup> Average debt of graduate with a bachelor's degree; Education Counts 2015, p. 37

<sup>8</sup> NZUSA 2015, p. 8-9

<sup>9</sup> Electoral Commission 2015; Voters as a percentage of total enrolled, ages 18-29.

<sup>10</sup> NZES 2011, 'On election day, which party liked most'. Determining the political perspectives of the student population was challenging, as there is surprisingly little existing empirical data that quantifies student participation in politics as a discrete cohort, such as whether the voted in the election or what party they voted for. For instance, Electoral Commission data is reported by age, not by occupation. The most applicable publicly available data was from the 2011 New Zealand Electoral Survey, which includes 148 respondents studying at level 7 and above (bachelor's degree and above). While imperfect in that the qualification level is not exclusive to universities and the survey includes a relatively small sample of students, it gives an indication of the political views across universities.

## Appendix 3: Short questionnaire

### Understanding the attitudes of New Zealand university students towards political action

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Please answer the following questions about yourself. You are not required to answer any question you do not wish to answer. The information will be used to provide some background information on the people taking part in the project.

Are you:  Female  Male  Other

Age:  18-19  20-24  25-34  35 or older

With which ethnic group (or groups) do you identify? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. Māori, NZ European, Chinese)

What is your religion, if you have one? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been studying at university? \_\_\_\_\_ years

Are you an undergrad or postgrad student?  Undergrad  Postgrad

Are you a domestic or international student?  Domestic  International

Which subject(s) are you studying at university? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your enrollment status?  Full time  Part time

Do you have a student loan?  Yes  No

If so, please specify the approximate amount: \_\_\_\_\_

What are your current living arrangements? \_\_\_\_\_  
(e.g. shared flat, halls, single apartment, own home)

Are you currently employed?  Yes  No

If so, please specify the approximate number of hours worked \_\_\_\_\_ hours  
per week:

Are you active in any clubs or groups *on* campus?  Yes  No  
(1 or more hour per week)

If yes, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Are you active in any clubs or groups *outside* of campus?  Yes  No

If yes, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Did you vote in the 2014 election?  Yes  No  Not able to vote

If any, which political party do you most support? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4: Interview guide

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>
Introduce study and explain objectives; confidentiality; timing Consent and short questionnaire Outline structure of the interview
<b>SECTION 1: Activities on campus</b> <i>Encourage students to start talking about and reflecting on their involvement in groups on campus, particularly detailed coverage of circumstances that led to key events/periods</i>
Involvement in clubs and groups 1.1 Description of clubs involved in 1.2 When/how became involved in [club/group]? 1.3 Why did you join? What appealed? What do you enjoy about being in the club? 1.4 OR why didn't you become involved? What did you not like?  Activities 1.5 Description of activities with [club/group] 1.6 What types of actions has your [club/group] pursued? 1.7 Why [that style] of action? In what ways was it effective? 1.8 What were the limitations/weaknesses/challenges with the approach?  Success/challenges 1.9 Why do you think students join the [club/group] – what do they get out of it? 1.10 What is frustrating? What are the major challenges you face as a club?  External influences 1.11 What external support does your club receive? (i.e. sponsorship, resources, mentors, facilities) 1.12 What support does your club receive in return?
<b>SECTION 2: Political perspectives</b> <i>Encourage students to reflect on their personal views, how they have changed over time and why</i>
Political background 2.1 How has your political perspective changed since coming to university? Why/why not? 2.2 Attitudes towards parliament and party politics. Why do you most support [party]? 2.3 Why/why not did you vote? 2.4 How comfortable expressing political views – class, peers  Political agency 2.5 What is an issue that matters to you? It can be anything – global, local or something in between 2.6 How have you sought to affect change on [issue], if at all? 2.7 What approaches/methods do you considered effective? What are not? Why/why not? 2.8 What are difficulties/challenges you have encountered? 2.9 To what extent do you think your views are similar/different to other students?

### SECTION 3: Reflections on campus and student life

#### Campus life and the university

- 3.1 Expectations and surprises for when first came to uni
- 3.2 How would you describe your experience as a student? What do you like/not like about uni?
- 3.3 How has debt affected you or your friends, if at all?
- 3.4 Has your experience as a student affected your political action? If so, how?
- 3.5 To what extent did you find it easy to make friends or connections with other students?
- 3.6 What aspects of campus enabled you to meet people with similar interests to yourself?

#### Students' associations

- 3.7 How much do you know about the students' association? What is their role?
- 3.8 From your perspective, how has the role of students' associations changed?
- 3.9 What does it do well, what could it do better?
- 3.10 Elections

#### *For student exec members:*

- 3.11 What are the strengths of [students' association]?
- 3.12 What are the key challenges that you face in your role? And for the students' association more generally?

#### Beyond campus

- 3.13 Open discussion of their interaction with the wider community based on short questionnaire
- 3.14 If so: in what ways, how, why?
- 3.15 If not: why not? What challenges/barriers for engaging beyond campus?

### FINISHING UP

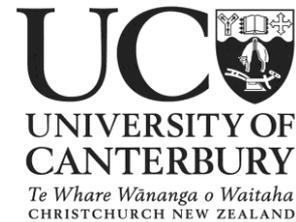
Anything else?

Other students interested



## Appendix 6: Information sheet

Department of Political Science  
Telephone: +64 3 364 2987  
Email: sylvia.nissen@pg.canterbury.ac.nz  
[Date]



### Understanding the attitudes of New Zealand university students towards political action

#### Information for interview participants

I am Sylvia Nissen, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Canterbury. As part of this degree, I am interviewing students throughout New Zealand about the activities they participate in on and off-campus, including their involvement in clubs, volunteering and membership in a range of political and apolitical groups. I also examine how student political views develop during their time at university and their perceptions of campus life and student culture.

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this information sheet in full before making a decision.

#### What would my participation in this study involve?

An audio-recorded interview with me at a public location of your choosing, such as at a café or office if you have one. The interview will take around 30 minutes to one hour and involve an open-ended discussion about your involvement in groups on and off campus, your political views and how they developed, and your reflections about your university.

A few weeks after the interview I will send you a transcript of the interview for you to approve. You can change anything on that transcript up until you approve it.

Participating in this research project is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. If you withdraw, I will remove any information you provided up until your approval of the interview transcript.

#### Is what I say confidential?

Yes! Everything you say in the interview will be completely confidential. Although the results of this project will be published, your identity will be completely anonymous and not be made public. A pseudonym, which you will choose at the start of the interview, will be used in transcriptions and in any published material to disguise your identity.

#### What happens to the data?

Interview transcripts and other data will be kept on University premises, in a locked filing cabinet for ten years after the completion of the thesis. Data will only be accessed by the researchers and a transcriber, who will sign a confidentiality agreement.

**How can I find out about the results of the study?**

You can receive a summary of the project results by putting your email address on the consent form or by contacting the researcher ([sylvia.nissen@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:sylvia.nissen@pg.canterbury.ac.nz)) in mid-2016 at the conclusion of the project. A thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library from the second half 2016.

**What do I do if I have any concerns about this project?**

You can contact me at any point regarding this research ([sylvia.nissen@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:sylvia.nissen@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or 021 161 5550). My project is being carried out under the supervision of Dr Bronwyn Hayward, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science. She can be contacted at [bronwyn.hayward@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:bronwyn.hayward@canterbury.ac.nz) and will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)).

Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia Nissen