

Making it mainstream; engaging students who articulate from Vocational Education and Training (VET)

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Abstract

In recent years an increasing number of students have entered Australian universities on the strength of qualifications gained in the VET sector. A number of studies have recognised the importance of positive transition experiences as a foundation for retention (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000) and the needs of this particular group of students have been highlighted in recent research (Dickson, 2000). This paper reports on a research project conducted into the transition experiences of students entering the University of Western Sydney with an AQF Level 5 qualification in early childhood. The experiences of these students who, as a result of academic credit, often begin their first year at university alongside more experienced tertiary students, may have important implications for similar 'non-traditional' cohorts in a variety of other courses. Similarly the strategies developed by staff from the early childhood course are worthy of note. According to Lawrence (2005) academic staff often assume that mismatches between students' prior experiences and the expectations of higher education can be dealt with by merely referring students to support units. The approaches evident in this program demonstrate an alternate pedagogy which integrates disciplinary and literacy expertise.

Introduction

In 2004 the Learning Skills Unit (LSU) and the Continuity and Change : Educational Transitions (CCET) research concentration received an equity grant to conduct qualitative research into the transition experiences of students entering the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) from TAFE. The project scope reflected institutional concern over the retention rates of students who had been entering the University of Western Sydney through non – traditional pathways such as TAFE and who often belonged to non Anglo-Saxon language and cultural groups. It was felt that data gathered from the transition experiences of this cohort could form the basis of an institutional wide response to the needs of these students.

Over the past several decades Australia's higher education sector has been characterised by an increasing number of students entering the higher education sector from the VET sector. This has been particularly the case at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) where DEST submissions from 2001 to 2005 indicate that the percentage of students entering from TAFE increased from 8.9% in 2001 to 17%, in 2005, translating into 2196 enrolments in 2005. This percentage of students is second, nationally, to Swinburne but the actual numbers of students involved may be greater. UWS then, has a significant stake in ensuring a smooth transition for students who articulate from TAFE to university.

Evidence suggests the transition experiences of students moving from VET to university are not always positive. A growing body of literature has reported a mismatch between the prior experiences of students and the requirements of university study (Dickson, 2000; McInnis & James, 1995, Harris, Sumner & Rainey, 2005). These differences relate to epistemological issues such as the focus on practice or on theory, variations in learning and teaching styles and relationships and to gaps in academic standards and expectations. A large study investigating non completion in VET and higher education found that differences between student expectations and reality are a source of confusion which could be linked to attrition (McInnis et al 2000, p1). Within UWS there has been an increasing incidence of referrals and anecdotal reporting of transition difficulties facing this cohort of students. These have been matched by institutional concern over possible declines in retention and student satisfaction. The disciplinary areas with the largest numbers of students articulating from TAFE are Business, Nursing and Early Childhood. In two of the four largest courses in which intakes of these students occur, there have been significant falls in the retention of this group over the period 2002 to 2005. The attrition rate for students from TAFE in these four courses in 2004-5 ranged between 15.8% and 32.1 %. This viewed against DEST figures that put the 2002 national rate of attrition for school leavers at 17.4 suggests that there is some cause for concern.

The Research Project

The UWS study, *Articulating from Vocational Education and Training to the University of Western Sydney* completed in 2005 was a longitudinal research project into the experiences of two cohorts of students entering the early childhood teacher education program at UWS in 2004 and 2005 with an AQF5 qualification for which they received academic credit. A total of twenty two students were interviewed either in 2004 or 2005 in focus groups conducted at the beginning of semester and again later in the semester of each year. In addition focus groups were conducted with early childhood lecturers from UWS and with a group of early childhood teachers from a local TAFE college. Despite some change in institutional practices between 2004 and 2005 the data collected from students demonstrated a number of similar trends. Some variations were noted, however, between the experiences of 2004 students compared with those in 2005 which in part reflected the ongoing adaptation of the degree program in response to the needs of its students.

Issues

An analysis of the interview data from the students, lecturing staff and from TAFE teachers revealed several key issues as critical to the transition experiences of this group.

Credit Transfer

Students who receive academic credit for previous studies are often expected to undertake subjects normally taken in second or third year, in their first year of study. The generous academic credit arrangements of between twelve and eighteen months awarded by the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) were a major attraction for the students interviewed. However, a mismatch occurred because the students assumed that such advanced credit meant they had been judged as having the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in the more advanced units. Unfortunately, in reality most found that they encountered gaps in terminology, frameworks, knowledge and skills.

They don't explain what an outcome is, what an indicator is, why we use the syllabus" (Rita, Interview 1, 2004)

" He started talking about 'KLA's (Key Learning Areas) and I'm just like, what is he talking about ? Am I supposed to know this ?" (Alex, Interview 2, 2004)

At the same time as struggling with course specific requirements some students found that they were also unfamiliar with university systems such as in information technology and information literacy. Several of the students interviewed had no experience with online library catalogues and internet resources. For the 2004 cohort who were in classes alongside students who had had twelve months to become familiar with university culture and systems, this mismatch was particularly daunting.

The common experience for TAFE students articulating into a second or third year of a course would be mixed class composed of students who had commenced university study the year before, and those new students entering with credit. These classes provide a particular challenge for lecturing staff. In the Early Childhood case, for example, attempts by some lecturers to alert the AQF5 students to areas in which they might be lacking knowledge or skills, seemed to have a negative effect on the students' self esteem with some feeling that they were being labelled publicly as having a deficit.

Administrative processes

A surprising number of students appeared to expect that the administrative processes related to enrolment, and subject and timetable selection would be similar to TAFE. Hence the reality of relatively complicated procedures, some online, and the difficulty in contacting an advisor for assistance were met with frustration and resentment.

" because we're treated like we should know all this but we've never done enrolment before" (Rita, Interview 1, 2004)

A major cause of dissatisfaction in both 2004 and 2005 was the scheduling of lectures and tutorials in evening time slots. Students had expected that classes for full time students would be conducted during the day. For the mainly mature aged women, evening classes impacted significantly on family commitments, and safety was a concern for the younger students who had to rely on unsatisfactory public transport options. Many of the students found the extra classes on information and academic literacy skills difficult to attend because they were not part of the initial timetable and family and work commitments could not be altered.

Autonomy and pastoral care

Students felt that their TAFE course had provided a much greater degree of support than their university course. A number of factors seemed to contribute to this. The much greater face to face teaching at TAFE combined with smaller class sizes had allowed students plenty of time to interact with teachers and peers. In the early childhood course the usual subject pattern was two hours of lecture and one hour of tutorial with tutorial classes often relatively large. Both students and the TAFE teachers agreed that students at TAFE were often 'spoon fed' with hand outs and notes, liberal discussion and individual help with assignments and even assistance with personal issues like transport or childcare. In comparison the students found that at university it was difficult to discuss work adequately in the tutorial time and that opportunities for individual assistance from lecturing staff were limited.

“At TAFE (they tell you), this is what you need to know and they help you and guide you through it all. But at Uni you are just left on your own”. (Marg, Interview 2, 2004)

Academic Literacy

Perhaps the greatest area of ongoing dislocation for the students was in the area of assessment and expectations related to academic literacy. Students reported that they had expected to do very well. This seemed to be based on the fact that they felt they had covered ' a lot' of the content of the degree course already, had received high grades at TAFE and had not previously failed. In the TAFE sector the competency based system allowed students to resubmit work until they passed. As a consequence students were dismayed to receive marks below their expectations with a number reporting that they felt like 'giving up'.

The gap between student expectations and actual performance is not surprising when the prior learning experiences of students are compared with current demands. Some students reported that they had rarely used the library at TAFE relying on simplified teacher hand outs and text books.

“I only bought four books at TAFE and we used those four books, they were our theory basis for our whole course.” (Leah, Interview 2, 2005)

Students reported that they were overwhelmed with the volume and complexity of the reading required in their university subjects. Similarly writing tasks at university far exceeded the practical, reflective and descriptive genres that students had become familiar with at TAFE. Initially students were also doubtful about the value of theoretical frameworks and critical perspectives that were emphasised at university. Interestingly, however for some this scepticism changed as the semester progressed.

“At first I thought ‘How is this going to make me a better teacher?’ ...but I’ve learnt that now as it progresses it is interesting – it gets you thinking.” (Roula, Interview 2, 2005)

“It gives evidence to back it up ... the evidence to say to parents or to other co-workers.” (Leah, Interview 2, 2005)

Discussion

This study into the transition experiences of early childhood students articulating from TAFE into university did indeed find significant gaps between the prior experience of students and the current realities of university life. As reported by McInnis et al (2000) such mismatches can be a cause of confusion and uncertainty. Many of the students in our study responded to their experiences with words like ‘overwhelmed’, ‘stressed’ and ‘shocked’ and a number had considered withdrawing from the course.

The major task facing universities is how to engage with these students in a manner that facilitates their transition to university without resorting to practices that label the cohort in a negative way. Lawrence (2005) reports that there has been a tendency for universities to view differences in academic preparedness as ‘deficits’, requiring remedial input. It is true that university learning centres can be places where ‘underprepared’ students are referred for ‘fixing’. In many cases course staff who refer these students believe that they have a limited role to play in bridging these gaps. Lawrence (2005, p.244) cites the research of Asmar et al (2000) to make the point that academics often view the transition of ‘under-prepared’ students as outside their teaching and learning role and as a “matter only for the Student Services Department” It is in this regard that the approach of staff adopted within the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) at UWS has been most unique. The response to the transition requirements of students articulating from TAFE has been initiated from within the course and whilst staff have drawn upon a variety of expertise and academic support available from throughout university, the responsibility for transition and therefore retention, has been one firmly accepted by the academics within the course.

Transition Strategies

In response to the needs of this articulating cohort of students, a number of strategies aimed at facilitating a more supportive transition experience have been implemented. This section will briefly discuss three systemic strategies which have received positive early feedback.

Change to course structure

In 2005 a new course was introduced to replace the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood). The new Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies (Child and Family) has two distinct pathways, one of which is period of one year full time study for students who have completed an AQF5 qualification in children’s services. In 2005 students undertaking this pathway were enrolled at Penrith campus meaning that for the first time, students in this

cohort were taught in a distinct group rather than being mixed with students who had entered the previous year through other more traditional pathways.

The research team found several positive variations in the feedback from the 2005 group compared to those in 2004. Firstly the stress surrounding the enrolment process including subject selection and academic credit arrangements appeared to have largely dissipated. It is surmised that the procedures were more straight forward and information could be delivered more effectively when the audience was comprised of the one group of students. A second advantage of having a group of only AQF5 students was that it was possible to address the specific needs of this cohort without making unfavourable comparisons between them and students who had had more experience in the tertiary system. As early childhood staff become more knowledgeable about this specific cohort of students, teaching and learning practices can be further adapted to facilitate positive early engagement with university practices and discourse.

Embedded Academic Literacy

In 2004 and 2005 early childhood staff collaborated with the Learning Skills Unit (LSU) to provide a range of interventions related to academic literacy. Introductory writing tutorials were conducted by LSU staff in timetabled tutorials as part of one of the first semester subjects. In addition the LSU offered a series of non compulsory adjunct tutorials outside timetabled classes. As a result of close collaboration between content staff and staff specialising in academic literacy both of these interventions provided academic literacy development that was closely related to specific assignment tasks.

“Yeah and the standard of writing but then we had to go to this workshop which helped me with the writing. It’s not about personal experience either, that’s what I learnt” (Rita, Interview 2, 2004)

“We’ve taken the initiative to latch on to the LSU people..... I think with my old knowledge about essay writing I would have failed both those assignments.” (Linda, Interview 2, 2005)

The research team did find, however, that the workshops that were part of formal timetabled classes provided greater value. Smaller numbers of students were able to attend the adjunct classes which were timetabled with short notice after formal timetables had been set. A number of students had family and work commitments that could not be altered. In addition some students did not attend because they had attained high marks at TAFE and believed the Learning Skills Unit to be providing a remedial service that, at the time, they thought they did not need. Both early childhood and LSU staff felt that the workshops were insufficient to adequately familiarise students with the range of new academic literacy required and there are plans to extend the embedded academic literacy program in 2006.

Peer Mentoring

The Peer Mentoring program is jointly facilitated by the LSU and early childhood academic staff. Although voluntary most of the students interviewed for the study had attended and were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. Peer Mentoring at UWS is based on a

supplemental instruction model where third year students provide general acculturation to university study and later specific advice on learning within the discipline.

“Yeah 3rd year students that had just done [the unit] and they were fabulous ... the world of good....., I felt a lot of freedom to talk and say dumb things – It was a small group, twenty of us maybe.” (Alex, Interview 2, 2004)

Again, some students had difficulty in attending the additional sessions and alternatives for these students are being explored for 2006.

Conclusion

The study reported in this paper attempted to provide greater understanding of the experiences of a particular group of transiting students in order that this information may form the basis for other targeted studies of different cohorts of students. A corpus of such investigations offers valuable empirical data for the establishment of programs addressing both common and particular needs of key transiting groups within the institution. This study already offers useful empirical findings illustrating that students, in transition from TAFE to university, benefit from within-subject curriculum and pedagogical changes that are integrated with targeted support from language and learning specialists. Clearly however similar evidence-based interventions are essential across disciplines if universities are really interested in reducing attrition rates and improving the transition experiences of TAFE to university transfer students.

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