

Diverse Transitions

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the key experiences which contribute to successful first year student transitions into university. Interviews with seventeen first year students from across Macquarie University's four faculties provided an insight into the degree to which their expectations of higher education were being met by the university's initiatives. The participants' educational, cultural and professional backgrounds were varied. The diversity of their responses indicates the dangers of understanding and treating first year students in a generic fashion in the university. The emphasis of the responses confirms previous and contemporary work stressing the importance of the socio-cultural, social capital and emotional domains in the successful transition of students.

Background – Transition and Engagement

Several models of transition into university are found in the literature – amongst these, the work by Purnell (2002) and Bridges (2003) go some way to providing a paradigm of the process from the student point of view. Purnell (2002) describes the stages of transition as being preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilisation. According to this, students have to establish themselves in the university social community by negotiating a sometimes-distressing separation from previous experiences (e.g. school, college, work). Purnell argues that being aware of these stages may give an indication of where we can invest effort in supporting student transition. Bridges (2003) describes three phases: *separation, transition and reincorporation*, which are inherently challenging. Separation is the move away from established beliefs and values; transition is the process of adjustment during which ambiguity may be experienced; and reincorporation is the stage at which the individual becomes accepting of and accepted by their new context (Wood and Solomonides, 2008). These challenges were described by Reid and Solomonides (2007, p. 31) as 'cognitive and emotional borders' through which students have to travel as they focus their attention on different parts of their experience. Other researchers have documented the challenges of transition and the nature of engagement for students in their first year of study. Kift (2004) summarises much of the work in this area and the nature of 'contemporary diversity writ large' (p.4) – a diversity that is of course widening, increasing and changing from year to year – and the range of factors that afford or militate against successful transaction and engagement with the first year of study.

Following previous publications on the college environment, student drop-out and predicting academic performance, Alexander Astin published books in the late 70s, revisited in the 90s, discussing 'What matters in college?' (Astin, 1977, 1993). His work studied undergraduates in the 60s and 70s (also the focus of follow-up work by Pascarella and Terenzini in 1991 and 2005). Astin's main concern was to identify and isolate 'college impact' and to understand how the students were affected by where they studied and the experiences they had there. Most interestingly Astin contributed the idea that the educational impact of institutions is mediated by variables such as peer group relationships and 'involvement'. In other words quality of learning is positively correlated with involvement in study, with staff, and with

peers. There are interesting reflections from this study for today's university economy and culture:

The characteristics and behaviours of faculty also have important implications for student development. For instance, attending a college whose faculty is heavily research oriented increases student dissatisfaction with various aspects of college and has negative impacts on most measures of cognitive and affective development... Attending a college that is strongly oriented toward students and their development shows the opposite pattern of effects. (Feldman 1994, p.618)

Astin (1984) declared that 'student involvement', as a theory based on the work described above, refers to the '... amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience' (Astin 1984, p.518). 'Academic experience' includes, inter alia: study, time on campus, student associations, interaction with other students, and interaction with faculty staff. Astin (1984) also suggested that student learning and development is directly proportional to student involvement, and that the effectiveness of policy and practice is related to the capacity of that policy and practice to increase involvement. Like Pace (1982), Astin is clear that his theory '... directs attention ... toward the motivation and behaviour of the student', and that 'college personnel... can assess their own activities in terms of their success in encouraging students to become more involved in the college experience.' (Astin, 1984 p.529)

It is through the work of George Kuh that the concept of student engagement has reached recent prominence. 'Engagement' is a term current in higher education that has been widely used to describe various relationships between the student, study, and the institution, including the campus. A scan of the research literature shows engagement seen variously as: some relationship between students and their studies, some aspect of student behaviour, quality, motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic), something that is promoted by teaching, a passive or active approach and a level of interest (Reid and Solomonides, 2007). The concept has reached holistic levels of definition, appropriated at various times and with divergent aims to practices. These include the ability or inability to deal effectively with issues such as contact hours, extra-curricular activities or campus life, students' patterns of study and working (individually or collaboratively), the curriculum, staff-student ratios, distractions to study including paid part-time employment, inclusivity, the research-teaching nexus, work integrated learning, and greater student heterogeneity. Here, the concept of engagement is based on the work of Pace, Astin, and Chickering and Gamson (1987) and the idea that engagement is manifest in student action and participation in curricula and co-curricular activities. According to the student engagement paradigm, concepts supportive of student engagement are: level of academic challenge; active and collaborative learning; student-staff interaction; enriching educational experiences; and of interest to this study, a supportive campus environment. Broadly, these stances may be thought of as focusing either on student behaviour, including effort, time on task, and use of resources (Kuh 2006; Coates 2006) or on socio-cultural factors, including a perceived sense of belonging to, or lack of alienation from the group (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1999; Mann, 2001). Hu and Kuh (2002 p.555) suggest that:

The most important factor in student learning and personal development during college is student engagement, or the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes.

But this focus on conative factors misses some of the more ontological dimensions of transition and engagement described by authors such as Barnett (2007) and Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) for whom the remarkable thing about students is how they maintain a strong 'will to learn' (Barnett, 2007), despite the cognitive, conative, emotional and relational hurdles in their way.

The Study

Against the backdrop described above, the authors have been investigating through in-depth interviews with first year students, their experiences of transition and engagement. Rather than repeat work uncovering conceptions of engagement, students were prompted with an explication of engagement and invited to reflect on its meaning in their context. The prompt cited ten factors (Solomonides, 2008) believed to support student engagement the most pertinent of which are:

- *First year experiences that ease and enable effective transition* - where possible staff responsible for first year students should be attuned to their cognitive and emotional needs as they make the transition from school or work into the university. Opportunities for working in smaller groups should be provided for these students.
- *Common and shared experiences that foster belonging* - social and academic activities that bring students into sustained contact and discussion with other students, senior students, academic and general staff.
- *The promotion of learning communities and identifiable cohorts* - students working closely together and with staff so that a sense of identity, either around subject, place or group is established.

Similarly they were given a copy of the university's capability statements as a prompt for discussion, and to introduce a discourse in a longer study of students' experience and understanding of capabilities. The authors were keen to know if first year students had any recognition of the capabilities that universities currently favour when codifying generic learning outcomes for graduates. The concept of capability was instigated by Sen (1979). Stephenson (1992, 1998) developed the notion suggesting that capability is about 'fitness for specified purpose' or capacity to function a certain way. Graduates should be capable of integrating knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding in their personal and professional lives. Their capability can be observed by their confidence and ability to: take effective and appropriate action; articulate their purpose; live and work effectively with others; and continue to learn from their experiences in a diverse and changing society (Stephenson, 1992).

Method and Findings

Seventeen first year students across four faculties were interviewed using a semi-structured method, at the end of their first year of study. Each student was provided with an explication of 'engagement' and 'capability' and invited to reflect on where these concepts intersected with their own experience. They were asked to indicate which aspects suited their personal aims and expectations and whether the university's aims had been communicated to them. The researchers looked for themes emerging from the interviews. Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) focuses on themes and patterns emerging from (usually) ethnographic data.

A theme that ran throughout the interviews, most frequently expressed by post-HSC students, was recognition of a greater level of responsibility for one's own learning. They acknowledged the difference in attitude between their university tutors and lecturers from that of their school teachers or bosses whereby "*All the learning is your responsibility all of a sudden, that 'if you don't go, it's not our fault, you will fail'. They're not stopping you, they're not forcing you either*" (Participant 14). A variety of different conclusions were drawn from this situation by individual students. Some students found the fact empowering and motivating while others found it demanding and impersonal. When asked about their transition into an academic atmosphere, participants highlighted certain key moments and relationships that shaped their experience. The primary issues mentioned by the participants

are summarised below as: their first impressions of university life from orientation or enrolment day, social networking, course material and staff accessibility.

Orientation Day

Orientation day is often the student's first experience of being on campus as a member of the student body and so it is generally influential in determining the student's attitude toward 'university life'. A few participants discussed positive experiences taken from orientation day which helped them to feel they were developing an identity at the university. The features of the day which allowed them to feel this way were the opportunities they had to join clubs, to sign up for mentoring programs or workshops, to meet other students and the opportunity to gain a cursory knowledge of the campus layout. However, it seems the majority of the students interviewed found orientation day a stressful and isolating experience.

The time it took participants to enrol was a contributing factor to their disillusion. Those who came straight from school often found the difficulty lay in organising their timetables. One bemused student (Participant 9) complained that the only person she had contact with at her enrolment organised her timetable by putting her four 'hardest' subjects in first semester, producing stressful ramifications throughout the semester. Another student who didn't have any help explained the difficulties she had when faced with organising her timetable, saying:

At school they make your own timetable and at TAFE they do as well. I didn't even know what subjects I had to do ... I didn't know that the 100 was year one, 200 was year two... We were there for hours just working on this bloody timetable (Participant 11).

The comments made by mature-age students about their first impressions of the university seem to indicate a common belief that the university treats all its first year students as though they are full-time students directly from school. One part-time mature-age student with a full-time job spent a sizable portion of his interview discussing his impression that "*enrolment is a mess, really, really a mess. That's supposed to be excellent, because we're doing it every year*" (Participant 5). He felt that there was a lot of time being wasted as a result of poor communication between departments; he found this particularly frustrating as he had not predicted it would take a whole day to enrol and was expected back at work. He suggested that there should be an online enrolment option.

Another mature-age student who attended an information night (believing it would help her to understand the university's expectations concerning student roles and responsibilities) was quite affronted by the tone of the speeches which;

were like, 'oh, you've got to ask your mum if you can get pocket money for this sort of thing or fees'... it was sort of like a parent information night, which I think is even more patronising (Participant 17).

This participant pointed out that if school leavers were expected to be responsible for their own learning at university, the university should be treating them as responsible adults from the outset. Treating all new students in this way would help them to understand what is expected of them and allow all students to feel they are being welcomed on an equal footing.

A third mature-age student started her degree mid-year and talked about how much harder it was to commence at a time when everyone is assumed to be settled. In addition to this assumption the student felt intimidated because she "*had just come from being grown-up back to being at uni and I just didn't really know how to go about it. It was daunting*" (Participant 16). If universities were to make it clearer that people start degrees at all stages of their lives, it would be easier for mature-age students to begin with confidence.

There were of course also students who had positive stories about orientation. Most of these students were those who didn't rely too heavily on their first impression lasting throughout the degree. Participant 15 recognised that orientation was a good initial introduction to the campus layout and social activities, however after this time one had to take more initiative in following prompts around the university, such as posters, to know what was going on. Students seemed to do better if they had some idea of how to go about taking the next step to continue to engage both academically and socially within the university routine.

Social Networking

The difference in social interaction and behaviour on campus from that in high school was distinctly marked by students. For one of our participants it was even a surprise to see that *"...everyone's got their books out on the grass and ... [people don't say] "Oh my God I can't believe she's got her books out. Don't you dare that" (Participant 11)*. It is interesting to think that something so common in a university context was thought to be so novel by a post-HSC student. This emphasises what a significant social change starting university represents for many first year students. For some students embarking on their degree will be their first encounter with a community of people who study voluntarily in a range of diverse fields, and who (also unlike school) do not necessarily know or even recognize each other. This cultural and spatial change can greatly add to students' sense of isolation.

A few students mentioned peer-support and mentoring as helping them to make a smooth transition into university life. Mentors provide the students with a recognisable face on campus. One student commented that their mentor's *"little advices came at the right times ... helped in the transition, that also helped me see what I could do later on" (Participant 14)*. Having on-going contact also helped students to stay on-track: *"I think the mentoring is quite good in the first half year, because they just keep emailing you" (Participant 12)*.

The size of the university community can be daunting for new students, particularly for those who have come from close-knit school, cultural, or work communities. It is important for many of these students that the university supports them in building social networks at an early stage. One international student, having been advised to become involved in social activities, explained that for him clubs were;

... vital, because just I've also read about cultural shock. I haven't been home in quite a while... so I really needed to have contact with people especially my age, and which are in the same situation as I am (Participant 1).

University organised days representing clubs and societies early in the semester encourage students to consider themselves as part of the university community, with the opportunity to become involved in social activities and meet similarly minded people. For those who found clubs appropriate for their own interests they provided a social break from the pressures of their first year of academia. Clubs allow students to belong to small communities rather than just being one among the entire university community.

The promotion of interest groups beyond the classroom has become particularly important as the size of first year units has increased, making it increasingly difficult for students to form steady friendships. Amid the numerous challenges faced by students many believed that *"making friends is like one of the hardest things in your first year" (Participant 11)*. This situation is exacerbating when connections formed in classes only last one semester. A student complained that *"none of the friends that I made in my first semester are in any of my classes for my second semester ... the friends never transfer"*. This student however, did get a

great deal of support from the rowing team she joined. She talked about the advantages of being in a group with older students who could then act as quasi-mentors:

It definitely made uni a more enjoyable experience because I have met people through it that I became really good friends with... A lot of them are actually four or five years older than me so they kind of act as a mentoring thing (Participant 9).

Social interaction on campus and student parties, such as Macquarie University's 'Conception Day' was highlighted as an experience that helped students to engage with the university community:

It really hit home for me that it's not just about coming and getting the guide to study and you go and you do your own thing ...I figured that it [Conception Day] would just be a chance to party on ... but it really did feel... that the university was a community (Participant 7).

Non-academic interactions, including more low-key university gatherings helped students to recognise peers and to feel their identity was more comfortably grounded in the community:

Group activities bring people together. I find it quite cool when you know people from uni and then you see them out on a weekend and you recognise each other from uni and then you bond over that, so that makes you sort of I guess that fosters a sort of belonging to the uni (Participant 2).

Having friends on campus was seen by a number of students to provide an incentive to study on campus: "I'm motivated to come to uni because of friends but as a result of me coming here I've got to study as well" (Participant 14). Another student made a similar statement but continued to say she thought this social interaction, though possibly eating into study time, helped to improve her academic performance.

Being happy at university helps me learn more. So even groups of friends ... When I'm there and I'm probably not studying where I could otherwise be studying. I find that still helps, like a sense of belonging somewhere (Participant 17).

A number of students recounted the difficulty they had in finding a club that suited their interests, timetable and situation. For example, this student "wanted to join a group, especially in first semester, to kind of get that belonging and you know have a social network. But I live too far away" (Participant 11). Students have to make choices according to their own circumstances. Another student spoke enthusiastically about the importance of social groups but didn't think organised groups were appropriate for him:

It's not going to make a big deal for me to join a student group but definitely I think 20 to 30 per cent of uni life you should find something not just academic but somehow related to people (Participant 10).

Another approach was taken by an international student who agreed it was important to balance social interaction and academia but didn't feel she could actively develop a network of her own until she had adjusted to her new academic life:

I haven't been as social this year as I've wanted to but I think next year I will be just because I've got my feet on the ground now. I understand how the university works and how my social life will fit in with my university life (Participant 15).

It is also frequently the case that people join clubs but the club is not active enough to retain its members. "I did join one group but I haven't really kept part. They stopped emailing and then I didn't bother" (Participant 6). Students therefore may not become involved in formal clubs or societies for a whole myriad of reasons. The university cannot, therefore, rely on clubs and societies outside classes to provide a social foundation for the entire first year

population. Unit structures should support students' need for social inclusion through such techniques as discussions and group work.

Course Material

A number of students found that the way the courses were structured to try to ease them into university work (from an assumed HSC background) was lop-sided and therefore more of a disadvantage than an advantage. One student commented that the first few weeks of university felt like HSC revision but after week 5 this suddenly changed and *"they try to push everything into your brain and somehow it's even tougher"* (Participant 10). An excess of HSC references in the first few weeks can also pose problems for international students. One student noted that her teachers were continually referring to a course she didn't do and she thought; *"I've got no idea what you're talking about, about HSC. I did British A levels!"* This student continued to say: *"Maybe sometimes it's too much of an ease. If I'm being honest, I don't do all the readings that I'm supposed to but I'm still getting decent grades"* (Participant 15). Although this particular mismatch in expectations was not seen to be all together unpleasant to the student it does indicate a potentially more serious problem for international, or indeed mature-age students who are unfamiliar with their lecturer's key reference points.

A mature-age student also expressed a concern that there was an uneven balance of assumed knowledge in class stemming from an over-reliance on HSC material. Even her courses in second semester brushed over points, noting that they were covered by their HSC. This left her and other students behind and feeling uncomfortable about asking for clarification as, when HSC material was rehashed, the rest of the class got bored. At this point she felt her post-HSC peers were disruptive; talking and laughing over the lecturer. She was particularly upset as it seemed nothing was being done to *"change their behaviour or something, in order for them to be out of high school mode and back into higher education mode"* (Participant 8). This participant acknowledged that it shouldn't be the lecturer's job to *"discipline children"* but was concerned that if nothing was said the problem would continue, later arguing that this rift between the students could be resolved if there were a course which covered the basics more carefully or if the related HSC subject or equivalent be made a pre-requisite.

For post-HSC students the transition into academia can be very exciting; offering them a range of opportunities to be creative and responsible in the development of their thinking. For other students, however, this feels more like abandonment than freedom. A few of the students interviewed were impressed that they could find answers to questions on their own:

I pretty much suffer from my HSC because all these past papers all day really makes me feel: 'Oh, that's the only solution I can get for that answer,' but actually, it's not. With uni you've got ...those kinds of freedoms in thinking. Like lets you to actually engage more (Participant 12).

The opportunity to defend ideas was mentioned positively by a number of the participants: *"Everyone's free to share their opinion, and it's encouraged ... They say, Don't worry, you cannot agree with some points, but you have to come with arguments"* (Participant 1). The combination of new responsibilities and of autonomy led many post-HSC students to feel a new enthusiasm for learning: *"I'm more interested here because in school it was more kind of strict, like what you had to do, ...but here you can kind of choose what you want to do"* (Participant 13). Some students require more support in understanding what is expected of them:

First semester was kind of not very nice for me ... because it was all – it wasn't really put on a plate, and given to you ... There was not kind of direction given as far as the course work and the learning, how we were supposed to learn (Participant 11).

Mature-age participants spoke about the trouble they had in understanding what was expected of them, though once expectations had been established, the university's approach was;

... a really good step in between, where it's not handed to you but it's there if you look for it. So it's learning about going and looking for your help when you need it, going and looking for answers that you don't have. It's like a subtle way of teaching you life skills because in the real world it's not all handed to you (Participant 16).

Staff Accessibility

Having tutors who knew the names of all the students was a very important point for many of the students interviewed. A positive example of a tutor making an effort to learn names was given by a student whose tutor would “*take a picture of us and then write your name on top of the photo... which let us feel we are important*” (Participant 10). Having a tutor remember your name was also seen to enhance your ability to engage with the course because;

It just makes you feel a lot more comfortable in, you know, saying oh hey, I really need help with this. Whereas if they don't want to engage with you or you might not want to engage with them. So that's really good when they want to know your name, it sounds really simple (Participant 11).

That tutors didn't know their students' names was just one of a number of things which highlighted for our participants the difference in student/tutor engagement at university:

At school they all really wanted you to do well... Whereas here, as I said earlier, you're just a number... it's okay to see them after the lectures but they're kind of wanting to just talk to the next person in the line (Participant 11).

A few students felt that university lecturers were more distant than school teachers. Lecturers are often described as giving the impression of being too busy to talk to the students. “*They don't tell you everything. They say, this is your assignment, go away and do it... they have so much other things to do you don't feel like asking them any more.*” (Participant 14)

The perceived accessibility of and appropriate interaction with tutors seems initially to rest on the student's experience and preconceptions. A contrast can be seen between one post-HSC student's comment: “*Being friends with your teacher would just be weird*” (Participant 9) and a mature-age student who commented:

[coming from a work environment]it's always been 'your boss is your boss, and you don't treat your boss as your friend' ... Whereas now you can just go and chat to them, and they're just different people. (Participant 3)

Conclusion

How well integrated students feel will mediate the way in which students focus their attention on different components of their study. Ideally, as students progress through their studies they take on capabilities, attributes and ideas that relate to their future profession, and this leads to a broader engagement with their studies. All of the interviewees described a way of thinking about themselves that emphasises their confidence, happiness, imagination and self-knowledge. In other words, there was a strong emphasis on the socio-cultural and human capital aspects of beginning university. Students came with a variety of backgrounds, expectations and fears. At best these were somewhat accounted for, whilst elsewhere there was a tendency to treat students as homogenous, HSC school leavers. Kuh (2008, p.14) has identified operating at the ‘human-scale’ as an important part of high impact educational

practices. This means we need to understand who our students are in promoting better relationships. Some students in our study suggested they felt a sense of alienation stemming from a failure in communication or perceived lack of control (Mann, 2001). Others demonstrated how attuned they are to implicit messages being broadcast by the university interaction with students, something that caused conflict in particular for mature age and non-standard entry students. This suggests a need to inquire into or at least articulate the engagement issues that may be particular to mature age students, or indeed any students with specific needs such as equity groups or students for whom English is not their first language. Compounded by the fact that the student's life is transitory, we need to help students with the negotiation of the cognitive and emotional borders from school to university, through university and into work.

Increasingly, universities are looking at student engagement and transition issues from pedagogic, institutional and strategic perspectives. It is likely that the Australian Government will adopt retention rates as a proxy measure of student engagement, placing greater emphasis on the early contact and social networking of students, as well the organisation of course material and contact with academic staff. There is compelling evidence to suggest that activities designed to develop 'learning communities' – activities that demand interaction between students and staff, consequentially promote deep learning and mastery (Pascarella and Terenzini (2005, p.111), especially if these activities are part of a cluster of other high impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008 p.14). The research reported here makes it clear that the opportunities to help and to hinder the development of the 'community' begins very early in the lifetime of the student and continues with the perceived relevance of the course material and the accessibility of the staff. This is summed up well by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) who write:

The holistic nature of learning suggests a clear need to rethink and restructure highly segmented departmental and program configurations and their associated curricular patterns ... The guideposts should be the interconnections that are at the core of student learning, not convenient faculty-centred divisions of labour, discrete organisational units, or budget development and resource allocation models driven by credit hours (p. 647)

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