

Student Experience in a First Year Economics Unit at an Australian University Offshore Campus

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Abstract

A recent study of first year Microeconomics students' experiences at Victoria University (VU) identified a number of aspects of student attitude towards economics, their degree of motivation, satisfaction with the content and the delivery of lectures and tutorials. Students surveyed indicated that a teaching approach which links economics to 'real-world' situations was a significant motivating factor. The objective of this paper is to examine first year students' learning experience at a VU's offshore campus. The study is based on a survey of students enrolled in Microeconomics in Semester 2, 2007. A qualitative analytical approach utilises contingent statistical methods. The study identifies issues of significance to first year international students and highlight differences and similarities between the learning approach of local and offshore students, their expectations and needs. The results of the study will be helpful in developing strategies for internationalising the curriculum and in improving teaching and learning processes.

Introduction

The challenges associated with the first year courses have been the subject of many studies (Cook, 2007; McInnis, 2001; Trotter and Roberts, 2006). The literature on student transition to university indicates that the first year difficulties can lead to significant attrition or generate consequent attrition in later years (Tinto 1993; McInnis 2001; McMillan 2005; Trotter and Roberts 2006). Anderson, Dwayne and Fuss (1994) report that around 30 to 40 percent of initially enrolled students drop an economics course before the final exam. The literature offers a number of studies concerned with various aspects of the first year at a tertiary institutions (McInnis, James and McNaught 1995; Johnston 2001; McInnis 2001; Marangos 2002 a, b; Abelson 2005; Krause, Hartley and McInnis 2005; Gabb 2006; Cook 2007).

Tinto (1993), McMillan (2005), Nora, Barlow and Crisp (2005), Gabb, Milne and Cao (2006) take the view that the student attrition rate is strongly affected by students' academic success and their overall university experience during the first year. Despite some concerns about first

year student attitudes and experiences at Australian universities, a study by Krause *et al.*, (2005) found that, overall, students are more satisfied with their university experience than they were ten years ago. Based on strong evidence of demographic subgroup differences, the study invites further research into the first year experience in higher education.

Keating, Davies and Holden (2006) present the findings of an exploratory study of the major transition issues experienced by first year higher education students. The study pointed out that the problems experienced by students are very common and they relate to the academic, social and environmental aspects of the transition experience. Most students felt that the structure of the teaching and learning environment was the most challenging aspect of the transition to university. Students expressed their misconceptions and a general lack of knowledge about what to expect of teaching and learning at university. The issue was well expressed by Kantanis (2001), cited by Keating *et al.* (2006, p. 2): '*In an environment where much is assumed and little explicitly stated by academics in terms of enculturating students into the teaching and learning styles, life, procedures, practices and culture of the university it is inevitable that student will find the adjustment difficult.*'

In response to VU's challenge to improve student retention rates and enhance the learning experience of first year students, the study by Keating *et al.* (2006) emphasises the urgency for further research. It points out the areas that require further investigation, such as students' preparedness for higher education, their expectations, experiences, and the support strategies they use to conquer transition difficulties. The study stresses the need to respond to individual groups with reference to the particular discipline of study.

Prompted by Keating *et al.* (2006), this paper aims to investigate issues facing first year students in one of the offshore campuses in the Faculty of Business and Law at the VU - Sunway College, Malaysia. Students studying the subject face the challenge of not only learning the subject content but also of adjusting to the university environment. Identifying and addressing teaching and learning issues in this unit is likely to enhance students' first year experience. It can also lead to improving first year teaching and student support practices, by aligning them to the needs of the first year students. The ultimate aim is to increase the student retention rate.

Research objectives and hypotheses

The focus of this paper is on students' perspectives of their learning experience, in particular the level of student *motivation*. However, other aspects of the first year student population are also explored. These include: *students' profile characteristics* such as gender, age, enrolment mode, whether they are local or international students, work commitments; *student satisfaction* with the content and the delivery of lectures and tutorials, and the opportunity to interact with teaching staff and other students in class; *challenges* to improve the learning experience and the *most enjoyable aspects* of studying the unit, as listed below.

In order to assess student *motivation*, the indicators such as use of complementary materials, reading other economics textbooks, intention to study economics voluntarily, seeking help, participation in class, hours spent studying the unit, regular reading of the prescribed textbook and lecture notes and preparation for tutorials are considered. To identify *challenging* aspects of studying the economics unit, learning activities such as reading the prescribed textbook, reading lecture notes, assignments, test, exam, tutorial discussion are investigated.

In addition to the *challenging* factors, a number of additional student *needs*, including taking of lecture notes, essay writing and exam preparation skills, are addressed.

In order to test the association between the variables of interest, the hypotheses can be expressed, in general, as:

H_0 : There is no association between any two of the above specified variables.

H_1 : There is an association between any two of the above specified variables.

A number of the associations have been tested. The results are presented below.

Research methodology

Sample design

A survey was conducted during the second semester of 2007 among the first year university students enrolled in the economics subject, at the Faculty of Business, a VU offshore campus. The textbook, lecture and assessment material were the same as for the local students. The focus of the research was to explore students' profile characteristics, their learning experience and satisfaction with the quality of teaching, their needs and challenges, and their overall attitudes towards the unit.

A structured questionnaire was distributed to all students studying the unit. Students were informed about the purpose and confidentiality of the responses. Participation in the survey was voluntary. To encourage responses, students were not required to identify themselves on the questionnaire.

Structured questions were measured on the Likert scale. A few open-ended questions allowed students to express their personal feelings and attitudes to various issues, such as those aspects of studying Microeconomics that they found the most challenging, most enjoyable and the areas they need help. Students were given the opportunity to express additional comments to all questions concerning the content and delivery of lectures and tutorials. Overall, 124 valid responses were obtained. While the sample size is not large, it covers 64 percent of students enrolled in the unit.

Student profile

Gender representation in the sample was unusually well balanced, with 62 females and 62 males. The age was specified as a categorical variable, in four categories (1= '18-20', 2='21-25', 3='26-30' and 4='above 30'). Majority of the students (86.3 percent) were younger than 20 years. The remaining students (13.7 percent) were between 21 and 25 years. No participating students were older than 25 years. Thirty six percent of the respondents are international students.

A relatively high proportion of students (75.8 percent) studied economics before entering the university. This proportion is significantly higher than at the local VU campus where only 30.4 percent out of 181 students had a prior knowledge of economics (Havrila and Zhang 2007). In comparison, in a survey by Siegfried and Round (1994) 65 percent of pass students and 74 percent of honours students studied economics in high school. Millmow and Bookallil (2006) report 61 percent of students without any prior exposure to economics.

Results and discussion

Previous studies suggest that an increasing number of students typically spend less time on campus engaging in their academic and other university activities and increasingly more time in paid employment. For instance, in the study by Siegfried and Round (1994) involving 179 final year undergraduate economics students from 19 Australian universities, about 60 percent reported working while they attended university.

It is commonly believed that student employment responsibilities have adverse effects on their study experience and even the student retention rate Gabb *et al.* (2006). Pantages and Creedon (1975) found that full-time students who work more than 15 hours per week are more likely to leave study than those who work less than 15 hours per week. Furthermore, as indicated by McInnis (2001) students who worked part-time rated the quality of teaching, and other aspects of their first year experience, lower than students who did no work in the labour force.

Based on the sample evidence in this study, the highest proportion of students spend between 6 to 10 hours in paid employment. This is significantly lower than in a similar study, focusing on a local campus, where Australian students are reported to spend, on average, around 14 hours in paid employment (Havrila and Zhang, 2007). Just over twenty-five percent of students do not have any work commitments, compared to 16 percent of VU Australian students (See Table 1). Almost 16 percent of students work between 1 to 5 hours, 18.9 percent of students work between 6 to 10 hours and around 25 percent of students work more than 15 hours per week. Out of those, 15 percent work more than 20 hours per week. In contrast, around 45 percent of VU local students work more than 15 hours. Out of those, 21 percent work more than 20 hours (Havrila and Zhang, 2007). The work commitments of students studying Microeconomics at this offshore campus are also lower than those reported by McInnis and Hartley (2002) where Australian students were engaged in an average of 10 to 15 hours in paid work per week. They are, however, similar to those reported by Krause *et al.* (2005). In their survey, full time students were involved in 7 hours paid work per week, on average.

Responses to the question *How many hours per week do you study the subject?* revealed that over 85 percent of students study the unit for less than five hours per week. Out of those students, 54 percent study between one to two hours and 31.5 percent study between three to four hours. A very small proportion of students (1.6 percent), devote more than 6 hours to studying Microeconomics (see Table 1). In terms of gender, female students seem to spend relatively more hours per week than male students studying the unit. For instance, out of 67 who claimed to spend between one to two hours studying the unit, 55 percent are males and 45 percent are females. However, out of those who devote between three to four hours per week to studying economics, 59 percent are females and 41 percent are males. Similarly, in the subset of those who spend five or more hours per week studying the unit, 56 percent are females and 44 percent are males. Thus, based on the student responses, it appears that in subcategories with a higher number of hours spent on studying the unit, the proportion of females is higher.

A number of studies concerned with academic performance and its predictors indicate that female students usually outperform their male counterparts (Power, Robertson and Baker 1987; McKenzie and Schweitzer 2001). Following this suggestion, a Pearson χ^2 test was applied to test whether there is any association between one of the *motivational* factors, 'hours of study' and

'gender'. In addition, we examined the association between 'hours of study' and 'age'. However, based on the sample evidence we cannot confirm any statistically significant association between any two pairs of variables. Therefore, we do not present those results.

The survey responses revealed that 6.5 percent of students *read the prescribed textbook* before the lecture, compared with almost 18 percent of students on the Australian campus (Havrila and Zhang, 2007). However, the same percentage of students (43.5 percent and 43 percent, respectively) read the textbook after the topic was covered in the lecture.

The findings suggest that offshore students take exam preparation more seriously. A higher proportion read the textbook before the exam (see Table 1). This implication seems to be supported by another aspect, that is, more offshore students also read the lecture notes before the tutorial and the exam. Nearly forty-three percent of students seem to regularly prepare for a tutorial session and over fifty-two percent 'sometimes' prepare. The proportion of those who never prepare for tutorials is only 3.2 percent. A positive indication of motivation is that 54 percent of students ask questions in class. Seventy-one percent of respondents stated that they seek help from the lecturer/tutor in person and only less than 2 percent ask for help via email.

Just over 57 percent of students expressed their desire to study an economics subject. They *would study economics even if it were not compulsory*. This is very different from the survey findings by Marangos (2002a, b) where 78.2 percent of students expressed their dislike of economics. In the study by Millmow and Bookallil (2006) 97 percent of students stated that they were not enjoying their 'first exposure to economics'. Overall, approximately 75 percent of all students ranked their enjoyment of economics study as 'moderate, low or very low' (p. 227).

More than 73 percent of students expressed a positive experience in studying economics. Students' positive experiences are generally attributed to content, teaching staff and the social aspects. When asked what the *most enjoyable aspect* of studying the unit was, students' responses included ... *application to real life*. ... *The lecturer present is well (sic) that keeps you interested in the subject*, ... *We learnt how the economy works and interacts*, ... *Mr. Lindsay is cool*, ... *making friends*. On the other hand, comments such as *when it is finally all over* reflects a different level of experience in the unit.

It is evident that students' responses tend to support the view of those economists who endorse more practical strategies and more real-world applications (Bloch and Stromback 2002; Guest and Duhs 2002 cited in by Abelson (2005, p. 117). A large-scale survey conducted by Siegfried and Round (1994) indicates that the two key reasons why students enroll in an economics degree are their interest in the subject and anticipated better job prospects. The results from this study seem to be consistent with that view. Most students who expressed their interest in economics appreciate the relevance of economics to 'real world' situations. Thus, in order to generate and enhance students' interest in the economics unit and their positive first year experience it is important to demonstrate its real-world relevance. Based on their responses, students seem to feel that the lecturer's ability to illustrate the application of economic theory to real world problems is an essential indicator of good teaching.

Forty-four percent (55 of 124) of students responded positively to the statement, *I find it easy to get myself motivated to study this subject*. This applied to both female and male students,

with 54.5 percent of female and 45.5 percent of male respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

In the report, based on the survey of first year students, Siegfried and Round (1994) state that the most common complaints from students were insufficient advice regarding the requirements of the degree program, inadequate training in essay writing, and a lack of focus on how theoretical aspects of the units apply to 'real world' situations. Some students also felt that lecturers lacked interest in student learning/teaching. Paying greater attention to these issues is likely to improve the student retention rate. As pointed out by Rickinson and Rutherford (1995), the dissatisfaction with the course of study is sometimes the reason behind students' attrition.

Along with the above indications, this survey attempted to examine students' perception of some components relevant to the teaching and learning process. In particular, students were asked to express their *level of satisfaction* with the content and delivery of lectures and tutorials. In general, students rated their experience very favourably. Over 60 percent of students in the sample were satisfied with the content and nearly 55 percent were satisfied with the delivery of the lectures. A slightly higher proportion of students were satisfied with the delivery of tutorials (63 percent) and 57 percent were satisfied with the content of the tutorials. The findings from this survey are more optimistic than in the study by Millmow and Bookallil (2006) where 51 percent of students expressed dissatisfaction with the teaching style.

In addition, students were invited to discuss their experiences in the unit, such as whether they are given adequate opportunity to discuss issues relevant to the topic, in tutorials and whether they study/interact with other students.

Slightly less than 50 percent of respondents reflected positively on the statement, *The lecturer stimulates my interest in the subject*. Over 39 percent of students agreed (23 percent female and 16 percent of male students) and 15.6 percent disagreed with the statement. Forty four percent of respondents expressed a neutral attitude towards the statement *The lecturer stimulates my interest in the unit*.

According to the responses, 61 percent of students tend to interact with others. However, nine percent of respondents do not interact with other students at all. It appears that more male (32 percent) than female (29.5 percent) students tend to study/interact with other students.

Pantages and Creedon (1975) and Abbott-Chapman, Hughes and Wyld (1992) found that students with poor study skills are more likely to quit university or find the transition from high school to university more difficult. According to the findings in this study, a high proportion of students also perceive study skills as 'the most challenging aspect of studying Microeconomics'. In particular, exam preparation skills (46 percent of the sample) need some attention. Responses to the question regarding the type of further help needed were consistent with responses to the most challenging aspect of the subject. Forty-six percent of students indicated exam skills as the area in which they most needed help, followed by reading text (20.3) and note-taking skills (17.9 percent).

Tinto (1975) suggests that student motivation and academic ability and the social and academic qualities of the university enhance both academic and *social integration* into the university system. Tinto developed a student integration model which shows that if students

are not integrated into the university, they tend to remain less committed. The notion was supported by other studies, including Terenzini and Pascarella (1978) who found academic and social integration variables to be the most significant predictors of student attrition rates.

Summary and conclusions

The survey results presented in this paper indicate that almost 76 percent of students studied economics prior to entering the university. Just over 57 percent of respondents expressed that they would study economics even if it were not compulsory. The majority of students were satisfied with the content and the delivery of lectures and tutorials. This shows that the economics unit content and academics delivering the unit appear to be significant factors in students' positive experience of studying microeconomics as a large majority of students conceded that the lecturer and tutor were the stimulating influence. Nevertheless, 44 percent of the students expressed their self-motivation to study Microeconomics. Yet, only around 43 percent 'always', and around 53 percent 'sometimes' prepare prescribed tutorial questions. Just over 85 percent of respondents studied economics for less than five hours per week. About a half of those studied only between one to two hours per week. Around a quarter of students did not participate in paid employment, 35 percent respondents participated in paid employment for less than 10 hours per week and almost 16 percent worked for more than 20 hours per week.

Comments by students in this study reinforce the link between economics and 'real-world' situations. It is therefore a crucial factor in improving students' understanding of, and interest in, economics. As a consequence, the first year economics unit curriculum should reflect the fact that students expect and value the connection to 'real-world' situations. The findings of this study indicate that the offshore students' characteristics and their experience in many aspects vary from those of the local students. The implications for teaching identical economics unit at an offshore campus are to allow flexibility within the structure. In this regard, it is important that the approach be adapted to the diversity of students' profile, needs and inspirations, to enhance their success in the first year economics unit and overall first year experience. Therefore, when delivering Microeconomics at an offshore campus, it is important to consider the diversity of the cohorts and adapt the content and the delivery mode suitable to the student cohort, in accordance with the best teaching and learning practices.

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Appendix

Table 1: Student Responses

| Questions | Student Responses (%) | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------|------|------------------------|------|--------------------|------|-------------------|------|-------|------|---------|----|
| | 0 | | 1-5 | | 6-10 | | 10-15 | | 16-20 | | 20 plus | |
| Hours in the labour force/week | 25* | 16 | 15.3 | 6.1 | 18.5 | 13.8 | 11.3 | 16.6 | 8.9 | 22.6 | 15.3 | 21 |
| Hours studied the unit/week ¹ | 1.6 | 2.2 | 54 | 40.3 | 31.5 | 40.9 | 11.3 | 13.8 | 1.6 | 2.8 | | |
| I read the prescribed text | Before lecture | | After lecture | | Before exam | | Don't read | | | | | |
| | 6.5 | 17.7 | 43.5 | 43.1 | 36.3 | 27.1 | 12.9 | 11 | | | | |
| I read the lecture notes | On lecture day | | Before tutorial | | Before exam | | Don't read | | | | | |
| | 36.3 | 59.1 | 29 | 19.3 | 24.2 | 18.2 | 10.5 | 2.8 | | | | |

* In each column, the values on the left are for an offshore and the values on the right are for the local campus.

Table 2: The Most Challenging Aspects of and Help Needed Offshore

| The most challenging aspects | Cases | Percentage* |
|--------------------------------------|-------|----------------------|
| Reading textbook | 22 | 17.9 |
| Reading lecture notes | 22 | 17.9 |
| Participation in tutorial discussion | 14 | 11.4 |
| Test skills | 12 | 9.7 |
| Exam skills | 57 | 46.3 |
| Other | 5 | 4.1 |
| Help Needed in Study Skills | Cases | Percentage* of Cases |
| Reading textbook | 25 | 20.3 |
| Participation in tutorial discussion | 15 | 12.1 |
| Lecture note taking | 22 | 17.9 |
| Test/Exam preparation skills | 57 | 46.3 |
| Other | 7 | 5.7 |

* Due to mutually non-exclusive multiple responses to this question, the total percentage point is not 100.

¹ Outside the class attendance.