

DIVERSITY IN RURAL STUDENTS: IDENTIFYING STUDENT LEARNING NEEDS

Cathy Maginnis and Lyn Croxon

Charles Sturt University, Dubbo

ABSTRACT

Diverse university student cohorts are becoming the norm in rural universities. As universities reach out to an increasingly diverse group of students in rural areas it has become evident that traditional support structures are inadequate to meet the needs of students who tend to be mature aged women and first generation students. Studies have shown that students from rural and geographically isolated areas and particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged groups are more at risk of failure. Several reports have shown that rural areas have major shortages of professionals such as nurses. As a result of this the need for universities to examine their support structures, so that this diverse group of students is given every opportunity to succeed, is vitally important (Howells, 2003; McInnis, 2001 & Tinto 1993).

This article reports on a project that was conducted with a group of rural nursing students that identifies the types of support structures relevant to the new student profile described above. The project strives to identify university students' learning needs and expectations and evaluate resources and strategies utilised to facilitate their learning experience from the students' perspective.

The results of this research reinforce a change in the student cohort to reflect a female dominant, mature aged cohort in a rural campus. Many of these students are first generation and more educated than their parents. This project has identified that their learning needs are diverse and that further research needs to be undertaken to develop an understanding of their learning needs and how best to meet these.

Key Words: Rural, University, Nursing students, Learning needs, Diversity.

INTRODUCTION

This project was conducted with students enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing at Charles Sturt University - Dubbo Campus. Dubbo is located 450km west of Sydney. The Bachelor of Nursing (BN) course was introduced to this campus in 2000 in an attempt to meet the needs of the rural community and address the shortage of nurses in the rural areas. Charles Sturt University research shows that over 70% of students upon graduating choose to remain and gain employment in the rural areas (Palaskas & Muldoon 2003). This paper will briefly address the diversity of the student population, services available to these students and it will identify their learning needs and expectations. These issues confront staff at this university and other rural universities on a daily basis. The paper examines both the students' personal experiences and what universities can do to identify and fill the gap in services provided to these rural populations. This information will identify the resources and strategies found to be most beneficial and least beneficial in relation to students' learning needs. Feedback is vital to ensure an effective learning environment.

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and
Communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication
And otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAL to ACER. For more
Information contact CAL on (02) 9394-7600 or info@copyright.com.au

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature regarding higher education discusses the difficulties experienced by the increasingly diverse university student population. This is particularly true of first year students, mature age, women and first generation students (Ballantyne 2000; Howells 2003; McInnis 2001 & Tinto 1993). The Dubbo cohort clearly reflects this population. Many are first generation university students and have to move or travel to attend learning sessions.

Historically higher education institutions often have a 'sink or swim' attitude to new students (Taylor & Galligan 2002). This is evidenced in the mindset that students who are not successful or have difficulties in their academic achievements are not intellectually able or are not 'prepared' for university. However, now that university funding has in recent times been linked to successful completion of students in courses (DETYA 1999), this emphasis has seen a shift in pedagogy to focus on student learning and support of students in this learning. It is therefore essential that there be recognition of how to best offer this support and hence reduce attrition. The implementation of research within institutions into the student experience is urged (McInnis 2003). One of the main areas of focus of the research has been to attempt to examine how services and programs can best be adapted to assist students in their adjustment to university (Lawrence 2002).

The numbers of students enrolling in higher education in rural areas are increasing. Federal government policy has increased funding to improve access to higher education for rural students. To increase access for rural people universities have developed campuses or learning centres in rural areas. These sites have proven to be financially and pedagogically challenging (Bambrick 2002). These centres provide opportunity for students who would not otherwise have access to a university in their home area. Bambrick (2002) describes the students as 'at risk' or educationally disadvantaged with a significant proportion of the rural population having been denied access to higher education due to the tyranny of distance. The learning experience in these centres appears to be very different to the learning experience of their metropolitan counterparts and the typical university student (Kevern & Webb 2003; McInnis 2001; Taylor & Galligan 2002). These learners are typically the first of their family to go to university, school leavers at the lower end of the tertiary ranking scale, mature-aged women, students with financial pressures or family pressures, women returning to the workforce, Indigenous Australians, and 'second chance learners' (Durey, McNamara & Larson 2003). This causes a problem in that within student groups there are differing levels of 'preparedness' (Taylor & Galligan 2002). A WBEET funded study *Towards Excellence in Diversity* identified "a clear trend is the lack of progress of socioeconomically disadvantaged and people from rural and geographically isolated areas" (Taylor & Galligan 2002). There is a need for a student to adapt quickly to a new environment that involves different ways of learning and different methods of teaching (Taylor & Galligan 2002).

A university needs to know its cohort of students (Lee, Jolly, Kench & Jelonesi 2000). McInnis (2003) further argues that the response of universities to the increasing diversity of students has been 'based on guesswork' because the students' perspective of their university experience is so poorly understood. There is a need to examine factors

that impact on student satisfaction at a local level (Lee, Jolly, Kench & Jelonesi 2000). These factors have increased the emphasis placed upon student evaluations. This supports the recognition that student satisfaction is linked to student performance and retention (Lee, Jolly, Kench & Jelonesi 2000).

The literature highlights a link between the feeling of fitting into university and academic success on the students' part, and retention. When a student decides to come to a university environment the rules, norms and culture need to be identified and explained to them so the students can benefit most from the experience (Emmitt, Callaghan, Warren & Postill 2002). A study conducted at Warrnambool, Deakin revealed success at university was correlated with the capacity to identify with the university, academic preparedness, students' attendance at classes, sufficient financial resources and state of health. This research claimed students who felt 'connected' to the university had greater academic success (Emmitt, Callaghan, Warren & Postill 2002). Engagement of students with the university is an area that needs attention and to be developed (McInnis 2003). These thoughts are widely supported (Lake 1999, Peat & Hewitt 1998, Tinto 1993). Therefore the need to research before the introduction of programs, as universities may not be correct in their assumptions, as to the students' reasons for withdrawing from a course.

METHODS

The aim for this project was to ascertain students' perception of their learning experience and how this learning experience can be enhanced. This was achieved using a quantitative approach which allowed for exploration of the perspectives of the students.

The data used in this analysis were collected from 38 questionnaires returned to the researchers from 50 questionnaires sent out. The respondents represent first, second or third year students of the Bachelor of Nursing course or were graduates from this course. Questionnaires were sent out to students who had withdrawn at some stage of this course, unfortunately none of these were returned. The students were asked about several aspects of their family and study situation and about their campus experience. The purpose of these questions was to try to determine whether students' needs are being met at the Dubbo Campus of CSU. The questionnaire was designed to cover the major issues identified in the review of literature such as the diversity of the students, satisfaction with teaching quality, modes of delivery of subjects and satisfaction with services offered to the students.

The questionnaire was comprised of 32 questions that included a wide variety of strategies to elicit responses. These included tables with boxes to mark the most applicable answer; yes/no answers; tick a box and open questions that required a written response. The results were entered onto an Excel spreadsheet and the written responses have been grouped into common themes. The type of data collected and the size of the sample did not allow estimates of significant statistical measures. Nevertheless, some clear conclusions may be drawn from the analysis.

RESULTS

As responses were evenly distributed amongst subgroups it could be argued that results were not skewed to the interests of any one subgroup. The group that responded to the questionnaire can be described as predominantly female (only 4 of the 38 respondents were male). The distribution of the age of the group shows that it is evenly divided into younger than 30 years and older than 30 years, although the largest single age group is the 20-25 year group. The majority have been studying for more than one year. It can therefore be expected that those with little experience of university study will not overly influence the responses.

A defining characteristic of the respondents is that they are, in general, significantly more educated than their parents. The results show the relative scarcity of those who achieved less than year 12 compared with their parents. Levels of education of parents tended to indicate the same trends. Students with more educated fathers are less likely to list fellow students as a positive experience. Secondly, students with more educated fathers are more likely to find small class sizes a positive experience. Lastly, students with more educated fathers are less likely to list the staff as a positive experience.

The questionnaire contained several questions about the satisfaction of various aspects of campus life. In general, the positive experiences in Dubbo include small class sizes with face-to-face teaching and close relationships with lecturers. A significant number nominated the close relationship with fellow students but this factor may be a result of small class sizes. Respondents with postcodes in the immediate surrounds tended to list class sizes and staff qualities as positive experience more than those from other postcodes.

Some negative factors identified included insufficient library resources and computing facilities, whilst a small number identified the lack of facilities for socialising. The other significant negatives were delivery of some distance education subjects and associated teaching methods. Analysis of this data, however, tends to indicate that, for both of these categories; it is the lack of face-to-face teaching that is the basis of the problem. This reinforces the findings of the positive feelings for small classes with face-to-face teaching. The negative factors have been addressed as new facilities have been built. Another negative factor identified was a significant difference in satisfaction between the academic services and non-academic services (such as orientation, counselors, etc) was found. There was not, at the time of the study, a counselor available on campus.

The number of children in the student's household has two probable influences on reported positive experiences. Students from households with more children tend to report quality of staff as a positive experience more often than those with fewer children. Students from households with more children are more likely than those with fewer children to report lack of facilities as a problem. They are also less likely to find delivery of distance education packages as a negative experience.

LIMITATIONS OF DATA

The data upon which this analysis is based has some significant limitations. One of the main limitations is that the sample size is small. This limits the number of categories into which the data can be separated and therefore limits the significance of the results.

There are no indications for the reasons for some of the apparent links between categories and replies to questions. A larger survey may be able to determine these links.

KEY OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study the researchers have come to recognise the need for certain responses to be made from the university. The first, which has also been identified by McInnis (2003), is to identify and acknowledge that students have many demands made upon them and study is but one of these and as such it may not be the highest priority. This means examining other factors that impact on their lives, such as family, health, financial and employment commitments when planning courses and course delivery.

Another issue identified is that universities need to know their students and focus on learning as a priority. This should be assumed but may need to be reiterated. "Universities, departments and academics should review their assumptions about the 'ideal client', their learning needs, and the nature of the 'typical student experience'" (McInnis, 2003, p.3). This relates to universities knowing their cohorts and identifying how they learn and what enhances this process. The whole of the learning experience for students needs to be addressed to make it real and to relate what students' learn with the 'real world'.

Further research could address the issues of, firstly, academic resilience. What factors ensure or detract from students becoming resilient? While there has been research into the problems of progression and retention of tertiary students a gap exists in the area of examining those students who successfully overcame difficulties in university education and to ask how these students managed (Dancer & Fieberg 2000). It is necessary to establish which resources both at the university and in the community these students accessed and which they found to be the most useful. This is an area that would examine academic resilience of students.

CONCLUSION

These results corroborate the researchers' position that smaller face-to-face sessions are favored. What has been determined is that small class sizes and smaller groups of students result in easier access for students to lecturers and enhances the students' learning experience. Students want a traditional university presence with on-campus classes, library facilities and social interaction with their colleagues. As Dubbo is a smaller and 'newer' campus it would be expected, as the literature asserts, that there would be an increase of educationally disadvantaged, first generation and 'at risk' students and that their preferred mode of learning would be face to face classes with lecturers and small groups. There is also a sense of community and belonging that has arisen amongst the students and staff. This welcoming could, as the literature suggests, contribute to the students feeling they are valued learners. This research reminds us that universities cannot presume to know what is best for students but that there needs to be a partnership between academics, support staff and students for success in learning. This applies to all courses, not just nursing, at all rural campuses.

REFERENCES

- Ballantyne, C. 2000, Are they glad they came? First year students' views of their university experience. *9th Annual Teaching and Learning Forum*, Brisbane, Australia, February 2-4, pp.1-10
- Bambrick, S. 2002, The satellite/remote campus: a quality experience for Australian first year students? *The Sixth Pacific Rim- First Year in Higher Education Conference: Changing Agendas*, Brisbane, Australia, July, 1-7
- Dancer, D M., & Fieberg, D G. 2000, Modelling students at risk, *The 7th Pacific Rim-First Year in Higher Education Conference*, Brisbane, Australia, July 5-7
- Department of Education, Training & Youth Affairs. 1999, *Transition to secondary to tertiary: A performance study*, Higher Education Series, Report No.30, September
- Durey, A., McNamara, B., & Larson, A. 2003, Towards a health career for rural and remote students: Cultural and structural barriers influencing choices. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, Vol.11, pp.145-150
- Emmitt, M., Callaghan, V., Warren, W., & Postill, K. 2002, First year: the Deakin way, *The Sixth Pacific Rim- First Year in Higher Education Conference: Changing Agendas*, Brisbane, Australia, July, 1-10
- Howells, K. 2003, The first year experience: starting with the student, *The Seventh Rim-First Year in Higher Education Conference: Enhancing Transition to Higher Education: Strategies and Policies That Work*, Brisbane, Australia, July 9-11
- Kevem, J., & Webb, C. 2003, Mature women's experiences of higher education: Lessons for nursing, *Collegian*, 10(4), pp.8-13
- Lake, D. 1999, Reducing isolation for distance students: An online initiative. K.Martin., N. Stanley., & N. Davidson (Eds.), 'Teaching in the Disciplines/Learning Context'. *Proceedings of the 8th Annual Teaching Learning Forum*, Perth, Australia, February
- Lawrence, J. 2002, The 'deficit-discourse' shift: university teachers and their in helping first year students persevere and succeed in the new university culture, *The Sixth Pacific Rim- First Year in Higher Education Conference: Changing Agendas*, Brisbane, Australia, July, 1-12
- Lee, G., Jolly, N., Kench, P., & Gelonesi, B. 2000, Factors related to student satisfaction with University, *The Fourth Pacific Rim-First Year in Higher Education Conference: Creating Futures for a New Millennium*, Brisbane, Australia, July 5-7, pp.1-7
- McInnis, C. 2001, Researching The First Year Experience: Where To From Here?, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 20(2), pp.105-114
- McInnis, C. 2003, New realities of the student experience: how should universities respond, *25th Annual Conference European Association for Institutional Research*, Limerick, Ireland, August 24-27
- McInnis, C., James, R., & Hartley, R. 2000, Evaluations and Investigations Programme Higher Education Division, *Trends in the First Year Experience in Australian Universities*. Commonwealth of Australia
- Palaskas, T., & Muldoon, N. 2003, *Learning and Teaching at CSU: Moving Towards Increased Flexibility* (A Discussion Paper). New South Wales: Charles Sturt University, Centre for Education, Learning and Training, pp.1-31
- Peat, M., & Hewitt, R G. 1998, Improving First Year Experience: to set a new culture in place, Faculty of Science Style. *The 7th Pacific Rim-First Year in Higher Education Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, July*

- Taylor, J., & Galligan, L. 2002, Overcoming beliefs, attitudes and past experiences: the use of video for adult tertiary students studying mathematics in isolation. *Australian Senior Mathematics Journal*, 16(1), pp.20-33
- Tinto, V. 1993, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago