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To cite this article: Anita Louise Wheeldon, Fiona Russo & Anup Shrestha (05 Sep 2025): 'Screaming dumpster fire crazy': first-year students illustrate hope in the midst of isolation and chaos, *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, DOI: [10.1080/00220620.2025.2552369](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2025.2552369)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2025.2552369>



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Published online: 05 Sep 2025.



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'Screaming dumpster fire crazy': first-year students illustrate hope in the midst of isolation and chaos

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ABSTRACT

Managerialised universities perpetuate students as consumers, structures that physically and virtually separate the university community from one another, and relegate quality teaching as secondary to research output. This study reveals more of the impact of this by evoking a deeper view of embodied, unspoken first-year student experiences. Using an arts-based methodology (novel in this field), the struggles, perseverance, and hope during the first semester of study are seen. Not because of support from the managerialised university, but *in spite of it*. Social support from family and friends plays a peripheral part in this early stage, but their first semester is an experience of navigating their student lives alone. Students come to study with deep emotional reasons, not purely rational and financial ones. University leaders and academics should pay attention to an absence of social connection to the university community when transactional, managerialised conditions treat students as consumers – not learners.



ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 November 2024

Accepted 20 August 2025

KEYWORDS

First year experience; universities; students as consumers; arts-based methodology; managerialism transitioning to university

Introduction

The process of transitioning into university has many challenges and involves navigating the new environment in terms of learning and assessment expectations, as well as accessing support in enrolment, library and digital services. There are also social aspects of the first year where students seek to find their new peer groups and develop a sense of belonging and mattering. These are vital aspects of university study known to foster success and retention (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007; Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe 2014). As Kift (2015, 53) points out, 'It is clear that first year students face unique

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challenges as they make very individual transitions to university study; particularly academically and socially, but also culturally, administratively, and environmentally’.

This already challenging experience is compounded by the managerialised treatment of students as consumers, which reinforces a consumer, rather than learner identity (Bunce and Bennett 2019). The problem is that consumer identities result in students developing entitlements that are not necessarily aligned with their learning efforts. They become hyper-focused on assessment completion rather than the critical thinking that comes with the learning journey (Todd et al. 2016; Bunce and Bennett 2019; Tomlinson and Jackson 2019).

It is also known that managerial structures and increasing centralisation of administrative and support services away from academic units cause the university community to be physically and virtually divided and separated from one and other. The impact is segregation, contested spaces, heightened conflict, and general confusion about the role each plays in delivering higher education (for example, Wheeldon, Whitty, and van der Hoorn 2022a; Tay et al. 2023; Caldwell 2024). Much of this research focuses on the work lives of academics and professional staff. So to better understand the impact of this trend on transitioning students, this study explores more deeply the first-year experiences within a managerialised university. It deploys an arts-based methodology to elicit a deeper, embodied experience that does not rely on the use of positivist words alone (Bagnoli 2009).

Many of our current research methodologies have a heavy reliance on the spoken word to convey experiences (Creswell 2013; Smith 2015). This narrowing of exploration can cause problems in terms of broadening existing understandings of particular phenomena (Visse, Hansen, and Leget 2019). This study overcomes this by having students undertake an exercise where they firstly recall their experience of their first semester of study through re-imagination, then they draw that experience. This evoked a more nuanced and unspoken understanding of their feelings during their first semester of study. The resulting drawings reveal symbolism that adds meaning to the struggles and perseverance of undergraduate students in their first semester of studies but also worryingly shows an absence of social connection to the university community.

Literature review

We will first set the problem addressed in this study in terms of the current literature around the first-year experience, and the treatment of students as consumers in the managerialised university. We also discuss the conditions within the managerialised university that have the effect of separating the university community personally and virtually from one and other. We then position this study’s purpose.

The first year experience

The experience of commencing university studies is intense as new students face significant changes and identity transformations (Brunton and Buckley 2020; Cabir Hakyemez and Mardikyan 2021). The formation of one’s identity as a student and a learner is an important step in the learning journey because it gives students the cultural capital (comprised of knowledge and a sense of inclusion) to feel able to cope in the university structures (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The formation of this identity is a result of situated

interactions with the university in which ‘students pick up cues regarding the horizons of possibility for identity formation’ (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007, 223).

When the formation of this student identity is jeopardised, students may be more likely to ‘opt out’ of learning opportunities, which manifests in an overall disengagement from the learning process (Lund Dean and Jolly 2012; Pownall, Kennedy, and Acquaye 2019). This identity struggle in students can also imbue a sense of being an outsider and not part of the world of academia (Kahu 2013). In managerialised universities, pedagogies restrict staff-student contact hours, meaning academics spend less time with students, offerings are dispersed across multiple campus sites, there is an increase in the casualisation of staff involved in first year teaching, and teaching is undervalued as academics are disproportionately rewarded for research outcomes and funding procurement above teaching activities and outcomes (Scanlon, Rowling, and Weber 2007).

It is during their first year that university students begin navigating the unfamiliar university environment, leading to a range of distressing experiences that contribute to high attrition rates if they fail to settle in and feel accepted within the university environment (Kane, Chalcraft, and Volpe 2014; Naylor, Baik, and Arkoudis 2017; McCluskey, Weldon, and Smallridge 2019; Sampaio de Sá 2021). Emotional and financial burdens and precarity are also well-known impacts, not just in the first year of study but throughout the university journey (Grant-Smith, Gillett-Swan, and Chapman 2017; McCluskey, Weldon, and Smallridge 2019; Mulvey, Morris, and Ashton 2024).

One significant predictor of retention (or persistence) in the first year is satisfaction with the degree and academic adjustment (van Rooij, Jansen, and van de Grift 2017). Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) found that making compatible friends in the first year of study was an important social support, which acted as a buffer to stressful situations. The conduciveness of living arrangements to first-year study is also important to retention (Naylor, Baik, and Arkoudis 2017; Pratt et al. 2017). These collective insights have led to first-year transition programmes that aim to promote social inclusion, sense-making of the university environment, and the acquisition of academic skills (Kift 2015; Sampaio de Sá 2021).

Students as consumers

The student experiences within the managerialised university are driven by structures that operate in competitive funding models that see universities subjected to the pressures of consumerism and marketisation (for example, Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014; Tight 2019; Jones et al. 2020; Parker, Martin-Sardesai, and Guthrie 2021). What follows is academic entitlement, where students feel they are owed something in the educational experience based on the exchange of money, which is set apart from what they might earn from their effort (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt 2010). This causes a lowering of academic values and learner responsibilities, resulting in lower academic performance and grade goals (Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2016). The positioning of students as consumers is reinforced when the development of the learner identity is arbitrated by the managerial structures of the university, which further convinces students they are consumers. This means that students’ interactions with the university are transactional (Bunce, Baird, and Jones 2016; Cattaneo et al. 2018; Bunce and Bennett 2019; Whitty and Wheeldon 2025).

Academic values are reduced by the misrepresented messaging of ‘efficient, customer-friendly service’ as large managerialised consumer relation management systems and structures actively redirect students away from interacting with the academic staff responsible for teaching them (Buultjens and Robinson 2011; Wheeldon 2022). As Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009, 277) put it,

once, under the guidance of the academic, the undergraduate had the potential to be transformed into a scholar, someone who thinks critically. But in our consumer society such ‘transformation’ is denied and ‘confirmation’ of the student as consumer is favoured.

Business schools in particular face increasing criticism over the value of their degrees, mainly because they are seen by the industry and students as credentials, rather than critical learning (Harley 2019). They have a particular positioning of business studies as a cash cow (Minocha, Reynolds, and Hristov 2017; Schlegelmilch 2020; Parker, Martin-Sardesai, and Guthrie 2021). This consumerisation is reinforced with the ‘I’ve paid for my degree’ perspective of service expectation (Jabbar et al. 2017, 96).

Managerial structures separate the university community

The trend towards centralisation of support services in universities is not new. Student services often exist in large ‘one stop shop’ structures that resemble call centres (Buultjens and Robinson 2011). Professional staff are centralised away from academic units, effectively isolating them from the realities of academic work (Wheeldon, Whitty, and van der Hoorn 2022a). Academics are left clueless and confused about how administration is carried out in the managerialised university, with centralisation rendering its administrative mechanisms opaque and out of reach (Wheeldon, Whitty, and van der Hoorn 2022b).

Tay et al. (2023) documented similar negative impacts resulting from the centralisation of learning designers away from academics, who were left bewildered about who to talk to or how to access help when needed. Croucher and Woelert (2021) have documented the unmistakable trend towards more complex corporate structures, with relatively fewer professional staff to support academic work. Power et al. (2019) highlight that integrated services providing library, ICT help, and student support need to be collaborative and interpersonal. A human feature incongruous with large impersonal digital structures virtually separates students from academics, academic staff from professional staff, and professional staff from both academics and students (Wheeldon, 2026).

The negative impact of students as consumers is also seen in the practice of providing feedback to teaching academics that results in feeling pressured to entertain their ‘consumers’ (the student) as opposed to facilitating their learning (Calma and Dickson-Deane 2020). This reduction in high-quality teacher-student interaction is particularly concerning because it is this interaction that can have a tremendous influence in fostering and motivating lifelong learning attitudes (H. Giroux and Paul 2022; Landberg and Partsch 2023). Compounding this further is an undervaluing of quality teaching in favour of research output. Academics are increasingly rewarded for hyper productivity and output in research, and often in areas that have little to no relevance or significance to their teaching roles. This means they are placed into a position of having to make ‘trade-off’ decisions regarding where they place their time and energy. Teaching is often relegated to the secondary concern (Macfarlane 2019; Weenink, Aarts, and Jacobs 2023).

The purpose of this study

This literature review has highlighted the challenges of university study, set against the transactional experience of the managerialised university. This compelled us to consider what potentially remains unsaid about the first-year student experience under these managerialised conditions, given the importance of these early experiences in shaping the rest of the learning journey. The research question central to this study is: *How can arts-based elicitation (drawing) open up new understandings of the unspoken, embodied experiences of the first-year student?*

Methodology

It is well established that diverse methodologies offer new ways to uncover insights and advance knowledge about particular phenomena (Creswell 2012; Ward and Shortt 2012; Creswell and Poth 2016). Arts-based research encompasses a broad range of artistic endeavours from poetic, drama, short story, collage, photographic, and drawing-based approaches (Chamberlain et al. 2018). The commonality between all of these approaches is that the arts-based approach steps away from the scientific method in order to gain better access to the emotional, affective, and embodied realms of the lived experience (Chamberlain et al. 2018). These non-linguistic ways of explaining lived experiences allow us to access and represent these experiences differently (Bagnoli 2009), which aligns with the central research question of this study.

Establishing the potential of arts-based methodology

To affirm that an arts-based methodology could elicit more of the embodied first-year student experience, a search of the databases Web of Science, Scopus, and Emerald Insight was conducted (see Table 1). A further review of titles and abstracts of returned articles ($n = 84$) substantiated that with the exception of one study using photo elicitation coupled with quantitative analysis (McKay, O'Bryan, and Kahu 2021), all other articles used an arts based approach as either a pedagogical tool, investigated student experiences not associated with the first year, or were irrelevant to higher education.

Table 1. Search of studies examining the first year experiences, using arts-based methodologies.

| Search terms | Emerald Insight | Scopus | Web of Science |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------|----------------|
| 'first year experience' AND 'arts based method*' | 0 | 5 | 0 |
| 'first year experience' AND 'arts based research' | 0 | 7 | 0 |
| 'first year experience' AND 'arts based approach*' | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 'learning experience' AND 'arts based approach*' | 0 | 68 | 2 |

Data production

Students studying in their first semester of a business undergraduate degree in an Australian public university (characteristic of managerialised university conditions) were recruited via direct invitation, resulting in 13 participants across three separate focus group sessions; 10 of the participants identified as female, 3 were international students, while there was a relatively even split between mature ages students ($n = 7$) and school leavers ($n = 6$).

Each session was held in the final 30 minutes of class time, in the final week of the participants' first semester of study. The researchers were not part of the course teaching team, and students were given the opportunity to leave class before this session commenced to ensure participation was voluntary.

The fact that these sessions were held in person at the end of the semester is important because it establishes that these participants would be considered highly engaged in their studies due to their persistent attendance in on-campus classes. Even though there was no mandatory requirement to do so.

At the start of each focus group, participants were given a blank A3 piece of paper and a selection of coloured ink markers. Participants were reassured that drawing skills did not matter in this task. In the interest of this study eliciting unspoken knowledge about the first year experience, rather than addressing participants with prompting questions and statements that may influence responses, they were asked to close their eyes and visualise for a short period of time their first semester as if it were a movie they could play back and forward in their minds. After this, they were instructed to draw the experience they had just recalled in silence. Participants were asked not to add written interpretations to their drawings. However, there are some instances where participants added short supporting words and statements. After the drawings were completed, facilitators asked each participant to describe their drawing to the group. This study has human ethics approval (University of Southern Queensland – H22REA176).

Data analysis

Each focus group was recorded and later transcribed. In line with the qualitative objective of arts-based methodology to illuminate the unspoken, inductive thematic analysis was used to allow themes to naturally surface. Each transcript was analysed alongside the drawings of each participant relevant to that group's transcript. This ensured emergent themes and drawings were considered together and holistically. Each transcription was thematically coded using a framework strongly informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Smith (2015). Each transcript was first read and reread, with initial notations added. Secondly, NVivo software was used to code the emergent themes in each transcript. In the third stage, these themes were connected across all transcripts. The research team discussed emergent themes alongside the drawings until a common understanding was reached.

Results

The drawings and narratives collected in this study have illuminated experiences of feeling emotionally and financially overwhelmed, and the ups and downs associated with the demands of assessment. Some discussed the emotions of having to leave their home to follow their dreams of studying at university, and most participants showed

their experiences as ‘alone’. However, the perseverance to push through the trials of the first semester was evident. These stories and experiences are revealed below.

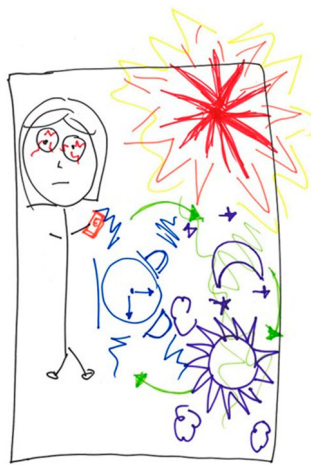
Overwhelmed

Participant K expressed their first semester experience as ‘the whole first semester of uni is absolutely screaming dumpster fire crazy’. Participant J shared this sentiment, describing their first semester of study as *‘Just very tired. Everything’s just a haze. Day and night. Alarms, energy drinks. And it was like I was, yeah, in a car accident’*. They also described how they *‘lived off energy drinks, pre-workout when I shouldn’t have, late at night to stay awake to do my assignments’* (see Figure 1). This is reflected in their drawing that depicts them with bloodshot eyes and an energy drink in hand. The large red-coloured explosion in the top right-hand corner of the drawing is described by the participant as the explosion of commencing study. The apparent chaos in their day is represented by squiggles that sit behind the sun and moon and arrows that show the tracking of time.

This feeling of being overwhelmed was shared by other participants. Participant S said, *‘I didn’t expect it. Everything’*. Participant M found juggling the preparation of assessments and family commitments difficult, saying they *‘have like a couple [of assessments] due this week, two next week. They’re kind of like coming up quickly and then, along with like work, family and other stuff, trying to stay on top is the hardest part. It gets tricky’*. Participant T talked of *‘essentially just having my cup way too full and not being able to handle it at all’*. For Participant G, their experience was *‘a lot of feelings’*. Participant J said, *‘I did expect difficult ... but it’s eye opening and it’s teaching me to not fall ...’*

Burning money

Participant E’s drawing showed them driving from one city to another, and staying at a friend’s house so they could attend on-campus classes (see Figure 2). They described how



Participant J

Figure 1. Drawing that shows feeling overwhelmed and tired.

their days would *'always start with a big drive' that represented 'a lot of time'. They would 'leave there and go there'. When prompted, the burning money emitted from the exhaust pipe was confirmed by the participant as an expression of financial burden. The car was seen as an important resource in their study journey; 'I got a new car and it's just like an integral part of it, you know. It lets me go places when I want to in between classes if I want'.*

Ups and downs

Experiencing the semester as a series of ups and downs (see [Figure 3](#)), aligned with each assessment task, was drawn in similar ways by four participants. Participant G said they felt

with assessment 2, I felt really confident. At the start of Assessment 3 ... my confidence kind of went, Oh, maybe I'm not so sure about what I'm doing. But once I had that light bulb moment of what I was doing ... I was like, Oh, actually I understand this. And my confidence for that assignment definitely grew.

Participant K described a similar experience (see [Figure 3](#)) where

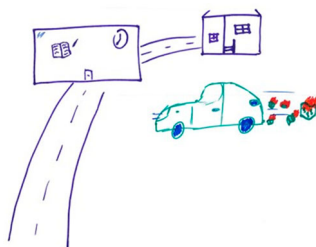
I started very confident ... and then right after assessment 1, I went down a sharp amount ... I got a 60% in the first assessment for this class. It was kind of a constant trying to figure out what we were supposed to write about and then doing it ... definitely struggle.

Juxtaposed against the graphical representation of the learning experience is a small flower. When questioned about it they said, *'It's my hope blooming'* (see [Figure 3](#)).

Participant F said they *'haven't been [studying] for a while'* which impacted their experiences (see [Figure 3](#));

the first week was kind of really overwhelming. It was like, wow. Then just kind of plodded along a little bit until kind of like the we had a few flexible learning weeks and it kind of gave me a chance to kind of reflect and look back.

Indicating the first rise in their drawing, they said, *'this is where I started back. And then I kind of realised I could do it ... motivation went up'*. Where the drawing shows a second, larger dip, they said, *'I started getting some marks back and it was a little bit not what I was expecting'*. Their next step in the journey was



Participant E

Figure 2. Drawing that shows the expense (money being burnt through the exhaust pipe) of commuting to campus.

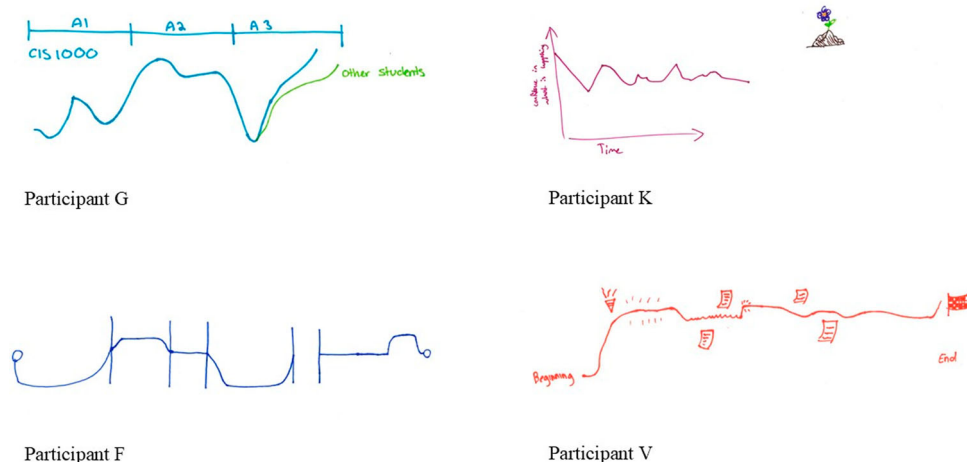


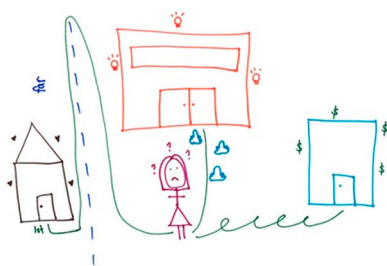
Figure 3. Drawings showing the ups and downs of the first semester of study.

then I reflected again and kind of used the kind of constructive criticism I got for the first couple [assessment feedback] and then kind of went back. And then at the end of the semester I got some results back and they were a lot better than what I expected. So yeah, kind of, I can do this. Why not?

Participant V described a similar journey (see Figure 3) where it ‘starts pretty well’ and they also experienced their first semester as ‘like low and then high, like the highs and lows of the semester’. At the start of the journey, they indicate a particular part of the graphical line that has emphasis applied to it, saying, ‘that’s where I just moved into colleges, getting to know new people. And that’s where all the parties start, I guess’. As their drawing includes document motifs, showing the tracking of assessment submissions: ‘highs and then gets low and then bit of roughness and then sort of getting used to it, getting better’. They pointed out the ‘bit of roughness’ (shown by a jagged line) and then the experience of ‘sort of getting used to it, getting better... so that’s when the reality started to kick in, you know, and I’ve got to start doing these assignments’. Moving to the far right of the linear drawing, the participant describes ‘the highlights and then spikes up in the end. Relief that everything’s done’. The participant punctuates this relief by writing ‘End’ and drawing a checkered finish flag.

Far from home

Understandably, international participants depicted the challenging experience of moving away from their family and home country to commence their studies. Participant L showed the love of her home by surrounding it in small love hearts and using the word ‘far’ (see Figure 4); ‘because I’m an international student, I left home to study here. So it was like a big step for me’. They also drew themselves with a look of confusion, which is reinforced by question marks surrounding them; ‘So, this is me, confused of what to do first. Like, adjust to my life here, study, focus on my studies, and also, I need to work for like extra income and stuff’. The symbol of money arises again as dollar signs are drawn around their house, showing the financial burden of



Participant F



Participant S

Figure 4. Drawings showing the experiences of being far from home.

living away from home. They explained how they felt ‘homesick’, but ‘*this is my dream*’. They drew the dream as the university surrounded by light bulbs. In order to realise their dream, they felt they were

having a hard time adjusting to work and studies. There were times when I don’t know what to prioritise, work or studies. But then I keep on reminding myself that I came here to study. So, I prioritise study over work.

Participant S said being far from home was difficult; ‘*I’m new here and far away from my parents, so sometimes I become a bit emotional*’ (see Figure 4). They drawn themselves, leaving their home country to attend university. Happily, they have also drawn themselves meeting new friends; ‘*I found a new friend in the second week*’.

Alone

Most participants have drawn themselves alone on their study journey. But of particular note, Participant N said that their experience was of ‘*just blankness, because that’s just kind of how it feels. Like blankness, like this lack of. Oh, my God. It’s just like really overwhelming at the moment*’ (see Figure 5). Participant A drew themselves sitting at a desk alone, listening to the lecturer who is drawn at a distance (see Figure 5), while Participant M said ‘*sometimes you just don’t understand*’ (see Figure 5).

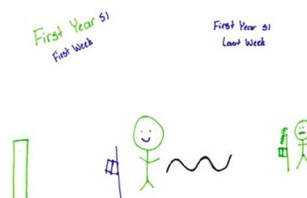
This feeling of aloneness was also reiterated by others. Participant F said



Participant A



Participant N



Participant M

Figure 5. Drawings showing studying alone.

well, I'm by myself most of the time. I live by myself. So, a lot is up to me to make my own motivation, which shown here is a bit tricky sometimes, but I just got to keep, keep going.

Participant L said, *'it's also like my first time having to do adulting stuff, so I'm more pressuring myself to be independent because I'm supposed to'*.

Participant J undertook online studies in their first semester and did not do any group work, so their experience was *'working by myself'*. They were disappointed when they listened to recorded lectures where *'I could hear the students asking questions and I'm like "Oh damn it". That would have been really helpful'*.

Perseverance to push through

The experience of having to persevere through the first semester was discussed by a number of the participants. Participant F said *'So it's just kind of really having to push through it'*. Participant M said, *'It's just in my own mind, I need to find time to actually get everything done. Okay. That's what I need to work on'*. Participant F said *'at the end of the day, it's up to you to actually have the motivation to do it'*.

Participant C drew the experience of perseverance by sharing an analogy in the form of a childhood memory about struggling through mud to reach a destination (the farm gate). The support of her sister helped:

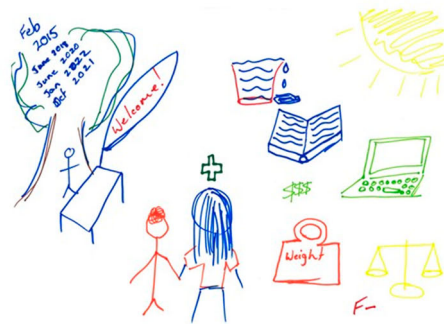
when I was little, my sister and I had this toy tractor and it was a pedal one. It had all these buttons on the steering wheel. I'm the oldest so I got to steer. So I was driving it and it was raining and we decided to go out in the rain. So my sister is pushing me in the mud. (See Figure 6)

They compared this childhood memory to feeling *'overwhelmed [in their first semester] ... but, you know, it's always like that when you're first starting out ...'*. It's reasonable to assume these initial experiences will be shared with and by the younger sibling if they too choose to attend university.

Participant T also drew perseverance as being supported by family (see Figure 6). In the top left-hand corner of the drawing is a series of dates that represent their various attempts to study at university. They had experienced some *'false starts'* and *'life altering*



Participant C



events'. They elaborated by saying *'I had a car accident four weeks in [to starting an earlier university degree] that put me in a wheelchair. So [that degree] was not something that they [parents] wanted to support me on anymore. And then from there, trying to start uni with kids again, no support, crash and burn'*. They described how they got *'to that point where the excitement dies down. Yeah, stuff gets a bit much and in the past I've sort of gone, "Oh no, I can't do it, can't do it, I don't have the support"'*. They are now attending university studies under different circumstances;

this time my partner was 'I'll cook, I'll clean. Physically go into uni and you do your study on campus'. That's the difference factor. Because usually by week three, I'm going, I can't do this. And I'm backing out fast.

Other symbols in this drawing illuminate the participant's learning journey: 'F' written in red, an overflowing bucket, scales and the word 'Weight', and multiple dollar signs.

The importance of having support from family and friends was echoed by other participants. Participant E drew themselves driving and staying at their friend's house (see Figure 2). Access to accommodation with family was a vital element in Participant S accessing international study and finding a friend (See Figure 4). Participant G factored other students into their drawing, represented by the green line (see Figure 3).

Participant F shows perseverance: *'I can do this. Why not?'* (see Figure 4).

While Participant J, despite feeling that their first semester was a *'car crash'* (see Figure 1), decided to increase their study load in their next upcoming semester. *'I just thought, just jump in and do it [undertake 4 courses in the semester] and see if I fail. That's fine. I can just do it again. There's no harm. It's and I can learn from it as well'* This perseverance is captured in their statement, *'I'm not scared to fail. And I just want to see if I can do four'*.

Symbolism reveals more of the struggle to learn

As Visse, Hansen, and Leget (2019, 1) position, arts-based methodologies lean into the 'unsayable dimensions of our reality'. The revealed symbolism of the embodied experiences of the first semester study is recounted as a précis of these findings:

- love hearts symbolise homesickness and the difficulty of being far from home in order to study
- burning money symbolises the financial burden of regular commutes to campus
- dollar signs appear as a general indicator of financial burden
- blood shot eyes and energy drinks symbolise the effort of juggling home life with study
- the childhood memory of pedalling through mud with a helpful push from a family member is an analogy to the feeling of persevering when trying to reach the destination
- question marks reinforce confusion
- light bulbs represent the dream of studying at university
- a flower symbolises the blossoming of hope
- a checked finishing flag shows relief at reaching the end of the semester.

Symbols add emotions and life to the telling of stories because they reveal the inner qualities and ideals of the storyteller. The limitation of the use of words would have left these poignant symbols in unsayable dimensions. As such, these symbols have become striking visual reminders for the very real and personal sacrifices these students make to pursue learning and to be students.

Discussion

Our lived experiences are made from a multiplicity of dimensions, including visual and sensory, which can't be easily expressed in words alone (Bagnoli 2009). In many ways, the experiences of these participants confirm what is already known. Social support is an important ingredient in the intention to persevere (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005). Participants have drawn their up-and-down journey of building their academic abilities as the first semester progressed, drawing and discussing how they became more proficient at studying, and therefore have hope that their learning journey will progress successfully (Kahu and Nelson 2017; Naylor, Baik, and Arkoudis 2017). This study also confirms the known fact that students experience financial and emotional hardship in order to take up opportunities to study (Postareff et al. 2017; Visse, Hansen, and Leget 2019). However, this study reveals these known experiences more deeply and allows us to visualise the personal costs borne by students as they pursue their dreams of accessing higher education. It also shows an absence of social belonging to the university community.

Universities, particularly in the anglosphere, have adopted narrow, market-driven perspectives that see them focusing on cost efficiency (for example, Hoskins 2022; Croucher 2023; Tight 2024). Degrees are presented to students in terms of price, speed, and ease of completion. However, these illustrations show in rich symbolism that students come to university with much deeper emotional, and social reasons to undertake study. They make sacrifices that are disregarded when students are reduced to being treated like consumers, and interactions with the university are reduced to transactions.

Lacking social connection and belonging to the university

This study shows that in the early stages of a student's university journey, when their identity as learners is most vulnerable and being formed, the development of a natural identification with the university community is missing. Instead, students manage their learning journeys alone. It is logical that if this sense of belonging is not built in these early stages, it may not be built at all under persistent transactional, and managerialised conditions.

The idea that students are partners in the university aligns with the view that education is a democratic and civic practice (H. A. Giroux 2010). Universities pride themselves on their efforts to develop partnerships with their student bodies (Matthews et al. 2018). University leaders see efforts to have students as partners as a way of transforming universities into egalitarian, learning communities where students and staff work together to shape the university and the learning journey (Matthews et al. 2018). But this study shows the emotional reality is far different.

Social connection and belonging to the university did not emerge in the drawings or explanations. Most participants omitted the university from their drawings altogether, although at times the university was included in the background as a physical place where the participant came to learn (Participants E, S, A, and T). Recalling that in framing the task, participants were not asked to explicitly include or exclude the university in their drawings, the limited inclusion is even more notable. There was no impromptu discussion of direct university support instigated by the participants. The one exception was Participant A's drawing of the lecturer at a distance, while they themselves sat alone. Family and friends were symbolised as important, but they offered support from the periphery. To recall Participant C's childhood memory as an analogy, the family offered a valued shove forward when stuck in the mud. For all participants, the learning journey was drawn and narrated as a solo journey.

These participants were active in their on-campus lessons, right up until the end of the semester. In other words, these participants would not be considered disengaged learners, but rather highly engaged in their learning. They persisted in attending on-campus classes throughout their first semester, despite the struggles they faced. It is known that the intentions of students to persist in higher education are stronger when there are high levels of interaction and engagement with social and academic components of the institution and its culture (Andrade et al. 2020). So, this demonstrated absence of social connection to the university community in the early stages of study should be a concern to university leaders and academics. Particularly at a time when, much to the frustration and dismay of universities, on-campus attendance is declining (Kelly 2012; Moores, Birdi, and Higson 2019; Menendez Alvarez-Hevia, Lord, and Naylor 2020).

Moreover, there are those programmes and areas of study that do not have a strong impetus to attend campus. In some instances, on-campus attendance is mandatory because it involves laboratory work (for example, Creative Arts, Nursing, Engineering, Science) or work with physical simulators (for example, Paramedicine, Aviation). But academic units such as business schools generally do not have these physical mechanisms compelling students to come onto campus. It is these areas that should be most concerned about the implications of this study.

Practical implications

The drawings in this study seek reflection and contemplation about the challenges universities must confront in terms of questions over their legitimacy. Through revealed symbolism such as hearts, light bulbs, burning money, bloodshot eyes, and question marks of confusion, this study has shown a deeper perspective of the efforts of students that challenges the 'just for the sake of the credential' narrative that extant literature presents. This study presents an alternative perspective that shows students approaching their studies with hope, purpose, sacrifice, and determination to persevere.

Despite the limitations of sample size, the practical implication is a reflective one. This study challenges university leaders to confront the managerialised conditions that reinforce students as consumers, and the flow-on effect these prolonged conditions have in frustrating and hampering the embodied human interactions necessary for learning and social belonging to manifest. It is also a reminder to academia that students have

deep, embodied, emotional connections to their studies. In the hyper-performative university environment, dedication to quality teaching has taken a back seat to research output (Weenink, Aarts, and Jacobs 2023). It behoves academics to match their students with equal effort in their own practices and attitudes towards teaching obligations, repositioning their own academic values to make teaching as important as research.

Concluding remarks

Students come to university to realise their dream of accessing higher education. In the realisation of that dream, they persevere through great personal cost and deserve the right to be treated as learners, not consumers. However, universities continue to undervalue teaching, perpetuate impenetrable managerialised structures that divide and separate the university community, and deteriorate academic values.

These drawings are a reminder of the high personal sacrifices students make to exercise their right to access transformative higher education. It urges university leaders and academics to confront the managerialised conditions and undervaluation of teaching that work against the rights of students to be learners. This study is a visual reminder not to entice ‘customers into their shop’ in order to sell educational products at the best going market rate. This approach only reduces universities to credentialing factories, which devalues the effort of learning. Particularly at a time when universities continue to struggle to maintain their legitimacy within society.

The embodied, unspoken first-year student experience is one of being overwhelmed and hopeful in equal measure. Treating students as consumers sits in opposition to this, and to the accountability universities have to deliver critical, transformative, and humanised education. Under managerialised conditions, social connection to the university community is missing. Students are left to struggle *and* succeed, *in spite* of this.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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