Early departure from a tertiary bridging program: What can the institution do?

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Theme: Research and Research Collaborations

This study examined the early departure of students between the ages of 18 and 25 years from an on-campus tertiary bridging program at a regional university. Participants comprised twenty students who had dropped out of the program within the first four weeks of study. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews which examined the student experience and the reasons for departure. It was concluded that participants comprised of two general groups: those who have no clearly defined long term career goal prompting their attendance at university with an associated low level of commitment to university study, and those who were committed to completing a university degree, but whose circumstances changed which prevented them from continuing. Participants indicated that attendance in the bridging program was a generally positive experience and that there was little that could have been done to prevent their departure. It was concluded that a certain level of early departure was inevitable in the tertiary bridging program. Where intervention was attempted, it should be addressed towards the development of long term employment and career goals for which university study was an essential pre-requisite.

Introduction

This study examined the factors which influenced the attrition of students between the ages of 18 and 25 during the first four weeks of an on-campus tertiary bridging program conducted at a regional university. Enrolment records indicated that younger students demonstrated a substantially higher rate of early attrition from the program. While the factors influencing attrition from the first year of university have been extensively researched, the attrition of atypical students such as those entering tertiary bridging programs has not been examined.

Previous research (Whannell, Allen, & Lynch, 2010) examining the secondary school experiences of students in a previous cohort of the tertiary bridging program where this study was conducted established that 40% of students between the ages of 18 and 22 had not completed secondary school while many had experienced poor academic engagement and outcomes. It was hypothesised that this background would present substantial challenges to younger students in their attempt to successfully transition into the tertiary bridging program.

Theoretical background

A number of studies have been published in relation to non-traditional tertiary students by researchers at the University of Newcastle. Cantwell, Archer and Bourke (2001) compared the performance of undergraduate students from three non-traditional entry modes with that of students who had gained tertiary access traditionally. The study made a number of conclusions, including identifying that age was "a significant predictor of academic achievement, with older students outperforming younger students" (p. 232) and that "most older females faced more physical and psychological demands in their lives outside university than younger students" (p. 232). Of particular interest was the conclusion that "socio-economic status did not emerge as a significant influence on performance" (p. 233). The academic performance of students who gained access via enabling programs was also found to be comparable with those who gained access via traditional entry.

A comparison of the undergraduate performance of older students who had gained entry to the University of Newcastle via an enabling program and younger students who gained access based on high school results has also been conducted (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999). The study concluded that mature age students coped "at least as well with their undergraduate studies as younger students entering via more conventional means" (p. 52). The study also identified a number of approaches to study exhibited by older students which gave them an advantage when engaging in undergraduate study. Older students were identified as having "more confidence to solve problems that arise in their lives, more confidence to plan a desired course of action, and more confidence to appraise accurately their strengths and weaknesses" (p. 50). The academic performance of students from the enabling courses was found to be influenced by how well the student adapted to different approaches to study. In particular:

> it was the maladaptive, rather than the adaptive, aspects of self-regulation that predicted poor achievement: students who admitted that they maintained a fixed approach to all their academic work even when they knew it was not a good approach did not perform as well as other students. (p. 48)

The ability of mature age students with a substantial work history to adapt to and engage with tertiary study has been questioned. While such students "developed a positive learning profile, a continued belief in the structural simplicity of knowledge appears to have a significant diminishing effect on the quality of adjustment and on the quality of learning outcomes" (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004, p. 131). The issue identified in relation to the adaptive ability of students is considered to have potential application within the tertiary bridging context where students are entering an environment with which they are not familiar. In particular, older students who have not been in an educational situation for many years would be expected to experience significant cultural and emotional shock. In such a situation, the ability to quickly adapt to the new environment would appear to be of importance to a successful transition during the early weeks of the program. Younger tertiary bridging students who have poor previous experiences and outcomes in secondary education (Whannell, et al., 2010) would be expected to experience similar cultural shock due to their attempt to engage with a culture towards which they may hold substantial negative emotions.

The challenge for mature age students who are returning to study after a long absence in changing their perceptions of themselves as learners was described in a study conducted at the Central Queensland University (Willans & Seary, 2007). The study concluded that such students are able to change their perspectives regarding their abilities as learners when "provided with opportunities to reflect critically upon themselves as learners, and deconstruct the origins of past assumptions" (p. 433).

Debenham and May (2005) identified early experiences in an enabling program as being of particular importance when they stated that "the first milestone in an enabling program for both students and lecturers is the submission and return of the first assignments [and] it can be asserted … that the first assignment is surrounded on all sides by anxiety" (p. 89). They also concluded that "initially students are threatened by 'academic work" (p. 89). A study conducted at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) (Bedford, 2009) identified "factors related to personal volition, social/family support, institutional support, and the quality of the teaching-learning experience" (p. 1). Particular problems which were identified included the teaching of academic skills related content, which were ineffective for about 30% of the study participants, while 33% of participants had reported not feeling a sense of belonging to the university community. The study also established that the factors which most strongly influenced students to discontinue their bridging program studies "were those relating to personal circumstances that were beyond the control of the course teaching team or the University" (p. 1).

Students entering a tertiary bridging program must successfully transition into the unfamiliar educational environment encountered within a university. The role of academic and administrative staff in the transition of new tertiary students involves inducting students so that they may come "to terms with themselves as participants within Academe, and the way in which their role is perceived" (Green & Latham, 2000, p. 44). In the process of transition to university, a student's peers may act as a challenge where "the impact of the peer group in terms of how the new culture is read and what rituals are adopted, is often a competing force, as students seek to find their way through the next passage" (Green & Latham, 2000, p. 44). Another challenge which is apparent in the rite of passage from one cultural situation to another for the new tertiary student involves "the cultural baggage that we carry with us from place to place, which includes our prior experiences, belief systems but also our ways of knowing and of behaving" (Green & Latham, 2000, p. 46).

Elkins, Braxton and James (2000) in a study in the USA examined student departure in the first and second semester of college with specific reference to the separation stage of the transition process. The study concluded that "the factor of rejection of attitudes and values is important in the separation process and ultimately in the persistence/departure decision" (p. 263). However, "the factor of support had the greatest influence on the persistence/departure decision" (p. 262). Of interest in the study was that it was identified that the level of support was influenced by the level of student academic achievement at secondary school. "Perhaps the parents, friends, and family members of low-achieving students question the likelihood of these students remaining in college" (p. 263). This particular aspect is considered relevant to bridging program students as many have achieved poorly at secondary school.

The ability of an individual to be able to cope with the transition to tertiary study has been related to the strength of the commitment to the goal of course completion. Tinto (1993) describes this relationship as:

> Understandably, differences in individual goals and commitments help shape individual responses to the stress of transition. Many students will stick it out even under the most trying conditions, while others will withdraw even under minimal stress. Presumably either lofty goals or strong commitments, or both, will lead individuals to persist in very difficult circumstances. (p. 46)

The literature cited indicates that the outcomes for tertiary bridging students in undergraduate study are comparable with those of students who have gained access through traditional means. However, student attrition during the transition into tertiary bridging programs, particularly for younger students, appears to be challenging institutions. Existing research at USQ (Bedford, 2009) where most students study by distance, identified that attrition during the early weeks of the program was primarily due to personal circumstances and was largely beyond the control of the institution. This study will add to the academic literature by examining if this situation also applies to participants studying on-campus. The literature also presents a variety of factors which may present challenges to the younger tertiary bridging student during the transition into a tertiary bridging program. Due to the poor academic background of the participants in this study it was anticipated that challenges associated with finding a place within the traditional academic culture of a university would present strongly.

Method

Participants were students who had been enrolled in a one semester on-campus tertiary bridging program at a regional university and who had dropped out of the program prior to week 4 of the semester. Potential interviewees were identified from the current enrolments in a compulsory course from the program who had not submitted the first assessment task for the course which was due in week 5. The participants included an equal number of males and females. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students between the age of 18 and 25, representing about 20% of the students in the targeted age range who had dropped out of the program. The interviews were conducted by telephone in weeks 8 and 9 of the semester. Notes of each interview were made at the time and a typed record of the interview was completed immediately after the interview.

Each interview included a number of common prompts, including:

What was your reason for enrolling in the [tertiary bridging program]?
What were the major challenges you experienced during your involvement in the [tertiary bridging program]?
What aspects of the program did you find enjoyable?
Why did you stop attending the [tertiary bridging program]?

The data was analysed using interpretational analysis (Borg, Gall, & Gall, 2007) with common themes being identified.

Themes Identified

A common theme identified was a general lack of commitment to undertaking university study and a lack of understanding of long term goals. However, it was common in these circumstances for the interviewees to describe positive emotional results from attendance at university.

> *I came into [the program] to do a primary education course. But then I decided I wanted to do music. I did not have any passion for university, nor for doing an education course…I had no passion and I was not determined to complete the course. I was very unsure about what I wanted to do which left me feeling confused and in limbo. I am now doing a Cert III/IV in fitness. Being at university made me feel proud, like I was taking the next step. But I realised that I must love it to complete it. (JW)*

> *For me joining [the program] was a last minute decision. I've been a hairdresser for several years and I have two babies, one two years old and one five months. I decided I wanted a new career, which is going to be social work. So I needed [the program] to get me into university. I only went week one and it was nerve racking. But the teachers were great and students were really friendly. I was really nervous to turn up…Being at university made me feel good, proud, it was different from work and I felt like I was bettering myself. When I was deciding to pull out I spoke to my girlfriends who were also students in [the program] and I felt that study was difficult and not natural to me. (KW)*

> *I came into [the program] very unsure about what I wanted to do. I was looking at a couple of different things, like Marine Science and other being Business. All my experience was just in working in jobs. I did [the program] for month in 2009 and this was my second try. Both times the teaching and students were great, but I still wasn't ready…I hopefully one day will go to university. It would mean a great deal because I promised my grandmother. (KR)*

> *I am new to the Sunshine Coast and I decided I would like to try nursing. I never started, basically I went to Victoria for a holiday and I was going to miss the first three weeks… I was sort of in-between, but I was still coming back to the Sunshine Coast. But I may go back to Victoria. (RT)*

I wanted to come into [the program] for the preparation and ranking to join psychology. I found [it] to be helpful and easy while I was there… I found the study very positive, but going into the classes was very nerve racking. (EC)

I did not feel like a university student. I still feel like a school student because I am 17 and all my friends are school students…Going to university feels like stepping up. (TH)

Some interviewees indicated that they had assumed the identity of, and were committed to being, a university student. However, at other times in the interview made comments which indicated that their commitment to attending university was not high.

A friend convinced me to do [the program]. I think I wanted to do law and justice studies, but I was not really sure. Still I moved to the Sunshine Coast just for this…I never turned up to any classes…The only thing that really stopped me was the economics… Even walking around the university I felt like a university student… I did not go to the intensive orientation because I was moving to the Sunshine Coast, but I was too nervous. (KB)

The reason I did [the program] was because my mother did it. I really wanted to become a Police Officer, so I was interested in law and justice studies… I only went for three weeks. Week one, I found everyone to be very friendly. The teachers were good and the library and resources were excellent. Week two I was sick and week three work needed me. I had missed so much of it, that I felt that I couldn't go back…I definitely saw myself as a uni student. The reason I thought uni was so important was because it made me think of the future and all the possibilities. I really hated school though. It was a lot of effort and originally, I thought [the program] would not be a big deal. But in the end it felt almost the same and more stressful, because it was my responsibility. (OB)

Originally I went to university to study psychology. But now I've decided I want music and [the program] was the only option I had to get into uni. I didn't actually start because [the university] does not have music and doing the [the program] wasn't going to help… Having a degree would be OK, but being so young I feel that I have a lot of options and time. (NA)

Conversely, six interviewees described a failure to relate to the identity of being a university student.

The reason I decided to leave was because I found this job which gave me money, fun and ability to travel… I didn't feel like a university student. I just wanted to travel and have a job. (WG)

I do not believe that I would be see myself as a uni student until I was studying an undergraduate degree. (NA)

I really feel that work is really important because of the economics and therefore it does not leave me enough time to do the study. The main thing that stops me is working full-time. I really did not feel like a university student… I found the classes and class times not suitable for my schedule. (KR)

The reason I left was because I found an apprenticeship as a chef which will allow me a direct pathway into what I want to do…I did not see myself as a university student. I prefer the practical aspects rather than the study. (JG)

I really did not feel like a university student. It was just a pathway to get a career for me. (SH)

I didn't really feel like a uni student, but I felt like it could happen one day. I found the study very positive, but going into the classes was very nerve racking. (EC)

Five interviewees stated that circumstances had changed which did not allow them to continue their study, but they would be returning to study at some later date or at another institution.

I was going to do a degree in Business in tourism…The decision to leave was personal, but I hope to be back at [the university] next year. (NJA)

The teachers were great, the support was phenomenal and I was treated like an adult. I will be back. (FJ)

I was only there for a couple of day, but I found the uni to be small enough to be comfortable and the teachers were good…The most important reason I had to leave was because my partner had to move to Gladstone for work. (RD)

My partner's work changed. I needed to be the economic support in the family and my children's young age meant they needed my support…As for being a university student, I sort of felt like one and I hope to start again sometime.. (KW)

I lost my job, but then I got a much better job which happened to be full-time…Yes I definitely felt like a university student when I was in [the program] and I really want to come back. (EW)

One particular aspect which was described was that the experience in applying for and attendance in the bridging program, although it may have been for only a short time, was a positive experience which was supported by both academic staff and family. In particular, it was common for the interviewees to identify that the decision to leave was a personal one and there was little that the institution could do to have changed the decision made.

> *When I was considering leaving I spoke to other students and my family. The support was definitely there at [the university]. There were just external reasons why. (EW)*

> *Friendly - nice. Everyone at [the program] were very friendly and very nice…There was nothing lacking in my experience at [the university]. (NJA)*

> *The teachers were friendly and there was a really good social side to [the program]…There is nothing that [the university] could have done. I really loved [the university] and it was really quite disappointing that I left. (JW)*

> *My mother encouraged me to go to the [the program] and I required a ranking to get into university. I was going to do hospitality management in business. I did not think it would be so much study…The reason I left was because I found an apprenticeship as a chef which will allow me a direct pathway into what I want to do…There was no-one at [the university] that could have helped me. (JG)*

> *This was a self-made decision. No one could have helped me because my heart was not in it. (SH)*

> *No I didn't feel like a university student. I just wanted to travel and have a job…Everyone was great and no-one else could really have helped. (WG)*

> *It was my own single decision to not continue. I was not aware that anyone else could have helped me at [the university]. (TD)*

Discussion

The interviewees were considered to fit into two general groups: those who have no clearly defined long term goal prompting their attendance at university and an associated low level of commitment to university study, and those who were committed to completing a university degree, but whose circumstances changed which prevented them from continuing. No evidence was identified to indicate that non-attendance was the result of negative experiences or staff interaction. This situation may also offer a possible explanation for the role that age plays in program attrition. Older students who have been engaged in an

unsatisfactory employment situation for a substantial period of time would have the opportunity and life experience to have developed an emotional commitment to changing their circumstances through improved education. The requirement for university completion as a stepping stone in their attempt to improve their life situation would be expected in older students. The important role of a strong goal commitment described by Tinto (1993) appears as very relevant.

Identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) offers one method by which the bridging students' commitment to university is explained by their long term employment goals. Where a student has a clear long term employment goal e.g. as a paramedic and is emotionally committed to that identity, attendance at, and subsequent completion, of the bridging program and undergraduate study would be seen as necessary to achieve that goal. Successful completion of university requires the development of a healthy and robust sense of commitment to a university student identity. Emotional commitment to the university student identity is thus an extension of, and dependent upon, the emotional commitment to the long term employment identity. The resilience of a bridging program student under this theoretical view would thus be dependent upon the existence of a strong emotional commitment to a long term employment goal. This approach to using long term goals and identity is also described by Simpson (2008) and he suggests that "one of the most effective ways of ensuring learners' motivation is to make certain that they are on the right course for them in terms of level, content and outcomes" (p. 162).

A large scale project at Griffith University, Queensland, which aims to improve the transition experience of students into first year undergraduate study uses "'five senses of success' and each suggests practice goals or areas for intervention" (Lizzio, 2006, p. 1). The sense of student academic culture provides the central component of the model used and requires the student to possess an "appreciation of the core values and ethical principles of the university and how these will inform their approaches to study and working relationships with fellow staff and students" (p. 2). A second component of the model is the student's sense of purpose. "Students with a clear sense of purpose are not only more likely to find their study rewarding, but also to be more committed and persistent when the work gets challenging" (p. 2). The findings of the current study indicate that the approach used at Griffith University in relation to students entering undergraduate study may also be appropriate for students commencing a tertiary bridging program.

Conclusion

When all of the comments made by the interviewees are considered together, two conclusions are drawn. The first is that very early attrition from the bridging program was not viewed as a negative experience by the interviewees and it appears there was very little that the institution was able to do to address the issue. The findings of Bedford (2009) in relation to bridging students studying by distance have been identified in this on-campus study. This finding indicates that there is a certain level of early attrition which will be experienced in both on-campus and distance programs, irrespective of the actions of the institution to prevent it.

This presents the prevention of early attrition from tertiary bridging programs as a very challenging undertaking. When it is considered that many students who demonstrate early departure from these programs have had poor quality experiences and outcomes in secondary school (Whannell, et al., 2010), may not possess a clear long term goal associated with their tertiary study and often demonstrate low levels of commitment to completing tertiary study, the capacity to intervene in the short period of time available prior to departure must be considered questionable. Interventions targeted towards these areas would need to be undertaken very early in the bridging program.

The second conclusion is that early departure from tertiary bridging programs for students whose departure was not driven by changed personal circumstances is strongly associated with a lack of long term career goals. The lack of long term career goals manifested as low levels of commitment to tertiary study.

One possible strategy for reducing attrition in the early transition period would be the inclusion of interventions in the orientation program and initial weeks of the semester which include career advice and counselling, learning experiences which focus on these aspects and the opportunity to engage with previous tertiary bridging students who are currently engaged in undergraduate programs in the same area of study. A stronger career orientation (Himelstein, 1992) and career counselling (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007) have previously been identified as assisting in reducing attrition from tertiary study. The quality of the support provided to students has also been identified as having the greatest influence on the persistence/departure decision (Elkins, et al., 2000). This strategy is used in the Tertiary Preparation Program offered by the University of Southern Queensland, in which commencing students are required to complete two career management assignments as part of their assessed coursework. The first of these assignments, to be completed within the first two weeks of a commencing course, consists of vocational self-assessment and career goal setting, and is supervised and assessed by a qualified career counsellor who provides individualised feedback to the students (Bedford, 2005). Course content and targeted support of this nature were not provided within the bridging program at the institution where this study was conducted. The inclusion of such a strategy offers one implication for practice.

A failure to adopt the identity of a university student and to identify with the university culture was described by participants in the study. The consequent failure to continue with the actions associated with the role of a university student, particularly continued attendance in the bridging program, were demonstrated (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Further research is indicated to determine if the strategies based upon student culture and identity used at Griffith University (Lizzio, 2006; Lizzio & Wilson, 2010) to facilitate the transition of students into the first year of undergraduate study may also be appropriate for use in the tertiary bridging context.

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