

Monitoring the social and academic integration of first year Education students at a Regional University

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Abstract

It is agreed that the first year of study in higher education is a time of great change in the lives of students and as such they are at risk of performing below their capability or withdrawing from the institution. Studies have identified the social and academic integration of students as a priority during this period leading to the implementation of a range of strategies to address this issue. To monitor the engagement of students, higher education institutions have devised measures (usually in the form of surveys) to identify students that could be in need of support to enable them to continue their studies. To this point in time the monitoring of social integration has had very limited attention. This paper describes a tool used to monitor both academic and social integration as well as broader factors throughout the education students' first year of study. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the monitoring tool is discussed using the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with the students.¹

Introduction and background

“A good FYE is critical to all students irrespective of their discipline, course, type (research or coursework), level of study or mode of engagement” (Nelson, Creagh, Kift, & Clarke, 2010, p. 4)

There is no question that the first year of study in a higher education institution can be very challenging for students. These challenges are now seen as high priority research areas, especially so in recent times where student retention has become a key measure of the effectiveness of universities, at least in the eyes of governing bodies (McPhail, Fisher, & McConachie, 2009; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005, p. 4). Tinto (1993) identified these challenges as being related to the ‘social and academic integration’ of the student into the culture and expectations of the higher education setting. This position is supported by the work of Palmer, O’Kane and Owens (2009) who stated that “Not belonging is becoming a prevalent theme within accounts of the first-year student experience at university”. The difficulty associated with integration into the new academic setting is that “it often challenges existing views of self and one's place in the world” (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 500). Another aspect of the transition is that students can be “suspended between one place (home) and another (university), which can result in an ‘in-between-ness’ – a betwixt space” (Palmer, et al., 2009, p. 38). This transition from outsider to insider and the associated strategies employed to facilitate this move

¹ The research detailed in this paper emanates from a Pilot Study conducted by the author as part of a doctoral study.

have been the focus of much attention and activity due to its connection with retention of students. This focus on retention and not the pastoral care of the students is seen as a very narrow view by first year practitioners and researchers alike (Tinto, 1993).

Studies both nationally and internationally have identified the mismatch that exists between the students' academic skills and habits compared to those expected of them by their lecturers (McCarthy & Kuh, 2006; McPhail, et al., 2009). Although the students know that university is going to be different to high school, they still expect the same forms of support they had previously experienced (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009). This mismatch can lead to tensions within the student that hinder their progress and draw into question their ability to successfully complete their university studies. Programs such as Orientation Week activities, Common Time (Burnett & Larmar, 2011; Fowler & Zimitat, 2008) and academic skills workshops have been implemented by higher education providers to up-skill students to a level deemed suitable for successful progression through their course of study thus supporting their academic integration (Burnett & Larmar, 2011).

Given the precarious nature of the first year of study at university there is a need for early warning systems which may identify concerns before they become critical (Krause & Coates, 2008; Tinto, 2009). Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek (2006) highlighted that these early warning systems are "especially important for students who start college with two or more risk factors ... or who appear to be struggling academically" (p. 60). Higher education authorities have taken this advice on board and implemented a range of early warning systems with the goal of minimising student departure. Frequently these early warning systems rely upon reports from academic staff identifying that a student may be at risk due to attendance issues, personal concerns or their results on assessments. Recently some authorities have implemented "weekly monitoring of profiles of student performances on formative and summative coursework ...to quickly identify those who need additional help, possibly due to acute and sudden-onset problems" (Ayres, Biggs, & Glaister, 2012, p. 1). Other authorities have implemented program entry questionnaires such as the Survey of Academic Orientations (SAO) which is used to predict the grades of first year students thus identifying which students may be at risk of failure and require support (Beck & Davidson, 2001). Consistently the focus has been on monitoring the academic integration of first year students and not on monitoring their social integration.

The need to take a broader view of the student experience and to include interactions outside the confines of the university is being voiced consistently by researchers (Hillman, 2005; Krause, 2006; Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004). Baird and Gordon (2009, p. 5) "consider the concept in relation to the shaping or colouring of personal identity" and include consideration of "facets of the institution experienced by an individual student" as well as "wider life experiences". Further investigation of practices which effectively and efficiently monitor the full range of first year student experiences is warranted, with the Bradley Report supporting this position by stating that "it is now time to review the approach to measuring student engagement to take account of new approaches and in particular to collect better information about the broader student experience" (Australian Government, 2008, p. 79). Consistent with this request, this paper reports on the evaluation of an instrument used to monitor aspects of the student experience both within and outside the confines of the university.

Context

This study was carried out on a satellite campus of a Regional University in Queensland, Australia. The first year education student intake on the satellite campus was 67 in number with the vast majority being students transitioning directly from high school to University. The author fulfils the role of First Year Coordinator for these students and conducts Orientation activities and weekly workshops throughout students' first year of study. This role is very similar to the First Year Advisor role described by Burnett and Lamar (2011) as occurring on the various campuses of Griffith University, a metropolitan university in Queensland with a satellite campus on the Gold Coast. The weekly 'Common Time' used to conduct the workshops is a one hour session following a core first year course to capture as many of the first year cohort as possible whilst they are on campus. The workshops relate to academic skill development (referencing, paraphrasing, academic writing), identification of support networks, preparation for practical placements in schools and connecting what is learnt to the real world of schools today.

Methodology

The research described in this paper relates specifically to the usefulness of the 'monitoring tool' (described below) in eliciting responses related to student's first year experience and facilitating student reflection.

The study utilised a constructivist paradigm (Bryman, 2004, p. 13) using a qualitative research strategy. The sampling method is characteristic of a 'convenience sample' given that the participants were all members of the on campus cohort at a small satellite campus of a regional university (Bryman, 2004). The author had ready access to the participants due to the facilitation of weekly Common Time sessions. The research methodology used is best described as a Case Study as the "research consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context" (Hartley, 2004, p. 323). Ethics approval for the research was obtained from the University Ethics Committee and permission to access first year students was provided by the Dean of the Faculty.

The Monitoring Tool

The tool consisted of a set of six Good to Bad continua (see Figure 1) on which students were asked to mark their perceptions of their first year student experience in relation to the six statements below:

1. Being a University student
2. Balancing major elements of their lives
3. Academic progress
4. Relationship with people associated with the University
5. Relationship with people not associated with the university
6. Support being received as a university student

Being a University student



Figure 1

The statements associated with the continua reflect the author’s belief that the student experience not only is what happens on the university campus but also encompasses how their personal identity is shaped and coloured by being a student (Baird & Gordon, 2009, p. 5). Thus the statements were meant to enable discussions of the broadest range of issues affecting the student’s life not just those obviously associated with the University. The use of the scales to measure the perceptions of participants mirrors the Outcomes Rating Scales devised by Duncan et al (2003) for use in counselling situations.

Thirty seven students chose to participate in the research surrounding the use of the monitoring tool. A sample of 20 students completed semi-structured interviews to answer questions related the monitoring tool. These students were chosen due to their availability at the time of the proposed interviews. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed into electronic form (Excel). The data were uploaded into the NVivo 19 software package for analysis and identification of themes.

The questions used to prompt student responses included:

1. Is it easy to complete the continua on the monitoring tool?
2. How much time is needed to complete the monitoring tool?
3. Do you really think about the questions?
4. Would you be comfortable to be approached if the scores on the monitoring tool showed a marked change downwards?

Results

The student responses to the interview questions are detailed below:

1. Is it easy to complete the continua on the monitoring tool?

Of the 20 students that completed interviews, all 20 responded in an affirmative manner with most identifying it as very easy to complete.

2. How much time is needed to complete the monitoring tool?

Times stated by the students ranged from 5 seconds up to several minutes with all responses identifying that the time required was not a burden. On further discussion 3 students identified they took longer on certain questions, these being associated with “Balancing major elements of their lives”, ‘Relationship with people associated with the University’ and ‘Relationship with people not associated with the university’. These comments highlight the importance of social integration but also the impact of factors beyond the university gates.

3. Do you really think about the questions?

Student responses varied, all identified that they did reflect upon of each of the criteria individually whilst some students explained that with experience they quickly completed the responses as they knew what was being asked.

“I just go bang – they reflect what I think”

Other responses (3) reflected deeper thought and that the completion of the tool was a stimulus for action.

“I love them, I think they are great ... you assess it yourself, how am I going, am I happy with my progress or do I have to amp something up”

Other students identified that the tool meant they put these aspects of their experience in perspective.

“It helps you see that not everything is impacted by one thing that happens” and

“it is useful as it gives us a guideline to how we are going at uni on campus”

4. Would you be comfortable to be approached if the scores on the monitoring tool showed a marked change downwards?

Only 12 students were asked this question as it was formulated later in the interview process of the Pilot Study. Of these 12 responses all students identified that they would be open to an approach from the author if the scores changed markedly or reflected significant issues or concerns. Some students (4) felt very strongly about the possibility of these approaches saying:

“I don’t like to say things to people but if it was something like that where I haven’t really said something and someone has picked up on it and does something about it shows you care” and

“What I find is when you need help the most I am more incapable of asking and it is really good if someone says hey here’s a hand”

One other key aspect identified by students was that they would also need to know (and respect) the person monitoring their progress if they would be open to approach for a discussion regarding issues or concerns.

“you could probably do it with your students but if they didn’t know you they probably wouldn’t care”

5. Would you benefit from seeing your earlier responses to the monitoring tool?

This question only appeared in the latter interviews. Of the 6 students that provided responses all 6 enjoyed reflecting upon their progress over time.

“I think this is great, I can see how I am progressing ... if I saw a number go down I think wow I need to work on that” and

“It’s good for me like, I really have to re-evaluate my life, how I am going and everything ... it’s like I really have to do something”

One student identified the need to send out the summary of responses only after the submission of the most recent response so as not to affect the responses.

6. Is emailing the monitoring tool to you just as effective as the hard copy?

All 20 students felt that the emailing of the monitoring tool was not a concern and was not a lesser option. One student specifically stated that she felt this was important so she did not lose the opportunity to respond. Three students highlighted they would prefer the email as it would mean they had time to think more deeply and not have to rush to complete the questions. One student identified the problem that she rarely read her University emails so may not engage with the monitoring tool regularly.

Other interesting comments:

One student identified that if someone takes the time to email her then she feels she needs to reply. Within the Regional University there are processes in place for Student Relationship Officers (SRO) to be a point of contact for students when they had questions or difficulties. One student identified that this process was not as effective as the mentoring tool due to not knowing the SRO and also that the SRO was not part of the teaching staff of the Education Faculty. Surprisingly one student identified they liked the idea of being part of a research project and even felt a responsibility to be involved to help the University learn more about their students.

Reflections

Initially the monitoring tool was being utilised to identify students for semi-structured interviews related to their First Year Experience in higher education but during the Pilot Study the value of the tool itself in the pastoral care of students became apparent. The ease of collection and recording of data utilising an Excel spreadsheet was very time efficient and changes in perception were easy to track.

The interviews with students resulting from changes in their perception of their progress (academic and social) were very effective. When discussing the scores with the students the scores on the monitoring tool were a very good stimulus for discussion and ‘broke the ice’ very quickly, allowing a comfortable discussion of issues or concerns. As a result of the interviews the author was also able to develop a greater understanding of the issues being faced by this specific cohort of students.

Conclusion

The Monitoring Tool and the manner in which it was applied could be deemed as being highly successful in opening the channels of communication with first year students. The questions used were able to tap into the life of the first year student, not just their academic progress but also their social interactions with members of the university and wider communities; a dimension which has been problematic to monitor. The use by students of the Monitoring Tool as a vehicle which prompts in-depth reflection and

possibly a prompt for action was not planned, but was a surprising benefit of the study. Given the efforts across higher education settings to better support students in their first year of study, processes to monitor students at regular intervals are critical. The Monitoring Tool described in this paper may be a good starting point for discussion and actions in higher education settings to monitor and support student integration.

Finally although there appears to have been a very positive response towards the use of the monitoring tool, there are still further questions which need to be explored. Specifically:

- Why might students choose not to complete the Monitoring Tool?
- What activities lead to students feeling comfortable enough to complete the Monitoring Tool?
- Will similar results be obtained for subsequent cohorts of students?

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