

RUNNING HEAD: CAREER EDUCATION

A Longitudinal Study of the
Experience of a Career Development Program for Rural School Students

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Abstract

This study investigated students' experiences of a career development program that was established to foster interest in and aspirations for higher education within high school students residing in rural and isolated areas of Australia. Nine students who participated in the program were interviewed 18 months later to explore their recollections of the experience. Results of the study revealed three themes pertaining to the value of career planning information, elaboration and confirmation of career thoughts and the social connectedness and positive experience the program provided. It was concluded that the program had a long-term positive impact and that there should be consideration given to exploring the cost-benefit of such programs in terms of university attrition rates.

A Longitudinal Study of the
Experience of a Career Development Program for Rural School Students

Hailing from a rural background is a major factor contributing to whether young people enter into tertiary study (Australian Education Council, 1991). Moreover, there is concerning evidence of fewer students from rural and remote areas successfully completing a degree compared to urban students (9.2% vs. 11.3%) (Athanasou, 2001). Greater career awareness and improved career planning are fundamental to facilitating students considering tertiary education as a post-compulsory path (Kucker, 2000) and Tinto (1998) argued that students with a strong career focus are more likely to persist with their tertiary studies. Indeed, more recently, the landmark *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) made the case for enhanced awareness, access, and achievement in higher education. A report derived from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth found evidence that students certainly valued career advice as being useful to their decision-making (Rothman & Hillman, 2008). Further, it has been argued that career education and counselling gives students the potential to overcome disadvantage by ensuring that they know what career path they want to pursue and how they might achieve their goals through higher education (McIlveen, Everton, & Clarke, 2005). Accordingly, this paper addresses the long-term impact of a career development program upon a group of rural high school students who explored higher education as a post-compulsory educational pathway.

A Career Development Program for Rural School Students

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has a substantial proportion of students from rural and regional Australia. It is therefore appropriate that the

university provide rural students living in its geographical region with the knowledge and resources to successfully negotiate a career path based upon a higher education qualification.

Accordingly, USQ has operated a career development program to assist with transition to university over six years prior to the current study and preliminary evaluations have indicated a positive impact (McIlveen, Ford, & Everton, 2005). Clinical experience of the counsellors at the university's Student Services suggests that students from rural and isolated areas experience a different transition and adjustment process from their metropolitan peers. A recurring theme presented to counselling staff is that rural high school students have limited access to career education and guidance at their home schools in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts.

Although similar factors influence the formation of aspirations for higher education within rural and outer-metropolitan students (Shaw & Larson, 2003), the successful transition of students from rural and remote areas of Australia to university includes social experiences, socio-economic, cultural and educational opportunities (Stevens, 1995). For example, in a study of health careers, themes emerged from rural schools in Western Australia when health career choices were restricted by geographic location, stereotyping, obligations and community and family loyalty (Durey, McNamara, & Larson, 2003). Thus, there is reason to provide career education and counselling that is specifically formulated for rural students.

Given evidence that career education can positively influence career decision-making self efficacy and confidence of high school students (e.g., McWhirter, Crothers, & Rasheed, 2000), the program assumed that if rural students are given quality career education and guidance, web resources, access to university career

counsellors for a private session, they would be better prepared to make informed career choices and consider a tertiary education as a post-secondary school option. The program included career education classes and also addressed issues pertaining to rural background, such as lack of finances; loneliness, first generation to attend university; discourse and student's mindset in relation to university. The initial evaluation of the program demonstrated that universities could respond to the needs of rural secondary students and that such a program impacts positively on students' decision to attend university (McIlveen, Ford, et al., 2005).

Student Participants

Year 12 co-coordinators and guidance officers from rural and remote high schools around south-west Queensland were requested to select and offer senior Year 12 students, on behalf of the university, an opportunity to attend the university's main campus to explore their career paths in relation to higher education and to experience campus life. Importantly, school staff were requested to encourage students who they believed may not necessarily consider university as a post-secondary education, but who may have a chance of success at a tertiary level if given sufficient exposure to raise their aspirations. Funding was provided by the by the university and there was no cost to the students.

Career Education Classes

Three career education classes were developed to encourage students to experience practical exploration activities. The first class addressed their career-related values and entailed the completion of the Australian Interest Measure (Naylor & Care, 2007) In the second class students received feedback on the results of their vocational interest test. This feedback process included discussions on educational pathways and opportunities related to their results. Students were also given an

assignment designed to develop their skills for the use of the *myfuture* website (www.myfuture.edu.au). They were required to explore the site and find information about the occupations that attracted them the most in accordance with their career interest profiles. The third session involved further exploration of their information in class group that included additional demonstrations of some of the key functions of the *myfuture* website, so they could find relevant information independently when they had gone home.

Career Counselling

Students were provided an opportunity to have a private one-hour session with a university career counsellor to further clarify career goals based upon their career assessment data and career education class activities. Additional sessions were provided if necessary. It should be emphasized that the career counsellors were under no obligation to recommend tertiary education to students. As per their professional standards (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2006) they were required to formulate a preferred career plan according to the needs of the students.

Complimentary Program

A student's successful transition from high school to university is a continuous, evolving process that encompasses academic, personal and environmental development, and is a complex phenomenon. Rendon (1995) suggested that two areas of adjustment are vital to student retention: (a) a successful transition into college and (b) making connections at college. Rendon includes other areas that are to be considered such as poor academic preparation, low socio-economic background, lack of clear goals, and the different culture of the university. Being perceived as different, leaving old friends behind and the experience of living between two worlds (home and campus) were identified as important facets of transition. Transition from

high school to tertiary education can be effected by differences in learning approaches, homesickness, and fear of failure (Lee, 1997). Feeling of safety plays a large role in adjusting to their new home, with those students who identify feeling secure being more likely to stay. Harvey-Beavis and Robinson (2000) found that Australian students reported experiencing university staff as socially and intellectually strange and distant, and that students did not understand the day to day activities of university. This highlights the need to provide transition services to students so that their entry into university life is not a “culture shock”.

Every university has a unique environment, culture and discourse to which students must adjust, and first year students must make the greatest adjustment. In addition to the career education classes and counselling, students also participated in complimentary activities that exposed them to university life and culture. Representatives from each Faculty presented information on the degrees programs for various disciplines and majors that were taught and what type of jobs students could expect from the degree qualifications. A lecture was given to the students so they knew what they could expect from university and how education here is different from high school. Students were also provided demonstrations by the multimedia and information technology staff on how university students use computers for their learning. A tour of the university library showed them how to search for resources using the extensive online databases available at the university, and also demonstrated how to find print materials (e.g., books, journals). The Student Guild (union) provided information on the various activities and supports they offer around campus (e.g., sporting and cultural clubs).

Another important experience in the program was staying at the USQ’s residential colleges and learning what it would be like to live away from home with a

number of other students, as for many, attending university would be the first time they would be living away from home. Student mentors who were senior university students were employed to be with the students 24 hours a day and conducted tours of the campus and city. They also provided a valuable and informal opportunity for students to find out what university was really like and have their questions answered by a university student and for the mentors to share some personal experiences. Some of the other activities organized after hours were ten pin bowling, going to the movies and shopping.

The Current Study

There is ample evidence that career interventions produce positive outcomes for clients, at least in the short to medium-term, following an intervention (e.g., Brown & Ryan Krane, 2000; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998). Evidences of its benefit in the longer term also exist. Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes (Bimrose, Barnes, & Hughes, 2008; 2006) have published results of a five-year longitudinal study of 50 adult clients, investigating what constitutes effective guidance. In this study, *effective* was defined as what the client found useful (Bimrose, Barnes, Hughes, & Orton, 2004). In the first year of the study (2003/04), 49 of the 50 participating clients (98%) reported that their career guidance interview had been 'useful', immediately after their careers interview. Whilst this proportion decreased over the period of the study, it was found that even five years after their careers interview, 19 of the 29 clients (66%) successfully followed-up in the final year said they still valued their careers interview (Bimrose, et al., 2008)

Although the university's career development program has been evaluated with respect to its immediate impact upon participants, there has been a need to consider its long-term impact (McIlveen, Ford, et al., 2005). Useful research to guide

such an approach to evaluation would be the longitudinal study referred to previously in which a five-year study was conducted to investigate the impact of career counselling sessions upon adult clients of various types of career services, including higher education, in the United Kingdom (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes, 2008) . This study entailed follow up interviews every year over five years with clients using a qualitative research design. The careers education program that is the focus of the current study was specifically developed to improve rural students' aspirations of their higher education as a post-secondary education pathway, with immediate feedback suggesting they were satisfied with the service (McIlveen, Ford, et al., 2005). Accordingly, by using a longitudinal approach, the current study sought to evaluate students' experiences of the program by exploring their recollections of the program 18 months following its operation. The study aimed to explore whether the program fostered aspirations for higher education.

Method

Research Design

The current study was constructivist in its epistemology and sought to understand participants' experiences of the program, through an analysis of their recollections derived from recorded interviews. The qualitative method interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) informed the interview process and data analysis. This method entails two separate, but interrelated, processes: exploration of the phenomenal experience recorded as interview transcripts; and hermeneutic processing to construct higher-level themes that subsume the phenomenology of the participants' experiences.

Participants

The present whereabouts of the 23 students from the 2006 program was checked using their addresses supplied at that time of the program in that year. Upon completion of the search, the location of 14 of the original student group was unknown. Of those nine remaining students whose whereabouts was determined, all agreed to take part in the current study. Whilst the final proportion of participants was 40% of the original population, IPA requires purposive selection of participants, rather than large sample sizes for its validity (Smith, et al., 2009). Their median age was 18 years and seven were female. All were enrolled in post-secondary qualification course, with eight at university and one at a technical college.

Sources of Data

Participants were interviewed using a brief semi-structured questionnaire. Items in the questionnaire addressed: the program's broad elements of career education sessions, Faculty presentations, and accommodation (e.g., What do you remember most about the program?); specific components of the career education sessions (e.g., What was the most useful piece of career information you received?); career guidance provided by other agencies (e.g., What other career guidance have you received since the program?); current situation (e.g., What work or study are you doing at the moment?); and future (e.g., What are the next steps in terms of your career?). Interviews ranged from 10 to 20 minutes in duration and they were digitally recorded for transcription by a professional agency.

Data Analysis

Nine transcripts were analysed using the guidelines for IPA. Firstly, one transcript was read repeatedly and then analysed before moving to the others. This initial processing served to embed the analyst in the process. In conducting multiple

readings of a transcript, the analyst sought to construct specific descriptions of experiences evident in the text of the transcript. These lower-level descriptions were subsequently compiled into themes, which were connected to the participant's experience as indicated in his/her transcript, yet sufficiently abstract to enable connection to the themes constructed in other transcripts. These themes were reiteratively checked against the lower-level experiences highlighted in the transcript to ensure their meaningfulness. The process was repeated for every transcript. Upon completing an analysis of each transcript, the themes were clustered up into final group of higher-level themes which subsumed the themes and experiences of each participant.

Following suggestions for check on validity in IPA (Smith, et al., 2009), an audit was undertaken by a third party who was not involved in the original research design, data collection or analysis. The initial data analysis was reviewed and amendments made. Broadly, there was agreement on the emergent themes. One major theme – originally 'valuing of career information' was amended to 'valuing of career guidance', since the auditor found evidence on a component of the program (one to one career guidance interviews) that had not originally been picked up. Additional evidence of the other two major themes was also added from the participant scripts. In addition to the amendments to the three major themes, two minor themes were added. These comprised the value of the career program in the way it helped familiarised participants positively with a higher education environment and the enrichment provided by a safe and expert environment in which questions that could not be asked of parents, friends or teachers could be explored.

Results

The IPA derived three major themes from the transcripts which pertained directly to the participants' experiences of the program. In addition, other career-related themes were derived from the analysis, and these will be presented after the program-related themes.

Valuing of Career Guidance

For some demonstrating self-reflexivity and independence, a structured career program may not necessarily meet their particular needs. For them, career decision making is regarded an intensely personal and private issue. One participant, for example, explained his apparent ambivalence towards the program: "It's a kind of choice you need to make by yourself" (Participant 2)

This view, however, proved to be exceptional. All, except one, stated that the program provided them timely and useful information and support in their career decision making. Participant 1 already had sufficient career-related information and had made their career-decision. Others remarked on the value of careers information. For example: "Certainly, it opened my eyes up anyway, I was like, oh, I didn't know all this [information] was here" (Participant 7). This statement exemplifies the surprise that participants experienced upon discovering the enormous volume of career-information that is available to them (e.g., the Australia's Career Information Service website *My Future*), yet were unaware of such resources being at their disposal. Beyond the information per se, participants learned that they had access to sources of expert advice which could direct them to appropriate information: as indicated in this participant's comment "If you want to talk to someone, or I don't know, talk to someone who has been there and done that, they're there" (Participant 4).

In addition to the value placed on career information provided by the program, the importance of one-to-one guidance was emphasised. Three participants highlighted the significant impact of this experience for their own career decision-making. One explained how: “I really enjoyed the meeting that I had with you because it really made my decision on what uni I should to and things like that (Participant 3)”. Another observed how: “...the one on one career session, that was very useful for me because I actually found out like exact, exactly what I need to study, and I found out the exact career paths that were available...”. The third explained how one to one career guidance had provided them with singular access to expertise: “You got an in depth talk to a person instead of having five other people jostling for information at the same time...I just like being able to talk to someone and just say, this is what I plan to do”

Elaboration and Confirmation of Career Thoughts

It is interesting to note that participants developed some early ideas of what they wanted to do with regard to their career prior to attending the program, but that the program served to elaborate and confirm their ideas; for example: “Well I knew from the start that I wanted to be a teacher so I guess it just kind of emphasized that more” (Participant 8); and “I already had a fairly good idea what I was doing. But it really did, narrow, guided me a lot and put me on the right path, because I knew what path I wanted to go on, but I just didn’t how to get there” (Participant 2). For participants who felt an information void regarding what a career plan looks like and how to operationalise one, indicated that the program assisted in advancing their career decision making: “You know how to make a choice to go towards your career inspiration right now, instead of just fumbling in the dark” (Participant 6). Participant 1, who described confidence in his pre-existing career decision, also stated in relation

to the career education classes that “they did help me confirm that I didn’t want to do a science”. The program also proved to be critical to the decision making process for one participant: “It really made my decision on what uni I should go to and things like that” (Participant 3).

Positive Experience and Social Connection

One of the major themes was the overall positive experience of the program at USQ: “I remember it was a really good experience” (Participant 9). Even the participant who already had sufficient career related information reported enjoying the social connectedness of the program: “the social setting, the getting to hang with people who ordinarily you’d probably most never meet” (Participant 1); suggesting that for a positive educational experience, there needs to not only be useful career related information and supports but also a balance between educational activities and other parts of their lives such as social interests etc.

Participants reported their joy about the social activities which were designed to create a relaxed, fun and inclusive environment, while still familiarizing them with university life and the engaging in the metropolitan community. “I remember riding there by bike and meeting everybody in a full room and then we did a couple of games and got to know each other and it was a pretty, fun, relaxed environment. We went out to the cinemas and shopping and more fun things” (Participant 3).

Participants found that they were not alone in their experiences and those other students from rural and isolated areas were faced with similar career life choices. Furthermore, for some participants it was their first time away from their rural home and visiting a city-based tertiary institution, so it was important to include social aspect into the program to assist them to feel welcome and connected, and adopt a belief that it is possible for them to belong within a university community: “I met a lot

of people, especially from rural areas and meeting up with them and seeing what uni life is really about I guess” (Participant 4). The familiarity provide by the program also proved to be key. One participant explained that this had been the pivotal factor in choosing their University: “Because I lived here for a week, is why I chose [McGregor College] over the other ones....because it was so familiar” (Participant 1)

Minor Themes

One area of particular interest was the obvious shift in rural and isolated parental views about education. They are very open to careers in non traditional areas and are happy to support their child in whatever career is of interest. Parents may be beginning to realise that making a living in rural and isolated areas is harder than it used to be and that there are many career opportunities available. Main supports for students are reported to be parents, school counsellors and teachers and friends.

However, it is interesting that the careers program also offered a safe and expert environment that provided information not available from these other sources. For example: “I could ask question that I wouldn’t. Like, I was too scared to ask” (Participant 9); “I could talk to people and they’d say, well, this is how people got to do it and this is how some people didn’t” (Participant 6). It is worthy of noting that friends still appear to play a major role in career decision making. The appropriateness of the information given by friends is unknown.

Students are being informed that it is no longer a case of “one job for life” they are still making decisions based on the idea that they will be doing whatever they choose now, for life. They are happy to move within the position, just not out of the position, which is demonstrated by Participant 4’s statement that “Yeah it’ll be the rest of my life probably”, when referring to whether she’s going to stay with that career for a long time or use it as a stepping stone to something else. Returning to

work in rural and isolated areas also became another theme throughout the data. Most participants reported that they wanted to use their skills in a rural community after they completed their degree. Participant 8 stated that “I’m hoping to finish my degree, and I want to work in a rural town”.

Discussion

This study revealed evidence of a positive effect of the program upon participants. It should be noted, however, that most participants had already made some early decisions about their careers prior to engaging in the program. We presume that this was as a consequence of the Queensland Government’s Department of Education and Training (2002) curriculum reform that required schools to ensure that students had career plans before they finish secondary schooling. Nevertheless, although the participants had a plan, it may not have been fully articulated to an extent necessary for rationale and informed decision-making, however; and the results of the current study suggest that participants found the program informative, inclusive, and useful in terms of developing career plans and confirming career ideas.

The program addressed transition to the university community through carefully planned social activities ensuring participants were familiar with each other, the university and the local community. Social aspects of the program were very successful and participants reported that they felt socially connected which was one of the goals of the programs. It facilitated students feeling a sense of belonging and that they could be successful in a tertiary education environment. This is consistent with Rendon’s (1995) research which suggests that for students to make a successful transition to university they must make connections at college. Lee (1997) also found that thriving students make a successful transition to the university environment and the local community.

Although guidance counsellors in Queensland's rural and isolated schools provide career information, counselling and education, it is not their only professional responsibility. There are other areas of practice that demand attention (e.g., health and welfare counselling). Therefore, students may not have access to dedicated career counselling and education services, and may not know where they can find the information and guidance they need to make informed and better articulated career decisions. Indeed, participants in this study reported that they were amazed at the volume of career information available and that they were unaware that these resources were available to them. It also allowed them the peace of mind that they did not have to make decisions without the assistance of people who had specific expertise.

Limitations

The current study indicated a positive longitudinal impact, which contributes to the body of evidence that career education and information does have a positive impact on participants. As a longitudinal study the results of the interviews may have been influenced by students' recall of events; as it requires good memory from the participants to accurately report on the program in detail. Participants would clearly have some memory decay over 18 months. However, it can be argued that this study is of the experience of the program that the participants are living currently—at the time of interview—and how they have over time and in the interview process interpreted their memories of the program. Indeed, it may be argued that the factual veracity of their recall is therefore less important than their current experience and remembering that influences decisions and beliefs in the present moment. The second limitation of the study is the attrition rate. With just over one-third of the original set of students taking part in this study, we are unable to assert that the program was

positive for all or the majority of the program's students in the long-term. Perhaps ongoing follow-up with the participants on a more frequent basis following the program might have reduced the attrition rate somewhat. Future research might include another follow up study in 3-5 years, as most students will have finished their tertiary education and be employed. Apart from the educational enrichment experienced by individual students, this issue behoves universities to operate and evaluate a career development program in terms of costs and benefits (cf. Athanasou, 2007).

Conclusion

This study extended the first evaluation of the career development program (McIlveen, Ford and Everton, 2005) which found an immediate positive impact upon participants to show evidence of a long-term positive impact upon a sample of students. Results from this evaluation provide an indication of the positive impact of residential career development programmes on the post-secondary school aspirations. Although such programs are inherently expensive to operate due to residential fees and staff resources, the success of the current program suggests that policy makers and funders of universities and schools might consider the potential cost-benefits in terms of students' successful transitions into higher education, particularly in light of the rhetoric of the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, et al., 2008). After all, the relative financial cost of a single student dropping out of university would likely fund a career development program such as the one described here.

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