

The First Year Experience on an Outer Metropolitan Campus

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First year business students on an outer metropolitan campus were surveyed to evaluate their experiences of university. Students enrolled on this campus tended not have received their first preference, were in longer hours of paid employment and exhibited greater disengagement with the institution and peers. The survey data will inform the evolution of the specific first year program on the campus. The current survey demonstrates that it is dangerous to simply expect national data to apply to all institutional campuses.

Introduction

Over the past decade there have been significant changes in the nature of the first year experience, which reflect the substantial shifts in Australian society and its higher education system. These broadly include: changes in employment levels, higher expectations and costs of the education system, greater competition between universities; development of new campuses on urban fringes; internationalisation of Australian higher education; and major changes in the use of communication and information technologies in teaching and learning.

The first year experience continues to grow in importance for Australian universities. It is the year in which the greatest numbers of students leave the system (DEST, 2004). High first year attrition rates affect the national reputation of a university, potentially depress entry standards, and represent significant financial losses to the institution. Recently the Commonwealth government has developed funding mechanisms that reward institutions on the basis of several learning and teaching performance indicators, including first year retention rates and first-to-second year progression rates. There is also discussion that a national first year experience survey might be developed and operate like the Course Experience Questionnaire. These factors have focused the attentions of many institutions on the first year experience as a matter of strategic importance.

Past research indicates that the first year of university provides a frame of reference on which a student's academic future is based (Northedge, 1987; Zimitat, 2004). Recent data from indicates that retention rates vary from institution to institution, and by discipline DEST (DEST, 2007). Results of the national first year experience surveys (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000) confirm that institutions need to understand and respond to the first year experience on their own campuses, rather than adopt off-the-shelf approaches that may be of marginal importance to their student population. Therefore, it is logical that developing a tailored First Year Experience (FYE) program for a specific campus or discipline, has been associated with improved student satisfaction, lower attrition rates, smoother transitions to university and increased levels of social and academic connectedness (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000; Volders, Thies, & Callaghan, 2000). This paper describes the first year experience of Business students on an outer metropolitan campus, and is offered as a set of data for other institutions to consider for benchmarking and comparative purposes.

The Carseldine campus of the Queensland University of Technology is located 13km north of Brisbane and is in the middle of the university's northern corridor which extends from Gardens Point up towards Caboolture. Unlike the main QUT city campuses, the Carseldine campus is located in a growing suburb of urban Brisbane. Degree programs offered on this campus aims to enhance the student experience by helping students become part of a whole-of-campus community, and academic environment known for supporting students. The Carseldine Bachelor of Business program is specifically designed as a First Year (or foundation) program, and has some unique features as compared to the programs offered at the main city campus. Firstly, students study in a cohort where the students commence studies together and can finish at various exit points. They undertake eight subjects in two semesters that includes a subject specifically designed for the first year at Carseldine e.g., one course, 'Academic skills and scholarship' is designed to develop academic skills in students. After the completion of the eight courses, the students transfer to the second year Bachelor of Business program at the main campus. Secondly, most students enrolled in this program are traditional school leaver students. The majority of these students have a lower entry score than those commencing at the city campuses, and this program helps them to gain entry to the second year of the Bachelor of Business program. Thirdly, there are no international students in this program, or on this campus.

Methodology

The questionnaire used in the survey was based upon the 2004 National Survey on First Year Experience conducted by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, Melbourne. The FYE questionnaire comprised of five sections (i) You and your study (demographics), (ii) Your expectations goals and study habits, (iii) You university experience in 2005, (iv) managing your commitments and (v) transition from school to university. The First Year Experience questionnaire was administered to the entire cohort of first year students enrolled in the Business program in mid October 2005. To maximise the response rate of the survey, the questionnaires were distributed during a lecture, which was attended by the cohort. A small incentive, a chance to win a \$50 gift voucher, was offered to students who included their email address on a separate cover on the front of the survey. Participants were assured that the address and the information would remain confidential.

The QUT Carseldine sample comprised of 109 students enrolled in a Bachelor of Business degree course. This represents a response rate of 80.6 % of the entire student population of first year business students enrolled at the campus. The majority of the respondents were enrolled full-time 88 % and 12 % had a part-time load. Of the respondents 48 % were male, somewhat higher than the proportion in the 2004 National study. The majority of respondents (69%) were 'school leavers' (i.e., aged 19 years and under), 21% were aged 20-24 years and the remainder were 25 years and over. For the purposes of comparison with the national survey data, cohorts have been described as school-leavers (aged 19 years and younger); non-traditional students (aged 20 to 24 years) and mature age students (aged over 25 years). On the postcode measure of SES, 28% of respondents were from lower SES background. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of students came from families where the parents had undertaken higher education and 49% of students came from families where the parents had lower levels of education. The majority of respondents (85%) were born in Australia, 14% per cent spoke a language other than English at home, and 6 % of students had come to Australia during the ten years prior to the survey.

Results

Aspirations, Change and Uncertainty

Past research on intellectual achievement suggests that student aspirations play an integral role in students' educational accomplishments (James, 2002; Plucker & Ouaglia, 1998). Improving job prospects was a reason for 93% of students enrolling in the degree, and the degree of importance attached to this item was very high (Table1). The most important factor for high achieving students was to study in a field of interest in comparison to low achieving students who identified improving job prospects as the central factor. A large proportion of students (88 %) indicated that intrinsic satisfaction of studying in a field in which of interest was an important reason for enrolling at university. These findings are consistent with the previous national studies conducted in Australia. However, the results from this study vary from the National 2004 study in respect to the order of importance, with greater significance placed on improving job prospects in this study.

Gender differences in relation to reasons for enrolling were interesting, in that females were more likely than males to rate both intrinsic and job-related reasons as most important. The most important factor for enrolment given by school leavers (age 19 and below) was to improve their job prospects. For students aged 20 – 24 indicated that studying in a field that is of interest and improving job prospects were the most salient reasons for enrolling. For the students above 24 years the most important reason for enrolling was to receive training for a specific job, closely followed by studying in a field of interest. Part-time students indicated that studying in a field of interest was most important whereas for full-time students improving my job prospects was most salient.

Table 1. Reasons for Enrolling at QUT Carseldine (n=129) compared to national survey data (N=2344), 2004. (% rating reason as important and mean rating).

Reason	Mean	Important	
	(1=v. important)	(%)	
	QUT CA	QUT CA	Australia
Studying in a field that really interests me	1.5	88	95
Developing my talents and creativity	2.0	74	75
Getting training for a specific job	2.1	77	74
Improving my job prospects	1.5	93	84
Expectations of my parents and family	3.0	34	30

Sense of Purpose. The majority of respondents (80 %) had a clear sense of purpose for being in the business program, a finding similar to the National 2004 study (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) (Table 2). In contrast to the National 2004 study however, less than half of the respondents in the current sample indicated that they were not aware of the type of occupation that they wanted. A small minority of respondents, similar to the National 2004 study, indicated that they were undecided about their future and regarded university as a period of 'marking time'. Approximately 8.5 % of the respondents had deferred their 2003 university offer for a place in 2004, and sought enrolment in 2005. Sense of purpose varied by age group: 74 % of students who were just out of school (19 and below), 84 % of students aged 20 – 24 and 90 % of students aged 25 and above were clear about the reasons for coming to university. On the basis of enrolment: 86 % part-time students but only 79 % of full-time students were clear about the reasons why they came to university.

Previous Studies. Many of the students attending Carseldine had begun earlier tertiary studies. Specifically, 20 % of students had previously commenced, but not completed, a university course and 2 % had completed a university degree or diploma course. A number of the respondents had completed (14 %) with a smaller number (5.4 %) commencing a TAFE course. Considerably more students in the current sample had previously studied in relation to the results of earlier national studies.

Table 2. Sense of Purpose among QUT Carseldine Students

	Mean (1= strongly agree)	Agree (%)	
	QUT CA	QUT CA	National
I am clear about the reasons I came to University	1.8	80	85
I know the type of occupation I want	2.5	48	67
University is just marking time while I decide my future	3.7	15	13

Preferences, Course and Enrolment Changes. Many students consider enrolment at university to be the first step in determining what degree they really want to study. Only 59% of Carseldine students received their first degree preference. A relatively low number (10%) of students had changed their course after enrolment. However, a more than one-third (35%) of students indicated a desire to change their enrolment in the second year, with 13% hoping to change institutions. Considerably fewer students received their first preference by comparison with the National 2004 study (Krause et al, 2005), and the proportion of students indicating course changes is considerably higher than the national 2004 average. Fewer students (16%) had withdrawn from a subject in comparison to 18% of the National 2004 study.

Deferral. Roughly one third of students indicated that they had seriously considered discontinuing and/or deferring their study at some stage during the first semester. This is consistent with the national data reported over the last decade (McInnis et al, 2000; Krause et al, 2005). Uncertainty about continuing with an enrolment is generally the result of a number of inter-related factors (Table 3). Only one factor, ‘I dislike studying’, was rated as important by more than 56 % of respondents, followed by ‘emotional health’ (49 %). This finding was different to the National 2004 study, where ‘emotional health’ emerged as the most likely factor in the national Males generally indicated reasons such as dislike of studying, whilst females indicated emotional health as the primary reason/s for deferral.

Table 3. Reasons for Considering Deferring

Reason	Mean rating (1=v important)	% agreeing (ratings of 1or 2)	
	QUT CA	QUT CA	National
Emotional Health	2.7	49	52
Physical Health	3.5	30	27
I dislike studying	2.5	56	27
University wasn’t what I expected	3.2	35	28
Financial Reasons	3.4	35	39
I thought I might fail	2.7	47	36
I found employment	3.9	19	10
Problems with daily travel	3.5	28	19
Family Commitments	3.5	23	17
I wanted to change course	3.1	37	42
Paid work commitments	3.7	21	12

Student Expectations

Overall, the majority of students felt that university had lived up to their expectations, with a small number (13%) reporting that it had not. Cross-tab analysis indicates that unmet expectations were most prevalent amongst students who were low achievers and/or paying full fees. At Carseldine, less than two-thirds of students (60%) really wanted to go to university compared with the national 2004 average of 76%. Nearly one fifth of all respondents (16%) indicated that they did not really want to go university, which may result in some difficulties adjusting to the demands of university. More than half the students (59%) felt that they were pressured by their school to go to university, which was slightly higher than reported in the National 2004 study (49%). A similar number (55%) felt that their high school teachers gave them good advice about choosing a university course, which was comparable to the national results. Compared to almost half of the respondents in the National 2004 study, only one-third (35%) of students felt that their final year was a good preparation for university. Interestingly, a very high proportion of respondents (40%) in this survey felt that they were not really ready to choose a university course.

Table 4. School to University Transition (n = 109)

Item	% Disagree (rating of 4/5)	% Agree (rating of 1/2)	
	QUT CA	QUT CA	National
At my school there was a lot of pressure to go to University	18.1	56.4	49
I received good advice from my teachers at my school about choosing my course	21.3	50.0	52
I feel pressured by the financial commitment made by my parents to send me to university	57.4	17.0	23
I would have preferred starting with a general first year at university before choosing a specific course	52.6	33.0	25
The standard of work expected at university is much higher than I expected	18.1	43.6	41
I was not really ready to choose a university course on leaving secondary school	34.0	40.4	30
My final year of school was very good preparation for the Study I am doing now	27.7	35.1	43
My parent's have little understanding of what I do at University	39.4	31.9	32
The subjects at University clearly build on my study at School	38.3	28.7	42
During Year 12, I really wanted to go to university	16.0	59.6	76

Adjusting to University Assessment/Standards. Students were asked to compare their first semester grades with what they expected when they started their first year. Just over half (52 %) of the students said that their average marks were about the same as they expected. A small number (16 %) indicated that they had received higher marks than they expected while 28 % said that their grades was lower than expected. In terms of student expectations concerning grades in the first year, age played a key role. Significantly more non-traditional age students received marks higher than they expected during the first semester of study (19 %). This may reflect the general lack of confidence experienced by older students who often feel daunted by the prospect of sharing classes with younger students when returning to study after years of being involved in home or work settings. Non-traditional age students are also known for their diligence and it is thus perhaps not surprising that their marks are higher than they expected. A slightly greater proportion of students aged 20 and over were in the top average mark bracket.

Adjusting to study in first year. Most students expressed a neutral academic orientation (Table 5) consistent with the National 2004 study. However, in comparison to the national 2004

survey, considerably fewer respondents indicated that they enjoyed the intellectual challenge of the lectures, that the lectures often stimulated their interest in the subject or that they got a lot of satisfaction from studying. This area is important as the academic orientation items gauge students' satisfaction with and enjoyment of academic endeavours early in their university experience. Almost half (46 %) of the students agreed that they had difficulty getting motivated to study, which was greater than the national survey. This is associated with being a young student, a low achiever and in paid employment rather than studying only, which is relevant in this sample.

Table 5. Academic Orientation and Application

Item	% Agree (ratings of 1/2)		Mean (1 = strongly agree)
	QUT CA	National	QUT CA
I enjoy the intellectual challenge of the subjects I am studying	34	63	2.8
Lectures often stimulate my interest in the Subjects.	27	50	3.1
I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	29	49	3.0
I find it difficult to get myself motivated to study	46	36	2.6
I regularly seek the advice and assistance of the teaching staff	19	13	2.9

Engaging with Learners and Learning at University.

An important indicator of the quality and nature of the university experience is students' level of engagement with learning and with the learning community. Engagement refers to the time, energy and resources that students devote to on- and off-campus activities designed to enhance their learning (Astin, 1984; Krause and Hartley, 2005).

How Students Spend Their Time. One third of Carseldine students spent more than 15 hours on campus and 15% of students were on campus less than 10hrs/week, but the majority (46%) of students reported spending between 10-15 hours on campus per week, consistent with data from the national survey (Krause et al, 2005). There was a substantial difference between the average number of hours of course contact reported by the students in the current study (12 hours) and the national 2004 study (16 hours). Perhaps the most striking finding was the number of hours that student were engaged in paid work (18 hrs), compared with the national average (Krause et al, 2005).

Table 6. Mean hours per week spent on study and paid work activities

Activity	Mean hours per week	
	QUT CA	National
Course Contact	11.9	16
Private Study	10.5	11
Paid Work	17.7	7.7

Institutional Factors and Student Engagement. Student engagement at the institutional level revealed that Carseldine students are less satisfied across the indices, compared with national data. The areas that the respondents felt unsatisfied with include the range of subjects from which they could choose (28%) and subject choices they had made (47%). The dissatisfaction relating to the subject choice may partly be related to the structured nature of the program. However, (G. Kuh, 2003) states that students perceive that they have been well advised academically and feel satisfied with their choices, they are more likely

to be committed to their studies and academically engaged. As a result, it is important to ensure that adequate support is in place to advise and guide students in their decision-making process.

Table 7. Indicators of student engagement at the institutional level

	Mean (1=strongly agree)	% Agree (ratings of 1/2)	
	QUT CA	QUT CA	National
I am satisfied with the subject choices I made this year	2.60	47.3	61
I was satisfied by the range of subjects/units from which I could choose this year	3.06	27.9	49
I was given helpful advice when choosing my subjects/units	3.32	20.9	33
I really like being a University student	2.35	55.8	75
I really like being on my University campus	2.78	38.7	60
I feel I belong to the University community	2.78	38.7	51
I am not particularly interested in the extra-curricular activities or facilities provided	2.76	45.7	32

Over half of the students (56 %) indicated that really liked being a university student and over one third reported that they liked being on the university campus (38%) and felt as though they belonged to the university community (38%). However, these figures were considerably lower than the national average of 75%, 60% and 51% respectively. Given the above findings it is perhaps not surprising that the respondents reported being less interested (46%) in the extra-curricula activities and facilities provided by the university. Interestingly however, in comparison to the national average (66%), a higher number of Carseldine students (74%) agreed that at least one teacher knew their name. As academic staff play a key role in contributing to student engagement with their study and the learning community as a whole, this may be a positive indicator (Kuh (G. D. Kuh, 2003) Krause, 2005).

Engaging and Disengaging in the Learning Environment. An important factor contributing to students' engagement with learning, peers and academics is the fostering of an environment in which students participate actively and develop a sense of belonging in both small and large group settings (Tinto, 1996). Such opportunities manifest themselves in many ways, including opportunities to ask questions and contribute to group discussion. More than one-third of first year students say they frequently participate in class discussions or raise questions in class (Table 8) which compares favourably with data from the national survey. On the disengagement dimension, a high proportion of students admitted to skipping classes (76 %) when compared to the national average of 59 %. Further, almost 86 % of students agreed that they come to class without completing their readings or assignments, however this figure is more consistent with the national average.

Table 8. Selected classroom engagement/disengagement behaviours

Selected classroom engagement/disengagement behaviours	% of students engaging in behaviours at least sometimes	
	QUT CA	National
Ask questions in class or contribute to class discussions	92.1	90
Make class presentations	89.7	69
Come to class without completing readings or assignments	86.5	73
Skip classes	76.2	59

Engaging with Peers. A wide body of research widely acknowledges that the more frequently students interact with peers in the learning community in educationally purposeful ways, the more likely they are to engage with their learning (Tinto, 1998). Overall most students

reported that they studied with their peers in some form and engaged with peers both in and out of class projects or assignments (Table 9). This may reflect the emphasis placed on group work and collaborative projects in many business subjects. Perhaps not surprisingly, based on the previous results, students reported engaging with peers less frequently when compared with the national average. Overall, a large number of students frequently (8%) or at least sometimes (40%) borrowed course notes from friends, though most (48%) did not. This figure is perplexing given the high number of student who admitted to skipping classes.

Table 9. Peer Engagement Scale (% of students)

	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
	QUT CA	QUT CA	QUT CA
Work with other students on projects during the class	27.1	65.9	4.7
Work with classmates outside of class on group assignments	39.5	51.2	7.0
Study with other students	9.3	58.1	30.2
Borrow course notes and materials from friends in the same subject	8.5	40.3	48.1

Engaging through Online Technologies. The number of students using in online technologies is comparable to the National 2004 study. However, the results indicate that students use substantially more email to contact friends in the course (Table 10). This may be attributed to fact that students are frequently involved in group work and presentations, which require contact with other students. Carseldine staff incorporate a range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) in their teaching and learning; such as online teaching, digital databases and Virtual Portal. The high number of students who report using ICT's in comparison to the national average reflects this. However, the results present a somewhat mixed picture, as despite the high usage of ICT's the percentage of students who find this useful is considerably lower than the national average (Table 11).

Table 10. Online Engagement Scale

	% of students engaging in behaviours daily or weekly	
	QUT CA	National
Use email to contact lecturers/tutors	19.4	19
Use email to contact friends in the course	47.3	22
Use online discussion groups	18.6	16
Use web-based resources and information designed for the course	67.4	73

Table 11. Percentages of students who used ICT's and found them useful.

	% student use			
	QUT CA	National	QUT CA	National
Online course resources (eg notes and materials on the web)	99.2	95	86.0	80
Using email to contact lecturers/Tutors	83.7	78	60.5	69
Using email to contact other students.	96.1	67	75.2	56
Computer software designed for the course	61.2	58	27.9	53
Learning at my own pace using online resources	82.9	54	42.6	51
Online discussion groups with other students	65.9	44	30.2	46
Online/virtual tutoring	45.7	31	19.4	47
Subjects offered online with no face-to-face classes	51.2	18	13.2	31

Managing Commitments in the First Year. Similar to the national trend, most students (69 %) were financing their studies by deferring their HECS payments. A significant proportion

(18%) reported that they were paying their HECS fees upfront, which may reflect the location of the campus in a lower socioeconomic area. There were also a significant number of domestic full fee paying students (10%). The main source of income for the majority of students is part-time work (60%)(Table 12). The number of student's engaged in part and full-time work is considerably higher than the national average. Significantly fewer students reported that their main source of income was provided by their parents/family or by government assistance when compared with the national average.

Table 12. Main or only source of income for Carseldine students .

Main or only source of income	QUT CA %	National %
Youth Allowance/ Austudy / Abstudy	8.5	25
Part-time/casual work	60.5	32
Full-time work	11.6	4
Parents/family	27.1	42
Savings	9.3	9
Scholarships/Cadetships	1.6	4
Spouse/partner	3.9	4

Hours of paid work. Compared to the national average, Carseldine students reported working significantly more hours per week, particularly in the category of 31+ hours/week. The majority of students reported working 11–15 hours/week, which was also higher than the n average reported in the 2004 National study (Table 13). Part-time students reported working more hours than full-time students.

Table 13. Hours of paid work per week for students who were in paid work (% of students)

	1-5 hrs	6-10 hr	11-15 hr	16-20 hr	21-25 hr	26-30 hr	31 hrs +
QUT CA	15.	17.5	28.1	26.3	5.3	5.3	14.9
National	19	32	22	17	5	2	3

Paid work and academic work. Overall, more than half (63 %) students believe that paid work moderately interferes with their academic performance, with 19 % experiencing severe interference. Only 18 % believe it has no bearing on their academic performance. Among the part-time students, 60% of employed students believe that paid work interferes at least moderately with their academic performance, with 26.6 % experiencing moderate interference and 9 % finding work severely interfering. Similarly, full-time students found work interfering with their studies. These results indicate many students in this study have competing demands on their time, which may affect their academic performance.

Comprehending and coping. The ability to comprehend and cope with studying can impact upon academic work and achievement. More than half the students (53%) felt frequently overwhelmed with university studies (Table 14). Strikingly, nearly all students (94%) at some stage felt overwhelmed at some stage of their study. Further, a number of students (43%) admitted the workload to be heavy. Not surprisingly, high achievers are more likely to have scores in the top 50 % of comprehending and coping than the bottom 50%.

Table 14. Comprehending and coping

Main or only source of income	Agree %	Disagree %
I find it quite difficult to comprehend a lot of the material I am supposed to study	22.1	48

I frequently feel overwhelmed by all I have to do	53.4	3.9
I have had difficulty adjusting to the style of teaching at university	14.7	55
My course workload is too heavy'	43.2	16.3
I find it really hard to keep up with the volume of work in this course	44.2	19.4

Discussion

The results of the current survey suggest that the preliminary profile of the QUT Carseldine student cohort is one in which students expectations are met, though there are difficulties associated with transition. Furthermore, they are employment-focussed, but with no specific career in mind. On the whole, the first year students' expectations about university were met. This pattern was consistent across all sub-groups. With respect to grade expectations, the trend in the data indicated that the majority of students received grades that were consistent with their expectations. Strikingly however, the majority of students received grades between 50-60 %, with very few achieving results in the higher brackets, in direct contrast to the National 2004 study. Overall the pattern of results suggests that a number of the respondents had some difficulty with the transition from school to university. Specifically, many students felt unsure whether they really wanted to attend university and felt unprepared to choose a university course. Their indecision surrounding whether to attend university may be related to the high number of students who reported feeling pressured to attend university in school.

The students find it difficult to motivate themselves to study and cite a general dislike of studying itself as the main reason for considering deferring. A number of students have previously engaged in some post-secondary study, and a significant proportion of the population intended to change their course or institution. This is consistent with the perception that Carseldine courses are a bridging mechanism for students to move into other programs.

There appears in this group of students, a general pattern of disengagement, which appears to be related to both institutional factors and high level of part time employment. Specifically, students reported a lack of engagement at the institutional level - they were less satisfied with subject choices and reported that they disliked being a university student and spending time on campus. Students at Carseldine report similar work/study patterns to those emerging nationally where there is an overall trend of greater employment-focus (Krause et al, 2005). Students reported part-time/casual work as their main source of income, they worked considerably more hours per week and received much less financial support from the government or their families. Similar patterns emerged in their level of engagement with the learning environment as the majority of students reported being unprepared and skipping classes reflected in lower levels of engagement with their peers. One of the most concerning findings was that over half of the sample felt that their work interfered with their studies. Given the importance of these trends to inform future policies and practices relating to first year programs, it is imperative that these patterns are closely monitored.

The current survey demonstrates that it is dangerous to simply apply national data to a specific student body. The demographics, experiences, expectations and hence needs of the student body can vary widely between institutions, but also within institutions. It would be of great benefit if there were data from other metropolitan university campuses and other discipline areas for the purposes of comparison and generalisation. Further investigation will need to be undertaken to fully explore the student cohort, particularly given the QUT Carseldine Business program is in its relative infancy.

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