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RESEARCH ONLINE

Well, I got here...but what happens next? – exploring the early narratives of first year female students who are the first in the family to attend university.

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Abstract
There is much literature and research pertaining to the First Year Experience but little that acknowledges or explores how this varies between different cohorts of students. The so-called massification of higher education has led to what Rendon (1994) terms a 'tapestry of differentiation' (p.33) amongst students. No longer is the typical candidate a school leaver originating from predominantly white, middle class enclaves where the tradition of attending further education is well established. Instead, many students now access university through non-traditional modes of entry or may be the first in the family to attend such an institution and as such, may not readily identify with or adhere to the values and practices found there. This article highlights the initial experiences of a group of female students, who are all first generation university students, as they enter undergraduate study at a regional university campus. Exploring the early narratives of these subjects not only provides clearer insight into the types of obstacles initially encountered but also facilitates some understanding of the motivation and persistence required by individuals in their academic pursuits .

Introduction

It is widely accepted that the first year of study within university is characterised by numerous challenges for students, many of whom are not only being exposed to new forms of knowledge but also becoming acculturised to a new type of community. Individual learners encounter any number of difficulties related to social, academic, economic and personal factors; unfortunately a relatively significant number of students fail to overcome these obstacles and ultimately become another 'drop-out' statistic. Student attrition and academic failure have far-reaching implications for both institution and individual. For students, such a decision can often result in negative social and psychological repercussions whilst institutionally student attrition not only reflects negatively on structural practices but also, more fundamentally, this is a very costly process. Arguably, this financial imperative has partially influenced the type of research conducted within this area. Huisman, Kaiser and Vossensteyn (2000) suggest that, in the

UK context, the political and governmental focus on participation rates results from both fiscal prerogatives and a realisation that in order to gain a highly skilled workforce it is necessary to maintain existing student populations and so assure that the 'open-door' university does not become the 'revolving door' university (Cope & Hannah, 1975).

Berger and Braxton (1998) refer to the withdrawal process as a 'departure puzzle' (p.104) and echo how this has attracted attention from both scholarly researchers and university policy makers or 'practitioners'. Research on this area is often characterised by a focus on internal and external variables that effect levels of persistence and transition to the academic community. However, many of these studies have been criticised as being largely '… preoccupied with the manipulation of variables in an attempt to uncover causality...' (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998, p.317), whilst others have been questioned in relation to the nature of variables expounded particularly in the light of the diversity of student populations (Mackie, 2001). Indeed, for all those students regarded as non-traditional, variables beyond those identified by many of the theorists influence decisions relating to persistence or withdrawal.

An analysis of the literature on first year experience or even more broadly defined areas related to tertiary study reveals a lack of attention on specific student groups. Transition to first year is undoubtedly a very personal journey and while it is not possible to document student experience on an individual level, research based on particular student cohorts rather than generic groupings serves to illuminate aspects of this process that larger studies may not capture. In the proposed study, subjects have been encouraged to narrate their experiences and so present personal realities of creating and maintaining meaning in a world that is characterised by obstacles, interruptions and constant renegotiations. Most of these students have a number of responsibilities and activities competing for time in their daily life. Largely, once lectures are finished, students rush to either catch a train home to household and family duties or other places of employment. However, such 'juggling' is certainly not unique to this campus or these students. Instead, tertiary study is becoming an increasingly 'solitary' occupation (Mc Innis, 1998) with the resulting loss of community leading to increased levels of student disengagement with the

academic environment. Thus, to undertake interviews in such an environment enables some conceptualisation and understanding of what it means to be a student in the current climate as well as enabling narratives rich in texture and diversity to unfold.

This qualitative research project specifically aims to better comprehend what it is that makes female students, who are categorised as 'non-traditional' in the sense that they are the first in the family to attend university, successfully engage with the university environment, rather than succumb to the pressure and depart. While much of the existing literature focuses on identifying the variables that lead to departure, this study is currently conducting interviews with first year students in order to explore what encourages persistence. Mann (2001, p. 11) compares the commencing student to a migrant or 'colonised' subject who is located powerless in a cultural environment that is attempting to thrust a particular perspective or worldview on them. This comparative is applied across student populations, Mann arguing that it is common for students, regardless of background, to lack a 'sense of ownership' (p. 11) about the university experience. In this way, students are faced with the conflict of trying to 'bridge' between prior experience and the new world of knowledge they are entering not as equal citizens but as powerless individuals. Similarly, Rendon (1992) succinctly defines the emotions and experiences of students who are the first in the family to attend university as:

> '…a feeling of alienation that moves the students from the concrete to abstract experience and that takes the student from an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style, and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices and assumptions.' (p56)

Arguably, nowhere is this more apparent that within a small regional campus that while appearing to be close to students geographically is arguably distant in terms of academic values and expectations. For most students, commencing tertiary studies can initiate feeling of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt; however, for those deemed non-traditional and enrolled in a small regional campus, where the opportunity to attend university is relatively recent, such feelings can be exacerbated. The ways in which these

individual students define university both personally and in relation to family and community affiliation, will clearly impact on their behaviour and their experience within this setting. Whilst university administrators and teaching staff may have perceptions about what the university experience is, undoubtedly it is the individual students who translate this experience according to personal meaning systems and realities. For many of those students who are the first in their families to go to university, both school leavers and mature-aged, there may be a lack of understanding or prior knowledge about the implicit expectations of this tertiary setting, this 'foreign language' of university life (Stone, 2004).

Methodology

In this project, qualitative methodology is used to explore the interplay of factors and experiences that aid or impede transition and socialisation into this new learning environment. The study is based upon regular semi-structured interviewing of 16 female participants, who are first in their family to attend university. The interviewees are predominantly undergraduate students and most are studying full-time. There are fourteen mature age students (those defined as over the age of 21) and two students who have come directly from school. Of the fourteen mature age students, twelve of these are mothers, eight currently reside with their partners and four are single parents. At this stage, the first set of interviews have been conducted and transcribed but three further sets of interviews are planned with each of the sixteen before the end of the academic year. In addition, participants have been asked to complete two email questionnaires, each of which will be sent out during the semester breaks. It is intended that interviews will build upon each other, with early interviews shaping the content of later meetings and the questions that will be asked; whilst email feedback will enable subjects to respond in an immediate way to requests and is less intrusive than an interview format. At this stage in the research, it is illuminating to explore common thematic elements which have emerged in interviews conducted in the initial weeks of this first year of study. The data reveals how despite the early stages of the study, commonality relating to initial experiences, expectations and also the nature of obstacles is very apparent.

The study is set on a small subsidiary campus of a larger metropolitan institution, located in a region that is recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged. This recognition is derived largely from statistical evidence revealing higher than state average levels of: unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits and low income earners. According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data (2001-2003), the area also has much lower university attendance rates than state or national figures (2% compared to 4% for state and national) as well as a much lower proportion of residents who have completed a university degree (6% compared with 11% for the state and 10% for the country) or completed the final year of high school (27% compared to 38% for the state).

Discussion

Clearly, the relatively recent inception of a university campus has offered many individuals the chance to attend university, many of whom may not have contemplated such an endeavor previously. Some of the respondents cited the proximity of the campus to their homes as one incentive to commence study and also highlighted a reluctance to travel further afield:

I think because it was local, yeah because I've actually considered probably the thing that I would maybe consider most doing is social work but I'm not going to do that because it is only offered at N. (bigger campus) and I'm not going that far because I think that offers a whole other set of time constraints in extra travel and things that I am not prepared to do…(Vicky, 40's)

Okay, it's close to home… I can jump in my car and get here in 25 minutes jump in my car and go home so if they ring me up at M's school I can get home if Mum and Dad isn't there or my husband isn't home from work so I know it's like local and easy to get to for me but I love everyone here I think they're so cool. (Susie, 38)

Probably cos I live five minutes up the road that's basically why I chose here I'd actually been driving into this campus for five years and driving children to preschool …so I was fairly familiar with it , I think familiarity, close proximity and knew that and its possibly going to happen…(Sheila, 30's)

The campus caters to a diverse scope of students from a range of educational backgrounds, many of whom have accessed tertiary education from non-traditional forms of access. This scenario is reflected in this study as while none of the respondents had

ever previously enrolled in a degree, seven had completed previous studies at a tertiary institution. Three students had attended Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges whilst the remainder had enrolled in a year-long university access course designed to prepare students for university study and also provide a UAI or University Admissions Index to enable application to an undergraduate program. The other participants in the study either accessed university as a result of High School Certificates or by sitting for the STAT test, an examination which also provides students with the requisite UAI. For many of these students, commencing tertiary studies initiated feeling of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt, emotions clearly revealed in the narratives and expressions used by respondents to describe their first day of attendance:

I was very nervous before the lecture I was up most of the night feeling sick in the stomach ... (Stephanie, 34)

Ahh, nervous as anything, I went through a week of not sleeping not because I thought I couldn't do it but just basically a fear of the unknown I was like so nervous… (Sheila, 30's)

The first lecture was described as *'overwhelming'* (Candy, 39), *'scary'* (Jane, 30's,) and *'very daunting'* (Clara, 23) leading to feelings of *'panic'* (Clara) and an initial sense of *'Oh gosh what am I doing and questioning myself...'* (Clara). Despite such initial misgivings, each of the mature age respondents expressed an almost grim determination to succeed in this new environment, each citing 'failing' as being the worst thing that they could imagine happening:

Yeah, failing did I say failing [laughs]… I don't doubt my capabilities I know I'll do really well cos, ya know, when I put my mind to it I do well so yeah, the fear of failure… (Candy, 39)

Emm, probably to fail something and they say: Ah, you've got to do a whole subject again even though its not really that bad and I probably wouldn't ever let it happen but em, that's probably the worst thing that could happen – that's how it feels to me at the moment (Cathy, 20's)

…so I started prac last Friday so if I were to withdraw from uni I would have a fail against my name so you can't pull out at that point so its not an option if I was going to withdraw from the university it would have to be after I got that pass so I put that pressure on myself but yeah, I won't fail. (Linda, 30's)

Failing, yeah, failing or not being able to get an assignment in because maybe my children fall sick which has happened two weeks ago …and maybe being told that you can't hand your assignment in late and missing out on the marks that would have passed you so I think failing would be the worst thing yeah and having to do it all again; I think everyone would say that (Susie, 38)

Perhaps, this fear is partially reflective of the fact that for most of the older interviewees, the decision to enrol was not taken lightly and had quite clear financial and emotional repercussions. Prior to enrolling, some of the women spoke of negotiations with partners and children, for example Stephanie describes how she *'harped on my husband for a whole year'* until he agreed *'initially very reluctant'* as *'he didn't think I'd finish it so I told him we'll see how I go for this year…*' Sheila describes how the decision involved discussions with both her husband and young children and how the ensuing approval increased her self belief in her abilities:

I had a discussion with my husband about it cos it meant me leaving work and it meant him taking on a few extra responsibilities as well so I knew it wouldn't just affect myself and then I said to my kids: What do you think and I actually asked them what they thought and I said: 'Mummy wants to be a teacher' and they said: 'Ohhh, yeah that sounds good mum!' so but whether they really knew exactly what that sorta entailed but that's I think why I sorta felt yes I can do this……(Sheila, 30's)

The decision to enrol in this particular year or at this stage of life was frequently attributed to some sort of recent catalyst which was both personal and work related. This is reflected by Cochrane (1991) who highlights how mature female students in his study reported how dramatic or important personal developments provided the impetus to come to university. For example, Catherine describes how her decision to enrol in a full-time Nursing degree resulted from caring for her younger sister: *'I got her well she lived with me for 6 months and …that's when I decided yes I could do counselling or social work as up until then I wanted to but never had the confidence* …' Indeed, often the reasons for coming to university reflect an incident that led directly to increases in self-esteem and confidence. Rendon (1998) identifies how for many first generation students the crucial difference between succeeding and failing in their studies is related to the nature and frequency of validation they receive from both academic staff and family. Similarly, in

Levine and Nideffer's (1996) study on first generation students found that success was often attributed to:

> 'An individual who touched or changed the student's lives; intervention by one person at a critical time in the person's lives… it was the human contact that made the difference.' (p65)

Rendon also argues that for students regarded as non-traditional: 'That certain glow, self assurance, and self-confidence develop because others reach out, validate them and enable their learning' (p3). Certainly, in the case of many of the students in this study the decision to come to university was often based on encouragement and support derived from not only family but also work and friends. For example, a number of the women were studying education or teaching and mentioned how encouragement from other teachers when volunteering in their child's school inspired them to enrol. As Sheila explains:

…never thought about it until my daughter started school , she was in Kindergarten last year and I played a big role with helping out at school in between working, I'd do reading groups and I helped out with their sports program and I had a lot of different teachers say to me – your fantastic and why aren't you teaching and that even started me thinking why aren't I doing this? I love it I enjoy it! I get satisfaction from it so why aren't I doing it so that when I thought ah…

Similarly, Linda describes how teachers supported and encouraged her decision to attend, providing much needed advocacy: *… they are going to support me; right now it's more a case of: Yeah you can do it [laughs]. Cos I'm going I don't know if I can do it* [funny voice] *so they're saying of course you can so yeah…* Six of the women revealed that attendance at university was the realisation of a long-term goal or ambition and hence, displayed a high level of determination and commitment in relation to their studies.

…its not a matter of will I stick it out or not , I'm doing a four year course I will graduate at the end, okay I might not have distinctions and everything because I refuse to put that pressure on me …but I'll know that I have done the best I can… (Candy, 39)

… one of the main reasons why I haven't gone: No, this is a dream I can't achieve, I'm just going to walk away, I've just sorta gone: No, there's gotta be a way through this and

I've just sorta looked for another way, I've thought: No, I haven't like come back here for no reason and I'm going to get through this time so yeah, my circumstances have never been better for studying and there not going to get any better so y'know that's the way I look at it and if I'm going to do it it's now.(Vicki, 40's)

Such sentiments are reflected in research conducted by McInnis, James and Naught (1995) where older students indicated higher levels of purpose in relation to their reasons for studying with attendance regarded as being a 'second chance' or an opportunity not to be wasted (p71). In the same study, those students who were the 'higher education pioneers' within the family, displayed greater 'academic application' than those students who had parents with tertiary qualifications. McInnis et al. postulate that perhaps these higher levels of application reflect recognition that academic success is not guaranteed nor taken for granted necessitating additional work and focus.

However, despite high levels of motivation, when students were interviewed in the fourth week of the semester, most expressed some level of disappointment about the course. Twelve of the participants mentioned that their expectations and reality did not match and as a result, many expressed some level of disenchantment with the reality. For example, students were surprised by the size of tutorial groups expecting small intimate groups focused on collegial discussion instead some of the tutorials included up to 30 students. Another major disappointment was the lack of direction afforded by the academic staff in relation to academic expectations and practices. Arguably for students, both school leavers and mature-aged, who are the first in their families to go to university, there may be few 'role models' available to them and little assistance in relation to comprehending the different cultural and academic expectations of university life. Such feelings can add stress and anxiety to an already difficult situation, initiating a downward spiral that may lead to ultimately to withdrawal, both academic and social. Indeed as Stone (2004) states:

> ' These kinds of fears and uncertainties can be a potent mixture for failure in the first year of tertiary studies – often by withdrawing rather than actually failing to make the grade in their assessments'. (p2)

For some of the participants, the expectations had been derived from previous educational experience and this undoubtedly had a part to play in the disillusionment with the reality:

I thought it would be like school …but being here you sorta see it just like no-one sorta cares about you as such if you don't do the work they don't care they don't follow anything up , they think ahh, if you don't hand an assignment in that's your problem and stuff like that and it's too hard well it took me a while to get use to it and I'm still getting use to it…(Carly, 18)

The shock of the expectations that I mean I know that its not like TAFE [College of Technical and Further Education] *or like school where you get spoon-fed but okay read chapter three by next week is fine if that is the only subject that you are doing but I've got all these other things. Its just like it was daunting to think wow there is so much expected from me… .(Nicki, 33*)

However, on a more positive note eight of the mature students expressed relief about the presence of other older students at the campus. Having other mature students in the class or just visible at the campus validated many of these participants and justified their decision to come to university at this later stage in life. Vicki describes how her initial thoughts focused on: *'Ohmigod I don't want to be the oldest person at university..'* and continues to explain how she thought it was a bit like *'...going back to High School again: Ohmigod is everyone looking at me y'know how do I look sorta thing ..*' However, later in the interview she explains how the presence of other older students increased her levels of confidence and made for a more comforting initiation into this environment. Similarly, Christine explains a similar focus on age on her first day of lectures:

…I'm watching people walking around thinking 'I don't know anybody' but yeah I remember thinking: 'Oh good she 's older, she's older' [laughs] I think I must have been pretty preoccupied with age… there was a lady who sat on the seat behind me and she was like, well she wasn't a young one its hard to tell people's ages but yeah, she was similar to my age I'd imagine and she looked pretty harassed [laughs] I said: Ahh it's a bit daunting isn't it and she said yes, so we started chatting a little bit which was good so it calmed the nerves a bit so yeah…

References to the age of students on the campus were apparent in many of the interviews, many of the older students expressing initial trepidation when faced with the youthful

faces in the lecture halls. However, equally some perceived the younger cohort or ' *the young ones'* as being less motivated and more interested in *'...off partying or wanna go home socialise and want to do other things so they wouldn't maximise their time at uni' (Candy,39).* Nikki echoes this sentiment, explaining:

...and there are just so many young ones who haven't even thought of starting these assignments and its like that's where I am ahead because I am thinking about I've gotta make time to do this, this and this and I still spend time with M. (son) so its making me feel a bit more motivated to sit at the computer and do my research a little earlier than probably I would have but you have gotta be motivated and time management and just breathe deep...[laughs].

For these participants, their maturity was regarded as an advantage in their study as their particular stage of life and external pressures provided the impetus to 'get started'. Interestingly, one of the students who had just left school described the presence of the mature cohort in a positive way, explaining how the mature age participation enriched her learning experience:

...they have a lot to offer in tutorial discussions too that you don't think about ... some of them might be like 35 and stuff and spent the last 15 or 20 years been working or travelling and stuff ...they also seem to look into the past too since they are a bit older you sorta see them as more of an authority figure, yeah. (Carly,18)

One of the mature age participants describes how she felt a level of responsibility within tutorials to maintain the discussion, despite being shy, this student disliked the *' deathly silence that occurs when a lecturer is waiting for a response so I'm finding myself talking an awful lot and hating every second of it'*. Clearly, the presence of different age groups within the learning environment has repercussions for the class dynamic. In fact, McInnis et al. (1995) caution how divisions can be created between age groups often exacerbated by older students dominating classroom discussion or asking many questions, in some cases leading to a 'negative' learning climate (p74). Clearly, such situations have implications for teaching practitioners, requiring skilful management of student participation and it is an area that future interviews will build upon and explore.

Finally, another aspect of study that most of the students did not anticipate was the amount of work required by the course and the speed of progression through the subject matter. Some of the women mentioned that while they expected some additional study beyond face-to-face lectures, the intensity of this came as a shock. As Sheila explains: *'I imagined that it would be y'know fairly tough and be lots of work but I didn't well I probably didn't think as much like…'* Kira likened her course to a rollercoaster and revealed how morale was already depleted amongst students:

I already do feel that it is amazing how many students you talk to even the young, they feel useless and they feel dumb …cos they didn't understand things they still don't understand a lot of things… it's like a roller coaster ride you join it get on and join it or get left behind and like …when people are getting their assignments back they are feeling: Ohh are you laughing at us? Are we that dumb? And I think that is bad, it is very negative…

This lack of understanding about institutional expectations was not however limited to the level of work required. Many of the participants revealed a startling lack of clarity or knowledge about quite fundamental institutional processes for example: enrolment procedures, financial requirements, timetabling. Overall, there seemed to be an assumption of knowledge on the part of the institution, a situation that clearly needs to be addressed, as Jane describes: *'...I think it comes down to just everyone assuming that you know what to do but nobody really speaking up and saying well I don't know what to do cos I didn't know what to do I knew that you had to do it but I just didn't know where to look for it...'*Another quote from Annie, one of the school leavers, probably most clearly sums up the confusion and distress that result from a lack of awareness of apparently tacit and implicit procedures:

….I got in and I was like thinking you just came to the uni for orientation week and you enrolled here everything you had to do they'd tell you in the first days like , y'know what books you had to get. I thought you'd get a whole package of everything you have to do and when I came here I had a problem as I didn't enrol on-line and I didn't really get the class days I wanted. I have to come everyday and I just had a few things like I didn't know it takes a while to get your text books and I didn't know they would cost that much like. I knew you had to get a lot but just pretty amazed like I've always heard people say it's a lot of money uni and stuff but I didn't know how many books I'd have to get …I know just from watching the movies you see I think that its mainly American like a lot of

American TV and stuff like that , I see them and they all go there and they have their orientation day and they talk to everyone and that was like that here but just what I expected it wasn't what it turned out to be…

In Annie's case, her initial euphoria about being accepted was soon depleted resulting in her initial weeks being: '*....heaps stressful cos I've been heaps upset over the first few weeks cos like the course is wrong and my professional experience…'* Such early negative experiences are bound to have a cumulative effect on self-confidence and for this particular cohort, where confidence is already low; such erosion of self belief has detrimental results in relation to future academic transition and success. This lack of knowledge might be in part due to the first generation status of the participants but wider research has indicated the need for better communication between institutions and students.

Implications

Berger and Braxton (1998) argue that institutions can implement quite basic strategies to aid student retention. Their findings include the need for universities to employ clear communication concerning academic standards and expectations, a need echoed by Martinez and Munday (1998) based on their survey of thirty-three British colleges of Further Education. The participants in this study included both staff and students, both groups expressing the need for clear advice prior to enrolment in order to ensure a match between student expectations and realities. Such explicitness should also extend to material and information produced about the institution. In an increasingly economic driven marketplace, universities are required to essentially sell their wares and some of the promotional material may not reflect student realities. Watson, Cavallaro-Johnson and Austin (2004) sought to highlight how student perceptions of their chosen program and profession influenced decisions to withdraw or persist. This study focused on an education student cohort and revealed how students had a somewhat unrealistic perception of the teaching role and that realisation of the realities of this profession had a negative impact on retention. These authors discovered a 'considerable gap between their [students'] idealism and realism of the classroom' (p68) and suggest that both retention

practices and promotional material should attempt to provide a realistic precursor to the chosen study and profession.

Despite the early stages of this research, the quotes outlined above provide some understanding of the complexity of issues surrounding the access and retention of non-traditional students. Globally, there has been much discussion about the growth of the education sector and the ensuing 'massification' of education within countries such as Australia, America and Britain. However, despite dramatic growth in participation, the numbers of enrolled students deemed economically or socially disadvantaged have not grown proportionally. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) suggest that within Britain the increase in student numbers is likely to be made up of '…more (i.e. less able) middle-class entrants, rather than this increase being accounted for by the inclusion of the disadvantaged.' (p221) This situation is reflected within the Australian tertiary landscape, with figures indicating that the percentage of low SES students accessing university has remained largely unchanged in the period 1993-2003. (James, cited in Skene, 2003). Equally, Couvillion-Landry (2002 – 2003) highlights how while American statistics suggest that the numbers of 'minority students' enrolling in tertiary education are increasing slightly, this student group is still underrepresented. Clearly, better conceptualization about the various student groups that fall under the non-traditional banner is required to facilitate both better access and success. Such knowledge is particularly pertinent for those of us who work in the student support areas on campus as with such understanding comes the possibility of better facilitating student transition and success.

Conclusion

With the second set of interviews just completed , the data outlined in this article will be further refined and negotiated. Some of the areas that demand further exploration include: the developing student identity of participants, the long-term impact of first in the family status, developments in expectations and also, long-term academic outcomes. The narratives and themes emerging will be built upon to enrich understanding but obviously such reflection does not suggest universal application. Rather, students as

individuals have very unique experiences but clearly some links and commonalities are visible. Interviews will continue throughout the year culminating with a retrospective analysis of the year in its entirety. The researcher looks forward to accompanying these students on their first year journey, and expects revelations and surprises along the way as they painstakingly negotiate this university landscape.

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