Perceptions of successful students: lessons for the First Year Experience.

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Abstract

We surveyed over 1300 successful undergraduates students from 12 disciplines and different diversity groups about the factors that have assisted them to progress in, and persist with their course. We show how the reflections of these successful students can inform institutional practices enhancing retention and progression through first year. The students' perceptions indicate that a focus on ensuring that students across all diversity groups are equally able to develop and use a variety of support networks (particularly peers), and strategies to assist students to clarify their personal goals would enhance the FYE.

Introduction

Increased access and widening participation with consequent increased student diversity has been a feature of higher education generally and of the "new generation' universities, in particular over the past three decades. Institutions have responded with a diverse range of strategies to aid student retention and progress (McInnes, 2003a). Today's students juggle interpersonal relationships, may have family responsibilities, mortgages and other financial commitments, work long hours, and may be coping with an unfamiliar culture and language. They have differing control of the multi-literacies needed to operate successfully in university settings. As a consequence of this increased diversity of students and their needs, we are moving well away from a uni-dimensional construct of the "typical" university student or university experience towards multi-constructs which have been termed 'student ecologies' or 'multiple selves' (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2003). While we recognise these multiple student constructs, we lack a sound understanding of them. All this is placing new demands on academics and challenging the way university courses are delivered, and the administrative and organisational frameworks in which they are delivered. At the same time, student perceptions of their learning journey reveal that universities may not be valuing diversity sufficiently when it comes to institutional policies and practices (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003).

The importance of the transition to university and the first year experience is acknowledged (Krause, Hartley, James and McInnes, 2005) and across the higher education sector a range of evidence-based programs and approaches are in place to help reduce the numbers of students who drop out of studies in the first 12 months (Darleston-Jones, Cohen, Hanould, Young and Drew, 2003; McInnes, 2003a). However, despite reference to an extensive literature on persistence, the studies really focus on retention for the most part, and there has been much less emphasis on actual successful progression through the later years of a degree. As a result we lack information on which to base indicators of effective student *progression* (Robinson,

2004). There are many factors impacting on students' lives that create conflict and dilemmas, which can impact on their progress. We know very little about how *successful* students resolve these conflicts and develop resilience. The need for individual institutions to understand the 'micro-ecology' of students over time, to understand how the complexity of social, academic, and cultural factors play out for the student within the specific institutional context is an urgent and emerging one (Krause et al., 2005; Leach and Zepke, 2003).

With this background, we obtained funding from the Carrick Institute to conduct a longitudinal study to document diverse successful students' perceptions of their learning journey through the latter part of their undergraduate course and into their first year in the workplace. A focus of the project was student diversity and the consequent multiple stories which might emerge. Through this project we hope to present to staff, new accounts of students' whole-of-degree experiences, providing insights into institutional factors that enhance or hinder progression. The first step in the project was to canvass students' willingness to participate in the longitudinal study through a questionnaire which would enable us to select students with diverse profiles and backgrounds. At the same time, we utilised this questionnaire to obtain students' perceptions about factors contributing to their success and persistence with their studies. Currently we are conducting focus groups and interviews with over 60 students who are part of the longitudinal study. In this paper, we present some initial analyses of the students' perceptions and describe how they might inform institutional strategies for improving the First Year Experience.

Methods

The university at which the research was conducted is one of the "new generation" universities, evolving from a College of Advanced Education in the 90's that, in turn, was formed from the amalgamation of long-standing teachers' colleges. The 3-page questionnaire was distributed to undergraduate students who were in their penultimate or final year of their degree. The first part of the questionnaire was quantitative and focussed on demographic data such as discipline, age, enrolment and student type, and various family background and spoken language details. The second qualitative section asked students the following open-ended questions:

1. Identify up to five factors that have helped you progress this far in your studies. How has each of these contributed to your progress?
2. Have you ever considered withdrawing from your studies?
3. If yes, list up to three most important reasons why you considered withdrawing and the reasons why you decided to stay?

The survey involved the collaboration of 33 staff across four campuses and students representing 12 disciplines. Completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and to maximise questionnaire returns, members of the research team personally contacted relevant staff and arranged to distribute the questionnaires directly to the students in the classroom. The response was excellent and resulted in a very high return rate, with 1353 students responding.

Questionnaire responses were digitally scanned using Cardiff Teleform software into an Excel database for easy export into SPSS (Version 14) for analysis. Each of the digitised qualitative responses was manually verified for accuracy. Only the first three responses relating to question 1 above were used in the analysis as it was questionable whether all students could reasonably provide more than three sensible responses. The student responses were

numerically coded into themes by the research team and Crosstab routines were applied to both single and multiple response data to describe response patterns by discipline and student diversity. From these response patterns, we were able to identify emergent themes underlying student persistence and resilience.

Results

Of the 1353 students who completed the questionnaire, 993 were females (73.4%) and 360 were males (26.6%). This is a similar profile to the general university population. The higher percentage of females reflects the range of disciplines included in the study, with Nursing and Education students dominated by females. There was a greater number of final year students (N=822 or 61%) than penultimate-year students (N=502 or 37%). All the diversity groups of concern to the project were represented in this initial survey (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1. Diversity of students who participated in the questionnaire (N=1353).

Diversity group	Percentage of students[1] (N)
International	5 (68)
Indigenous	1 (17)
Mature age[2]	68 (902)
First generation[3]	44 (587)
With parental responsibilities	16 (209)
With a self-reported disability	2 (24)
Academic discipline:	
Media and communications	15 (201)
Social Sciences/Psych/Social Work	10 (130)
Computing	2 (30)
Arts (English/History/Politics)	11 (146)
Business	7 (97)
Nursing	14 (187)
Natural Sciences	5 (75)
Education	23 (310)
Sports Science	13 (177)

1. The total percentage will exceed 100% as students could have multiple descriptors.
2. Mature age in this table = students >21 years of age.
3. First generation = first in immediate family to attend university.

Of particular note are the relatively high proportions of mature-aged students, those who represent the first of their family to enter university and those entering the university through non-traditional pathways. As has been shown for students elsewhere, the majority of our students in the sample work substantial hours in paid employment (Table 2). The results present the general response patterns for the entire students sample first, followed by a summary of the differences in outcomes by discipline or diversity group.

Support was the most commonly cited factor assisting progression with almost 50% of the responses identifying one or another form (Table 3). When this "support" was analysed

further, there were 5 main people-based sources - parents, friends (unspecified), student peers and university teaching staff, the last three sources being the most commonly cited.

Table 2. Demographics of students who participated in the questionnaire (N=1353).

Demographic characteristic	% of students (N)			
Age	<=20yrs	21-30yrs	31-40yrs	>40
	32 (428)	52 (693)	9 (116)	7 (93)
Type of study	Fulltime	Part-time		
	92 (1240)	8 (106)		
Entry pathway to ECU	TER	STAT	TAFE	Other
	50 (654)	15 (207)	13 (170)	22 (270)
Hours in paid employment	<=5	6-10	11-20	>20
	19 (249)	12 (156)	43 (568)	26 (339)

Table 3. Student-identified factors assisting course progression.
Values are the frequency of each response as percentage of the total number of responses.

Factor assisting progression	Percentage occurrence[1]
Support (from specific people such as financial motivation, assignments, living at home, encouragement, childcare, learning assistance):	43
… Parents	7
… Friends	5
… Family	12
…. Peers	9
…. Staff	10
Course-related issues (eg interesting content, learning/ environments, flexibility, online resources, good tutors).	11
Self-characteristics (time management, organization, motivated, determined, hours spent studying).	21
Goals/career aspirations (determination to obtain a degree, desire to be a teacher, want to have a well-paid job)	8
Employment-related (non-financial such as supportive employer, flexible work hours)	4
Scholarships	1
Previous study	2
Financial support (non-parental such as able to delay HECS, paid work)	3

1. These figures exceed the total number of students because the data is collated across three responses per student.

The parental support provided was identified as either directly financial (about one third of students mentioned this: *"Support from parents – payment of my fees*), or as other kinds of specified or unspecified support (eg living at home, emotional support such as encouragement or motivation, or just unspecified "support"). Family support included partners or spouses, children and other close family members *("Family – encouragement to continue"; "Family –*

financial and moral support"). Student peers and staff were each identified in about 10% of responses. Females cited "support" factors more often than males (44% compared with 39%) with higher frequencies of family and peers as their sources of support.

Just over one fifth of the students' responses identified one or more self-characteristics (eg time management, personal motivation, determination, ability to balance) as important in assisting their progression. After support, this was the second most cited theme. Once again there were gender differences with male students citing self-characteristics more often than females (26% compared with 19%).

Almost 40% of students had considered withdrawing from their course at some time during their studies. The reasons for considering withdrawal were varied and broadly distributed across a number of themes (Table 4). The most frequent themes were *extrinsic* to the university itself with financial issues ranked as the most cited. These included responses such as *"money – I need to work a lot to pay for my fees"* and *"financial hardship"*. Personal and family issues were very diverse. Almost one quarter of the responses identified a desire to be something other than a fulltime student (life choice conflicts) such as "*Desire to gain different life experiences eg. Travel"; "Don't like Uni life – prefer to work"; "Could make money now – easier way of life".* Students tended to cite university-related issues such as courses, services, resources and staff less often, though dissatisfaction with actual courses formed 13% of the responses.

Table 4. Student-identified reasons for considering withdrawing from their course.

Reason for withdrawal	Percentage occurrence [1]
Financial	38.0
Personal and family issues	26.4
Life choice conflicts with being a student	24.2
Life balance	18.3
Changes in goals, career aspirations	13.8
Stress	13.2
Dissatisfaction with course/units	13.0
ECU-related issues	9.6
Workload (Study)	9.3
Lack of academic success	9.1
Teaching staff	4.3
Lack of support	3.3
Job prospects	2.8

[1] Note: this column may exceed 100% because students could each identify up to three factors.

The reasons which students gave for remaining in their course despite considering withdrawing were very skewed towards those associated with the students' personal goals or career aspirations (Table 5). This theme dominated the responses and no other theme approached the frequency of citation of this one. Students commonly commented about their need to complete a degree *("Achieve a degree"; "Graduation"; "Want to finish my degree"*) or have a better future or specific career *("want to achieve my goal"; "The future will be better"; "Long term goals"*). Across both the disciplines and the difference diversity groups there was considerable consistency in the responses given for persisting in a course, and the same two themes (goals/career aspirations and personal attributes) led the rankings for all

cohorts but one. (The exception was students with self-reported disabilities who had, as their second –ranked factor for persisting, their interactions with the teaching staff). Across all the disciplines and diversities, personal goals/career aspirations remained uppermost.

Table 5. Student-identified reasons for persisting with study after considering withdrawal

Reasons for continuing	Percentage occurrence
Goals, career aspirations	79.0
Personal attributes	19.5
Support (other than financial)	13.2
Self-management/coping skills	12.3
Come too far to quit	8.1
Course flexibility	5.8
Interest in the course/discipline	5.8
Financial support	5.4

[1] Note: this column may exceed 100% because students could each identify up to three factors.

Discipline-related responses

There were only a few discipline-related response patterns which are noteworthy. Students in nursing and education disciplines cited family support twice as frequently as students in other disciplines (17% frequency compared with 6-9%) and there was considerable variation in the degree to which peers were cited as factors aiding progression, from rather low frequencies of 3 – 5% in Media, Arts and Business to higher frequencies of 12 – 14% in Social science, Computing and Nursing. The percentage of students who had considered withdrawal was highest in Arts and Humanities disciplines (Education 49%; Soc. Sci 45%; Arts 42%). There were suggestions of staff issues contributing to withdrawal consideration with Nursing and Computing students citing teaching staff as a reason for considering withdrawal, more often than other students (6% compared with 1-2%).

Student diversity groups and response patterns

We were particularly interested in any differences in student perceptions across the main diversity groups, and whether any differences might inform strategies for improving the FYE. There were differences in the response patterns of factors assisting progression. They showed as differences in the relative importance of factors *intrinsic* to the students themselves (personal characteristics and goals/career aspirations), indicative of self reliance, and the *extrinsic* factors of support and course-related features. Also, within the support factors themselves, different groups of students showed different profiles of support sources, indicating shifts in the importance of particular support sources (eg less responses related to family support and more towards peer support).

International students

For these students, support from other people (particularly peers) was less important for assisting progression (36% cf 44% for other students), and self-characteristics were cited more frequently (31% cf 20%), indicating increased self-reliance for continued progression. Very few international students (15%) had ever considered withdrawing from their course and

for those that had, personal/family issues and ECU-related issues were particularly common. They, more than other students, tended to cite "no choice" and the role of university staff as reasons for persisting.

Students with parental responsibilities

Students with parental responsibilities had an intrinsic-extrinsic profile for factors assisting progression similar to the total sample population, but within the support profile, family and peer support were far more frequently cited as important for course progression and together represented 30% of the 44% of total support responses. The importance of family for these students is not unexpected, and acknowledgement of the importance of partner/spouse assistance was a common response. Perhaps not unexpectedly, life balance and workload issues were cited more frequently as prompting withdrawal considerations (*"Juggling kids and home – university not supportive"; "Too many other competing responsibilities"; "Too much workload from all lecturers"*).

Indigenous students

These students indicated a much greater reliance on their own personal characteristics and goals to progress academically (16% cf 7% for the non-indigenous sample). These same factors were also the most frequently cited for persisting in their chosen course. Life balance issues and issues related to the university prompted withdrawal considerations in these students. This latter theme and the fact that support from others was less frequently cited as assisting academic progress (32% cf 43%), is worth further investigation given that there is a dedicated physical space, and staff resources for this student cohort.

Students with a self-reported disability

Like the international students, these students indicated a greater importance of self-reliance (30% cf 20%), and less reliance on peers for assisting their progression (6% cf 10%). Course-related issues were also cited almost twice as frequently by these students (19% cf 11%). When withdrawal was considered, family/personal issues were cited ahead of financial issues.

First-generation university students

For factors assisting their progression, and reasons for considering withdrawal, these students had the same profile of responses as the general student sample.

Mature age students

Mature age students (excluding parents, to avoid confounding these two variables) in the upper age brackets demonstrated considerably more reliance on self-characteristics (36% frequency) and less on support from family and friends (2%). These students in the upper age brackets also do better academically. Peer support however, remained frequently cited regardless of the age of the student. As the age of the student increased, personal/family issues and life balance were cited more frequently as reasons for considering withdrawal (21% frequency). Neither of these ranked highly in the responses of the youngest students (5%). The older students were also more likely to cite their personal attributes (such as managing or coping skills) as helping them persist. On the other hand, the younger students identified study conflicts (such as a desire to travel) and dissatisfaction with aspects of their

course as reasons for considering withdrawal, and their goals and career aspirations as reasons for persisting.

We were also able to extract response patterns for additional student groupings reflective of diversity in the student body, such as students with parents of differing education levels, students with alternative entry strategies and students whose home language is not English. Some of the more interesting outcomes with these groups were:
• *Level of parents' education*: Students with both parents educated to only primary school level were much more likely to identify self factors as important to their progression (29% of responses identified this as a factor). Peer support was cited most frequently by students with both parents educated to the secondary level and parental support by students with tertiary educated parents.
• *When home language is not English*: Students (local and international) whose home language was not English showed greater reliance on teaching staff for assisting progression (13% frequency cf 9%). For international students in this cohort, aspects of employment (eg employer assistance with English, with assignments) were cited more than twice as frequently as assisting progression, than by students with English at home. (This same factor did not score any differently in local students whose home language was not English, but there was a similar increased reliance on teaching staff.
• *Hours in paid work*: Students at this university are more likely to come from backgrounds where a university education is not the norm, and very likely to come via a non-TEE route (654 students). They also work substantial hours in paid employment on a weekly basis (Table 2) that is likely to hinder their ability to form support networks inside the university and interact with the teaching staff. When we investigated the response patterns of students by their hours of work, we found that as the hours of paid work increase, students cite parent support (11% cf 5%), course factors (14% cf 7%) and employment factors (eg flexibility of hours, supportive employers; 7% cf 1%) more often. That increasing hours of paid employment affects academic success, an effect discussed by other authors (McInnes, 2003c; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006) is shown by our data. Numbers of students gaining high distinctions decrease substantially with increases in paid work hours (from 11% for those working 5 hours or less to 2-3% for those working in excess of 10 hours).

Discussion

Support generally is well recognised as an important retention factor for first year students and particularly peer support through such avenues as peer mentoring and study groups. The successful students we surveyed rely heavily on one or more support networks, developed either inside or outside the university. The frequency with which different support networks are mentioned, and hence their apparent importance in contributing to successful progression vary considerably with the diversity of the student. International, indigenous and self-reported disability students have response patterns which suggest relatively less reliance on these support networks for successful progression, (particularly peer support) and more on self-reliance. For parents and first generation university students, the reverse is true, with family and peer networks being particularly important to the former student group.

The three student groups above, who mentioned support networks less frequently (32-36% of responses compared with 44%) have characterising features (language, culture or physical/learning impediments) which can make the students susceptible to marginalisation and, in the case of indigenous students, also greatly reduce the chances of progressing (Marks, 2007; McInnes, 2003b; Sawir, Marginson, Duemert, Nyland and Ramia, 2008). Their

reduced reliance on support networks for successful progression may reflect reduced opportunities to develop and maintain such networks. We are finding evidence of this in our interviews with international students for whom English is a second language. For these students, interactions with Australian peers, whether in or outside the classroom can be problematical for them. In the absence of other support networks, these students tend to mention assistance from staff and employers (for English assistance) more frequently.

A surprisingly high percentage of these progressing students had considered withdrawing from their studies at some point in their course. For the 500 students in the penultimate year (second year for most of them) this consideration would have occurred during their first year at university. The set of reasons the student gave for considering withdrawal includes factors which are well known to underlie attrition in first year and many of the most highly ranked factors are often outside the influence of the university (eg financial). There was some variation across the different student diversities in how the top four factors identified in Table 4 ranked, and the response pattern with age was the most distinctive. McInnes (2003b) refers to first year students as belonging to a different 'species' in terms of their very different learning needs and behaviours and this has some resonance in this study. The youngest students (those <=20 years) frequently cited conflicts with study, course dissatisfaction and changes to goals or career aspirations, all themes which suggest a lack of clarification of goals or lack of commitment to their chosen course of study. Each of these factors was outranked only by financial factors. Yet in the older age groups (>30 years), none of these factors ranked highly and personal/family issues and life balance (including workload issues) were the most frequently cited. The goal/commitment issues in this youngest age group is particularly interesting given the pattern of responses to factors enabling persistence. Across the entire student sample, it is the students' own commitment to, and clear clarification of personal goals and career futures that overwhelmingly influences them to persist, and this factor remains remarkably consistent across the student cohorts.

There has been little discussion of goal clarification in the context of the FYE, nor of the roles that clear goals and career expectations might play in enhancing persistence in a course of study. Holden (2005) interviewed a small group of education students and for most of these, persistence was enhanced by clear identification of long-term goals. The responses of these students were similar to those of our study – eg to obtain a degree, or to have a better job. We agree with this author that there is a need for strategies in first year that assist students with goal identification and clarification. Out data suggest that this is an important contributor to persistence.

Conclusions

The students' perceptions summarised in this study touch on many of the 'institutional conditions' required for student persistence, particularly those of commitment, involvement and support which Tinto (2005) has drawn from the persistence literature. Given the importance of peer networks, whether they are social or learning in their intent, special institutional efforts are needed to ensure that all these students have the same opportunities as other students for social involvement and development of these networks from first year. Tinot (2005) argues that the retention and persistence literature is interwoven and that institutional actions to improve retention will also improve persistence. The reverse is also true, and because persistence is such a student-centered construct, we would argue that an understanding of persistence from the view of the successfully progressing student is

particularly likely to provide sound, evidence-based initiatives to add to the retention strategy toolkit.

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