The University of Otago recruits most of its students from outside of Dunedin. The location of a well-defined student “quarter” within easy walking distance of both Campus and a major concentration of public bars has given the University of Otago a student social environment unique in New Zealand and rare in the world: the quintessential “college town”.

The students’ transition from a caregiver-supervised home to living in a strange town is eased by the Halls of Residence, independent high volume residences managed by wardens and supervised by a hierarchy of Assistant Wardens and Residential Assistants. Fully catered and heated, the Halls also foster the social and sporting integration of their residents, as well as providing tutorials and study groups. After their first academic year at University, students move out of their Hall into unsupervised flats, often with former Hall fellows as flatmates. In this way the student is socially and academically drawn into the University community.

The problem with this model is that not all students go through this transition process. In 2005 roughly four thousand students started their first year at the University of Otago. Only half of these had addresses in a Hall of Residence. Many students were therefore adapting to University study, developing domestic life skills and were frequently working to supplement their income at the same time. Coupled with this is a knowledge that many of their peers do not have to pay an unexpected power bill and have private tutors supplied at no extra cost.

In 2002 and 2003 research conducted by the Otago University Students’ Association (OUSA) and the University of Otago suggested that many non-hall first-year students felt disadvantaged and somewhat marginalised by this state of affairs. This was especially the case in Law or Health Sciences courses, where grades of a certain level are required before the student is admitted into the programme. Often, these programmes do not just accept everyone who achieves a B+ or higher, but successful students must be in the top deciles of specific papers. While all students are competing to achieve the highest grades, non-hall first-years must do so without the private tutoring and organised study groups halls provide their residents.

The University Senate Student Services Sub-Committee (SSSSC) formed a working party to examine the issue in 2003. There is no indication that a broad study of circumstances at other universities was conducted. The SSSSC working party identified three options which were then explored:

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1 Of the non-hall students in 2005, about a thousand were eighteen to twenty years old.
2 An OUSA survey of 3928 students of first-year papers in Semester One, 2005, stated that 39.5% of non-hall students had part-time work of some kind, as opposed to 11.8% of hall residents.

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• Organising simple peer study/discussion groups had the disadvantage that the “shared learning” concept broke down when dealing with issues that were difficult for all students to grasp.

• Most Hall Wardens were reluctant to allow non-Hall students to take part in Hall tutorials, regardless of remuneration. There were also social barriers to some non-Hall students attending Hall tutorials (e.g. mature students).

• Separate extra-curricular tutorials could be provided for non-hall students.

Several caveats were made when recommending a supplementary tutorial system. The first was from University department representatives, who felt that the term “tutorial” suggested that these were part of the paper’s programme, rather than a supplement to the resources provided by the department. The departments pointed out that administration would drain already stretched resources. Lastly, Hall students pay for their tutorials as part of their board at the Hall of Residence, so free tutorials for non-Hall students would create an inequitable situation against Hall residents.

OUSA’s priority was to provide extra academic support for non-hall students, while social support would be introduced over several years. The first OUSA tutorials were in 2004. The issue of an implicit official sanction from the term “tutorial” was balanced against another description misleading students as to content, so it was decided that the fact that the tutorials were provided by OUSA would indicate that these tutorials were supplementary.

While the 2004 tutorials were well attended, the programme was organised by several individuals within OUSA and operational inconsistencies appeared. In 2005 a project co-ordinator was employed by OUSA to provide centralised administration of the programme and to expand support for non-hall first-year students. Both 2004 and 2005 gained over four hundred enrolments for tutorials in half a dozen papers. The major differences were that the 2004 tutorials operated towards the end of semester to review exam papers, while the 2005 tutorials were divided between this “Exam Panic” format and longer term streams that followed the course material throughout the semester. Greater effort was made in 2005 to keep tutorial sizes manageable.

Tutorials were advertised in lectures, on the “Blackboard” computer system, and by posters in targeted locations (for example, outside the Law Library for Law tutorials). Tutors were senior students. The tutors were paid NZ$35 per hour of class time, with one or two hours of preparation time included for each stream as an incentive. Tutors from different disciplines regarded this pay level with varying enthusiasm. The availability of tutors varied across departments, but sufficient quantities of tutors were found in each discipline.

The biggest operational issue was the line between insufficient tutorials and an oversupply that caused financial loss. Tutorial enrolment peaks as exams approach. This occasionally meant that some ten-week courses were cancelled due to insufficient enrolment, only to have the “Exam Panic” streams swamped by applicants, most of who were turned away due to a shortage of tutors.

Tutorials were subjected to assessment via in-class anonymous surveys, usually delivered by the OUSA co-ordinator. Approval was very high from the students, with

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most students rating the tutors and tutorials as “excellent” – the highest possible response³. While one would like to believe that this reflected the brilliance of the tutors, it might reflect the desperation of many students enrolled in pre-professional courses. An informal illustration is this quote from a post-graduate student: “health science students get nosebleeds if they get less than an A+”. Given that most tutors were 400-level or post-graduate, and each was approved by the relevant academic department, it is probable that the quality of the tutorials is equivalent to their University counterparts. Hall of Residence tutorials, however, are often run by second year students who received good marks in the paper eight months before. This means that they often lack an overall contextual familiarity with the material they are tutoring, and this restricts their ability to answer particular questions. This statement is supported by several comments from the student surveys which suggested that the OUSA tutorials were far more comprehensive than those provided by some Halls of Residence. It is unknown how the respondents were in a position to compare the two tutorial programmes, although the existence of comparison conversations between hall and non-hall students is the most likely explanation.

2005’s priority was streamlining the OUSA tutorials, but this was not the only objective. The brand “Scarfie Col”⁴ was developed as a focus for the services aimed at non-hall first-year students. Several Halls of Residence at Otago are called “College”, for example Selwyn College and Knox College. “Scarfie Col” combines this Hall of Residence title with the “Scarfie” slang term for students. The OUSA website includes an extensive section to help first-year students, in particular non-Hall First-Years. Lifestyle articles, such as flatting advice columns, are included as well as general information about the tutorials. The website also links to the OUSA Student Support Centre, where students can find advocacy and financial advice, as well as a food bank, and support for queer students and a variety of other welfare services.

Free Scarfie Col membership is available for all non-hall first-years in 2006. This will give access to a range of study materials available from the OUSA website, as well as a regular e-newsletter and invitations to a variety of social events. “Scarfie Buddies” will be an online database of people looking for study partners for their papers. Open to all students, it is an experimental programme. Restricting participation to non-hall first-year students would only restrict the pool of potential study partners. Scarfie Col’s 2006 on-line plans are imprecise and imaginative, rather than actual, because operational implementation has been critically hampered by a lack of customer focus from Information Technology contractors. An actual programme planned for the end of 2006 is “Year 13 engagement”. Roughly six hundred non-Hall First-Years attend Dunedin schools in the two years preceding University enrolment. It is therefore reasonable to avoid competing in the “Orientation Week Information Flood” and meet students four months beforehand, i.e. the preceding October at their schools. The fourteen high schools in the Central Dunedin area will therefore be given information leaflets and offers of class presentations.

The long-term vision for “Scarfie Col” is for non-hall first-year students to feel as academically and socially included in university life as hall residents. This does not necessarily mean that they should be treated and behave the same as hall residents,

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³ 61% evaluated the tutors as “excellent”, 33% as “good”, and only 6% rate their tutors as “neutral”. No tutor received even a single negative rating.
⁴ http://www.ousa.org.nz/content/view/242/238/
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but that they have enough social and academic support that they can grow within, rather than outside, the university environment. The goal is not just student retention, but an improvement of the University of Otago student experience for a large but unrecognised group of students.