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Experiences of students from diverse backgrounds: the role of academic support

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This paper examines the experiences of a group of students who have entered higher education via diverse pathways in order to consider the implications of their experiences for academic support. Drawing on students' accounts provided as part of a longitudinal research project, we outline how these students manage their studies in the context of the competing demands on their time and the challenges they face. Perspectives from phenomenography, constructivism, distance education and adult education are used to frame the students' experiences. One major finding is the participants' limited usage of student support services provided by the university. Their primary source of formal support tended to be academic staff at the departmental level, while family and friends (including other students) were major sources of informal support. We discuss the implications of these findings for student support, raising questions about the boundaries of academic support, and how support services can be made more useful for these students.

Keywords: diversity, student experience, student support

Introduction

The experiences of students entering higher education from diverse backgrounds are often characterised by complex life circumstances which affect their study. These students include those from low income or socio-economic groups, indigenous or non-English-speaking backgrounds, or regional and remote areas, as well as people with disabilities, students who are first in their family to participate in higher education, mature-age students, and refugees. In this paper we draw on findings from a longitudinal research project which aims to provide insight into how these students succeed in their studies. In this three-stage project, on-campus and off-campus students at the commencement of their course explain their pathways into higher education. Then, while their studies are in progress, the students comment on how they are managing. Finally, they reflect on their experiences at course completion. The project is

being undertaken at Monash University, Australia, by adapting the research design of a similar project in the United Kingdom (Kirk, K., personal communication, May 20, 2005).

The paper focuses on the findings from the second stage of the project on how students manage their studies, in order to raise questions about the implications of some of their experiences for academic support from teaching staff. To provide a conceptual background for answering these questions, we begin by considering some ways in which students' experiences in higher education may be viewed.

The student experience in higher education

A number of theoretical perspectives converge in suggesting that the learning context plays a fundamental role in the experience of learning. In a phenomenological approach, the student's reality is an intrinsic aspect of the context of their learning experience, requiring the teacher to attempt to see the world through the learner's eyes (Marton, 1981). From a constructivist perspective, the world is separate from the student (Marton & Booth, 1997) but learning is facilitated through contextualised real world tasks since 'knowledge is individually constructed and socially co-constructed by learners based on their interpretations of experiences in the world' (Jonassen, 1999, p.217). Biggs and Tang (2007, p.21) express a preference for constructivism but note that both phenomenography and constructivism 'agree that effective learning changes the way we see the world' and that education, therefore, 'is about *conceptual change*, not just the acquisition of information.'

While these two perspectives have pedagogical implications for teachers, the extension of student learning research to accommodate the world of off-campus learners has highlighted more fully the range of factors that affect learning (Morgan, 1993; Chambers, 2002; Morgan & Beaty, 2005). Evans (1994) showed how social and educational background, money, gender, power, work, play, time and age affect learning, while Kirkwood (1995, 2000) focused on the factors affecting home-based learning to demonstrate the importance of context in the experience of off-campus learning. This broader recognition of the context of students' lives foregrounds issues relating to experiential learning, with the learner's personal experience, intent, and the learning milieu forming a 'nexus of cultural, social, institutional and psychological variables' (Boud & Walker, 1991, p.17). The use of this perspective informs adult education, along with other key ideas such as recognition of the experiences and resources which adults bring to learning, and viewpoints from critical theory which conceptualise the experience of learning in terms of empowerment, emancipation and social justice (Cranton, 2006).

The impact of the context of study has also been recognised in the series of Australian studies on the first year experience of students, given the reduced time they spend on campus and the continuing increase of full-time students in paid employment (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The 2004 study in this series indicated that mature-age students are generally highly satisfied, have strong clarity of purpose, and are more likely to seek assistance from staff than younger students. However, this may not be the case when students' life circumstances disadvantage them compared to other students. Yorke (2008) reports on a study which confirms differences in the first year experience of relatively advantaged and disadvantaged students. Crosling, Thomas and Heagney (2008) suggest a number of teaching strategies for engaging students from diverse backgrounds to improve their experiences of learning, while Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey (2002, pp. 17-18) draw on responses in a UK study of student services to note the importance of a proactive approach for supporting all

students, rather than being a last resort for students with ‘problems’. They see the link between student support, teaching and learning as being ‘at the heart of the issue’.

In the following section, we outline the method used in the current study and then summarise the findings on how students manage their studies in order to consider the implications of students’ experiences for academic support.

Method

Students entering the Bachelor of Social Work degree in 2006 were invited to participate if they came to university via one or more of the diverse pathways noted earlier, or they thought of themselves as ‘non-traditional’ university students for another reason.

Participation involved three semi-structured individual interviews and two group meetings during their course, with a view to producing a ‘life and learning story’ for each student. Sixteen students joined the study and completed the first interview on their pathways into higher education. Nine were studying off-campus and seven on-campus. A year later, thirteen students participated in the second interview about how they were managing their studies, one having withdrawn from the project and two from the course. However, one of the latter agreed to be interviewed.

In this second interview students were asked about:

- the planning they undertook in order to participate in the course;
- demands on their time outside of study;
- how they managed their study time;
- changes of circumstance and any particularly difficult times they had experienced; and
- their sources of support.

Their responses are summarised below.

How students managed their studies

All students needed to adjust other areas of their lives in order to make the commitment to study. Twelve undertook initial financial planning, which involved seven of them in reorganising work commitments and four in reorganising family finances. Ten had family demands that needed to be accommodated. For five of them, spouses/partners agreed to take on extra duties. While they were studying, twelve participants had to manage other major demands on their time. These included paid work (8), voluntary commitments (4), care of children and/or elderly parents (7) and personal demands – three students had health problems and three were adapting to a new culture.

To manage their studies successfully, students stressed the importance of organisation. This included giving equal priority to study with family and work, setting realistic goals (which may have meant lowering expectations of grades) and planning at the start of semester by noting assignment due dates. Organisation included travel to workshops for off-campus students. Four off-campus students commented on the advantages of this flexible mode and two full-time students managed by changing to part-time study. A key issue for eleven students was that their experiences whilst studying confirmed that their decision to study this course was right for them.

All of these successful students had family support, including parental support, although they were mature-age students. This included practical support such as accommodation, child care and financial aid, and emotional support with the decision to study. Five had friends who provided practical support (such as child care) and emotional support (including encouragement to continue). Nine students developed supportive peer relationships (with other students who were usually in the course), with whom they were able to discuss the course and who understood the demands of studying. Two students received scholarships which were significant in providing financial support.

Eight students received support from six academic staff that they approached for subject-related queries, but all sought this support reluctantly, unsure of the validity of their questions or whether staff would respond positively. All received satisfactory support. Only limited support was sought from other areas of the university, including central university support services: two received support from informational technology and library staff, two from learning skills advisers, and one from the Disability Liaison Unit.

The student who discontinued from the course had no support from family or friends. She was a sole parent with financial difficulties and did not believe completing the course would resolve these. She reported no peer relationships with other students, and perceived academic staff as unapproachable and unhelpful.

Discussion and conclusion

The above results indicate that friends and family (including ageing parents) were the primary sources of support which facilitated the success of these students, rather than support services offered by the university. This raises questions about the responsibility of the university towards students from diverse backgrounds who lack these informal support networks, and the confidence to seek out university support services. If universities are serious about maximising students' experiences of learning, what is the extent of the support that should be provided and what are the best ways of offering it? There appear to be implications for increasing support services at departmental level where staff are already in contact with students and are therefore in a better position to provide support or to direct students to available services. A proactive approach by academic and professional staff in departments may assist in anticipating the forms of support that students need but feel unable, or not entitled, to request. A potentially important finding is that students in this study contacted a range of academic staff members, suggesting that this proactive approach should not be confined to staff with designated roles, but that students from diverse backgrounds may respond to a diverse range of styles and approaches, depending on their individual characteristics.

This suggests a broader role for academic staff, extending the notion of good teaching beyond embedding students' experiences in pedagogical approaches, to include responsibilities for support and advocacy, offering practical and emotional support and guiding students towards learning skills support and other university support services. That students in the current study tended to make compromises about their academic expectations, despite considerable informal support, suggests that a broader, more proactive support role may have further assisted them in reaching their potential and maximising their learning. However, this also raises difficult decisions for individual teachers. How far should they go in supporting students? What do they do when students do not meet criteria for special consideration but

when their knowledge of students' life circumstances means that they know that the occasional extension is not sufficient to support them? How do individual teachers deal with an issue when they are not able to convince others that action is required? What are the ethical responsibilities of teaching staff in relation to passing on knowledge about factors given to them in confidence that are disadvantaging students?

These questions will become increasingly relevant if the findings of the Bradley review of higher education are implemented, given its acknowledgement of the likely increase in mature-age learners in higher education, and the need to increase pathways and partnerships between the vocational education and training sector and universities (Bradley, 2008). While some of our (over-worked) colleagues may baulk at the implications of a broader academic support role for university teachers, along with a potentially broader 'non-academic' support role for professional staff at departmental level, these issues currently have a profound impact on the everyday work of many teachers and administrators. Attention to them through the implementation of appropriate policies and practices can only benefit staff and improve the learning experiences of students.

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