

‘It was all too much.’ The vulnerability of vocational education entrants in their first year of Bachelor of Early Childhood Education studies

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Abstract

First year student attrition is an ongoing concern for universities (Blunden, 2002), with students from non-traditional cohorts at particular risk (Cameron, 1999; Elliott, 2002; Conroy, Pearce & Murphy, 2000). This study examined reasons for vocational entry (TAFE) students’ non-completion of an early childhood undergraduate program. Almost 50% of non-completing students withdrew before finishing the equivalent of one semester of fulltime study. Using structured telephone interviews, thirty former non-completing early childhood students identified the factors relevant to their withdrawal. External factors frequently reported concerned challenges in managing work-family and study, followed by study-related reasons like difficulty with academic work, insufficient academic support, and work-professional experience conflict. Internal or personal factors like change in life/career goals, were also noted, but are not reported in this paper. Using a sociocultural framework, this paper provides insights into the barriers these students encountered and makes recommendations for improving transition, and retention beyond the first year.

In Australia, vocational training in children’s services is provided by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges and other organisations. A well established pathway exists at University of South Australia (UniSA) for those holding the relevant TAFE diploma to enter the early childhood education (ECE) undergraduate program to upgrade their qualifications to degree level. The recent Australian Review of Higher Education highlighted the importance of such pathways to increase the number of university graduates, specifically from disadvantaged or equity groups, to create a better educated and globally competitive workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). As originally intended, the UniSA program attracts equity group students, in particular, women from low socio-economic status (SES), rural/remote regions and Indigenous backgrounds. TAFE entry students in the UniSA ECE program, represent a growing proportion of overall student numbers, a trend also evident at other Australian universities (Dickson, 1999; Dickson, Fleet & Watt, 2000).

UniSA has acknowledged that a whole of school approach is needed to support disadvantaged cohorts, and seeks to optimise ‘participation, retention and success for particular equity groups who enter through alternative pathways’ (UniSA Strategic Plan). The current pathway provides access to the ECE program, however, it does not automatically address disadvantage. As Cameron (1999) has observed in relation to university entrance, ‘there is ...more to a party than sending out the invitations’ (p.4).

Student attrition rates remain an area for concern. The attrition rate for this ECE TAFE entry cohort, measured since 2001, was 30%, 10% higher than for other undergraduate students in the same program (UniSA Planning Data). The Northern Ireland ‘Staying the Course’ report observed there is a greater risk of attrition for ‘less well off’ commencing students than for students from professional middle class backgrounds (Bailey & Boroah, 2007). Thus, TAFE

entry ECE students, who largely comprise low paid child care workers (Masterman-Smith & Pocock, 2008), are at higher risk when compared with other students in the same award. They are likely to need more support to be successful at university than students from traditional cohorts. From a socio-cultural perspective these students do not arrive at university with cultural capital containing the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities that will equip them to be successful students.

The first year of university study is when these students are most vulnerable and feel the gap between institutions (Cameron, 1999; Whittington, Ebbeck, Diamond & Yim, 2009). Apart from coming from 'less well off' backgrounds and possessing fewer academic skills, there are other reasons for their vulnerability. The giving of significant course credit reduces program length and acknowledges the cohort's TAFE award completion. Although attractive to students, this credit may impact on their academic preparedness as they transition to university study. Credit means that students effectively begin their studies at second year level, missing the academic skill development that is usually embedded in the first year, note taking, academic writing, research, critical thinking and problem-solving (Conroy, Pearce & Murphy, 2000).

If the percentage of TAFE entry students who successfully complete the program is to be increased greater attention needs to be given to understanding the specific barriers to successful completion faced by these students. The purpose of the present study was to investigate TAFE entry students' given reasons for withdrawal from their ECE program prior to the completion of their degree and the factors that contributed to that decision. Long term, the goal was to develop strategies to improve retention.

In investigating students' decisions to leave university in their first year of their ECE program, Elliott (2002, p. 6) found that 'economic vulnerability, personal stressors and competing family commitments' ultimately were the driving factors in students' decisions to withdraw. Research findings to date indicate that rather than there being a single causal factor for attrition, students' decisions to leave their university studies are the result of a 'complex web of factors' (Elliott, 2002, p. 1). A broad examination of issues is therefore required because, as Blunden (2002, p. 1) states, attrition is not simply the 'weeding out [of] the academically weak'.

The factors that have been found to impact on students' capacity to successfully complete their studies can be classified into two main groups. The first group are external to the self, and include family and work pressures, and the study environment. The second group are internal factors, which include health and personal motivation, self-efficacy and self perception (Allen, 1999; Devonport & Lane, 2006; Tchen et al., 2001). It is acknowledged that internal and external factors are interrelated and contribute to student withdrawal. This paper will report on external factors as, from a university perspective, they lend themselves more easily to intervention.

A key external factor, the study mode undertaken, has been found to impact on study success. Program completion rates for students undertaking fulltime, internal study were found to be significantly higher when compared to those studying part-time or via distance education (Urban, Jones, Smith, Evans, McLachlan & Karmel, 1999).

The work and family circumstances of TAFE entry students may make distance, part-time study preferable but also increase the risk of attrition. Students experience difficulties in managing study demands in addition to work, home and family commitments (Blunden, 2002;

Elliott, 2002). It may be that students underestimate the impact of university study on their lives.

Other external factors concern the pedagogy and delivery of higher education programs (Callan 2005; Teese 2002), and how well they match the expectations and needs of students undertaking the TAFE-university transition (Dickson 1999; Elliott 2002). The transition between TAFE and university is a difficult one for many students who experience a degree of apprehension and uncertainty regarding the standard of work required (Conroy et al., 2000; Dickson, 1999).

TAFE students entering higher education have reported the following difficulties in their transition to a higher education environment: significant disparity in teaching pedagogy, bigger classes, more detached staff-student relationships, difficulty in establishing supportive peer relationships, different academic expectations and assessment practices, as well as the depth and complexity of theoretical emphases (Conroy et al., 2000; Dickson 1999). TAFE assessments are located in a competency based framework that focuses on practical skill development, and ongoing assessment, and often use short answer style questions. University courses, on the other hand, employ fewer and larger assessments that are graded, require research and academic writing skills and demand theoretical depth (Conroy et al., 2000). In addition, university requirements may not always be perceived as sufficiently flexible to allow students to easily accommodate their studies with other commitments.

Available data indicates that attrition rates are generally stable, despite efforts to address the issue through improved orientation/transition programs and support services (Blunden 2002). Therefore, any model that seeks to improve retention must have a broad approach. Stewart and Rawrheti (2004) have argued for the use of the Beatty Guenter model (1994) to support retention of Indigenous students in New Zealand. The model is consistent with a sociocultural approach and proposes five areas in which specific strategies can be applied: Sorting (criteria and preparation to enter university); Connecting (developing a sense of being part of the university community); Supporting (practical support and access to services); Transforming the student (via skills development and academic advice) and; Transforming the institution (through staff development and curriculum design to improve teaching and learning outcomes). Two universities, one in New Zealand (J. Stewart, personal communication, August 14, 2009) and the other in Scotland (V. Johnston, personal communication, August 14, 2009) have partially implemented the model. Stewart reported that retention rates for Pacific Islanders have improved by six percent, however she cautioned that implementation is only partial, so a direct relationship cannot be assumed. Both Stewart and Johnston commented that universities are reluctant to change existing structures or to commit the required resources to fully implement this model, preferring easy, economical measures. Although the model is yet to be fully tested it remains a useful framework from which to consider intervention strategies.

The aim of the present study was to improve understanding of the specific issues surrounding TAFE entry student attrition from the UniSA ECE program, with a view to developing effective and targeted strategies to improve student retention. Specifically, the following research questions were posed. What reasons do TAFE entry students who have withdrawn (formally or informally) from an ECE undergraduate program identify as most important to the failure to complete their university program? What other contextual factors, if any, are relevant to their withdrawal?

Method

Participants

Between 2001 and 2007 seventy two TAFE entry students (Diploma in Children's Services graduates), either formally withdrew or failed to reenrol in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, and were discontinued. Of this group, 30 (response rate 41.6%) former students, all women, participated. At the time of withdrawal, 22 of the sample comprised former students from rural (n = 6), remote (n=5) and low SES metropolitan locations (n=11). The remainder were from Adelaide metro (n=6) or interstate (n=2).

Twenty five participants were studying in distance mode, with the remainder in internal or mixed mode. Twenty participants were studying part-time. The remainder were studying full time (n=6), or had reduced their study load during the course of their study (n=4). Age ranges of participants were 20-24 years (n=7), 25-29 years (n=7), 30-34 years (n=6), 35-39 (n=5), 40-44 years (n=4) and 45+ (n=1). The participants reflected the characteristics of the population of students who had withdrawn with one exception: a higher proportion of distance students participated in the study.

Measure, procedure & analysis

The interview protocol comprised 5 point Likert-type (1- unimportant to 5-very important) scales to allow participants to indicate the importance of each factor in their decision to withdraw from the program, and open ended questions for participants to explain their response. The survey included the following.

- Demographic details, including hours of paid work, reasons for entering program.
- TAFE and University experiences: perceived success; factors that facilitated or challenged participants' capacity to undertake studies.
- Reasons for withdrawal.
- Factors influencing participants' withdrawal:
 - *External (work and family)*: managing study with home/family/work commitments; social-emotional support received; logistical factors; financial factors,
 - *External (university related)*: structural; staff-student relationships; match between student expectations and university requirements; social integration, and,
 - *Internal (personal)*: perceptions of academic ability; cultural/linguistic background; motivation to continue university studies; age; interest in returning to university.

Once University ethics requirements were satisfied, the researcher attempted to contact all eligible former students by telephone. The interview began with a scripted introduction outlining the purpose of the research. The interviews' conversational style allowed the researcher to seek clarification and to probe as appropriate. Data were either input directly or transcribed verbatim into the UniSA data online collection tool, TellUS. University data about participants' program of study (number of courses enrolled, course grades) and age were accessed and analysed. Frequencies were calculated for participant ratings for each of the Likert items. Responses to the open-ended questions were read, categorised by issue mentioned, and frequencies calculated. Due to low sample numbers, statistical analysis, and analysis by equity group was not feasible.

Results discussion and recommendations

The aim of the study was to identify the reasons TAFE entry students left the ECE program before completion, and the factors they reported as influential to their decision.

Analysis of the demographic data revealed that the first year of study is critical to student retention. The average number of semesters in which participants had enrolled was 2.5 (range 1-5 semesters). Fourteen of the participants left their studies having enrolled in only four courses or less, equivalent to completing a maximum of one semester of full time study. Given that participants passed 57.1% (92) of the 161 courses in which they had enrolled, they were not necessarily failing students. These findings highlight the vulnerability of students at the commencement of university studies.

When asked specifically about their reason for discontinuing, participants cited a primary reason, and sometimes a secondary one. The reasons were categorised into external or internal factors, and then by reason type and frequency (see Table 1).

Table 1: Frequencies of reported reasons for withdrawal from program

Factor	Primary reason	Secondary Reason
External: work-family reasons		
Difficulty meeting -family-study commitments	1	1
Difficulty meeting work-study commitments	5	1
Difficulty meeting -family-work- study commitments	4	2
Subtotal	10	4
External: university-study reasons		
Difficulty with academic work	3	1
Lack of academic support	3	
Work-practicum conflict	1	1
Program dissatisfaction	1	1
Single incident	1	1
Subtotal	9	4
External: employment-financial reasons		
Lack of employment opportunities	1	
Gained employment		3
Financial		1
Subtotal	1	4
Internal: personal reasons (not addressed in this paper)		
Change in life/career goals	5	
Illness-death	4	
English language limitations	1	
Age	0	0
Subtotal	10	0
Total	30	12

Although participants' ultimate decision to withdraw from the program may have been impelled by one specific reason, further analysis revealed an in-depth picture; one that captured the complexity of the factors that impacted on students' capacity to successfully complete their program. The principal external factors are now discussed.

Participants (n=14) reported work-family related responsibilities as a major reason for withdrawal from studies (see Table 1). Those who found managing work and study too difficult (n=6) included Chelsea who expressed her deep commitment to her work. *'It was time consuming and important to me. It was all too hard'*. Two participants withdrew due to problems managing family with study commitments. Verity said, *'I had 3 small children at*

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the time so that made it difficult. I think I took on too much'. Six participants reported that balancing the demands of both their employment and family obligations alongside their studies became overwhelming. Helen stated simply, *'It just became too difficult juggling everything – study, work and family'*. That eleven participants were in the age range 25-35, key family establishing years, confirms this point. The considerable commitments of this group compromised their capacity to focus on their studies, unsurprising given 24 participants were engaged in paid employment of at least 20 hours per week, with 14 of these working at least 30 hours per week at the time.

When explanatory comments were examined, *lack of time* was the predominant theme. Participants tended to underestimate or have unrealistic expectations about their individual capacity to find the additional time and energy required to meet course requirements. Chelsea commented, *'I would have to juggle full time work. I would also have to do some work at home...All I was doing was work and study'*. The lives of some participants were already very full prior to commencing the program. Amy said, *'I was working full time, studying externally and I had small children. It was very busy and the expectations of the child care centre [where I worked] were very high'*. The option of studying by distance which permits students to continue their family and working lives and maintain involvement in the field may lead students to think that they can do everything. Daina recounted, *'[It was] a very difficult thing to do. I was working, have a husband and two small children. I looked at the work I needed to do - didn't look that much - but I would get home from work feeling tired...'*

Participants (n=13) also reported university study factors as a major reason for withdrawal (see Table 1). In order of frequency, participants mentioned the level of academic work, the perceived lack of academic support, managing the work-practicum conflict, a single incident, and program dissatisfaction.

Three participants explicitly stated that the reason for their withdrawal was difficulty in managing the university academic requirements. Alison, 22, summed it up in saying, *'Probably, in the end, it was just too hard – all of that academic stuff and time'*. Previous research has already highlighted some of the difficulties TAFE students face when entering higher education (Conroy et al., 2000; Dickson, 1999). A major concern for participants was the difficulty of transitioning from the vocational to higher education study environments. Although participants expected that studying at university would be much like TAFE, their actual experiences were very different. Twenty five participants rated themselves as 'Good' or 'Very Good' students at TAFE. In contrast, twenty participants rated their success in their university studies as 'Weak' or 'Very Weak'. There were two frequently cited reasons for feeling unsuccessful at university.

- Academic writing and expectations – Daina said, *'At TAFE the content was basic rather than challenging. I received good marks. I completed all the work on time. I was good at what I did... Standards in terms of writing were very different at uni. There was a more professional approach to assessment writing and referencing'*. This comment illustrates the gulf between the TAFE and university study expectations.
- Distance study mode - Feelings of isolation and frustration about problems accessing support, information and resources were keenly felt. Karen reported, *'It would have been different if I had been attending the campus regularly – to have the opportunity to ask questions... rather than being on your own with a text book'*. Amy, a distance student said, *'I didn't understand what I was meant to do – it was a constant struggle'*.

Lack of academic support was the primary reason for three students' withdrawal. As Pamela, a 33 year old participant said, *'Basically as a remote area, external student, it was not being able to get support quickly or not at all. When I did seek help it wasn't that useful'*.

Practical aspects that were reported by some participants as being particularly difficult to negotiate included using library and online resources. Pam commented, *'Internet access was limited [dialup]. There was not an adequate introduction for use of online study. I don't think I used the library'*. Students varied in their ability and confidence to access these resources, with Karen, 31, stating, *'It was a confidence thing about what was expected.... I quite liked the availability of online email – [but] I probably felt a bit intimidated asking questions... I didn't participate in online support because I didn't want to be thought of as stupid'*. Delays in assignment return, course materials and library books arrival were also issues that affected some participants' capacity to study effectively. Erin, 37, reported. *'[It was] all a bit last minute knowing what textbooks to get, etc'*.

Eighteen participants rated relationships between staff and students as somewhat or very important in their decision to withdraw from their ECE studies. Maria, a mature age student reported, *'I opened my stuff and thought 'Oh my God. What do I do? Who do I ring? I don't know any of my lecturers'*. The majority of participants reported that they had developed close and supportive relationships with TAFE lecturers. Tanya, 21 recounted, *'the lecturers helped me to understand what was going on. I made time to sit down with lecturers to find out how to improve assignments ... and they helped to develop my understanding'*. At university participants missed this personal tutoring and mentoring, leading to dissatisfaction with the support provided. Melanie, commented, *'Sometimes they didn't support you all that well....They didn't want to help you or answer questions'*. Accessing staff in a timely manner could also be difficult for distance students. Full time worker Nerida, commented, *'It was so difficult... I only had a small time frame to study in each day and couldn't get a reply when I needed it'*. Sometimes participants' lack of confidence, sense of isolation, and uncertainty about expectations impacted on their ability to access available and helpful support. Helen commented, *'Being so remote, I just found it hard - I don't think I utilised the phone as much as I could have. I felt really alone'*. Pam said, *'I found that assessment requirements were not well clarified - so it was not until assignments were returned with feedback that we requested help... the help we got was too late'*.

The need to maintain ongoing work commitments and undertake university practicums was a problem for two participants. They perceived the university requirement for block placements to be inflexible. Daina said, *'My workplace was willing to compromise a bit but the uni was not - no go for anything other than full time practicums'*. Although students are informed about these requirements at the beginning of their program; participants did not always appear to understand the practical implications. Amy reported, *'I had to do prac but I wasn't able to leave work and I couldn't do it at my workplace. Financially I couldn't afford to leave my job'*. With higher education now attracting 'more diverse, mature and less academically elite student body' (Elliott, 2002, p. 3), study may become a luxury that students cannot afford.

One participant worried about job prospects, while three said acquiring new or permanent employment was a secondary reason for their withdrawal. Felicity reported, *'I got the opportunity for a full time permanent position. It was a chance to start afresh'*. For Felicity, gaining secure employment outweighed her desire for improved qualifications.

In sum, these findings are consistent with those of Conroy et al. (2000), that studying at TAFE provided a more hands on, flexible, nurturing and supportive experience for students.

The university study context does not always facilitate a smooth transition to higher education for TAFE entry students because of the greater expectations for independent study and higher academic requirements (Conroy et al., 2000). Since needed skills are not always fostered through vocationally oriented TAFE programs, students tend to experience considerable 'culture shock' when moving on to university study and adapting to the 'different styles of teaching and learning' (Dixon, 1999, p. 3).

Consistent with Whittington, Glover and Stephenson (2006), relationships were also found to be important to distance TAFE entry student study success. In the absence of supportive relationships, either from lecturers or peers, students' isolation appears to impact on their confidence. Overall, it appeared that the perceived benefits of studying by distance (*'I could work part time and could do my study around my work and children'*) were offset by the challenges it presented. The majority of participants (n=25) who withdrew from the ECE program were distance students, highlighting that this mode of study is a risk factor (Urban et al., 1999).

The following recommendations focus on increasing TAFE entrant retention in university undergraduate programs. They propose creating structures to improve transition and the study experience of this cohort, in terms of both student satisfaction and developing student capacity. The Beatty-Guenter model (1994) employs a dynamic, contextual framework, suitable for possible intervention strategies that focus on building student capacity. The model offers previously mentioned strategies in five areas, beginning with 'sorting'.

'Sorting' concerns the criteria used to select university students and includes pre-entry programs that support students. Ongoing dialogue with TAFE lecturers, specifically those who teach the Diploma of Children's Services, including in distance mode would identify ways to build a smoother pathway between awards. Orientation sessions specifically designed for TAFE entry students, lead by the university's academic learning support and program staff before the commencement of the study year give the students an introduction to university and build self efficacy. Students are shown how university study differs from TAFE, and learn to manage their time, use learning resources, seek support, and build networks. As not all commencing students are able to attend these introductory sessions, an initial self paced learner 'package' would give students a list of activities and resources to assist their initial transition and serve to reinforce ideas presented through the orientation process. It is unrealistic to expect, however, that the full transition process can be achieved in one event.

'Connecting' focuses on developing students' 'sense of belonging' to the university community, an aspect that is particularly important for distance students who often do not have the same opportunities to develop relationships with peers and staff available to internal students. Consistent with Dickson (1999) and Whittington et al. (2006), developing strategies for connecting students with their peers should be investigated. These connections can be achieved through mentoring programs. Developing an online general discussion board for all TAFE entry students, may also serve as an initial step to build connections and confidence in using online resources. Already in place are practical supports such as access to services like personal counselling and childcare (especially for mature women students) which make their everyday lives more conducive to study, however the cutting of the compulsory student union fees has reduced such supports.

'Transforming the student' concentrates on providing academic advice and services to develop students' academic skills. Regular communications with lecturers can be difficult given staff workloads and student availability. Teese (2002) argued that 'less successful and

less confident learners need more frequent feedback, more accessible staff, and teaching that is sensitive to individual differences' (p. 2). The appointment of a staff member specifically allocated to distance students could provide the necessary overview support required (D. Hine, personal communication, August 14, 2008). The role, however, is one where students would be supported to develop strategies effective for them. The allocation of course-specific tutors for distance students in each course should be considered, with initial priority given to the first year when most attrition occurs. Like an internal tutor, s/he would facilitate student learning and engagement (D. Hine, personal communication, 2008). The employment of a range of information technologies like online discussions, DVDs and videoconferencing could also enhance learner engagement.

'Transforming the institution' is realised through staff development and curriculum design to improve teaching and student learning outcomes. Lecturers would benefit from specific training to increase their awareness of the issues surrounding attrition and how they could help to support beginning vocational entry students. Course materials which provide the framework for study within each course should be presented in a consistent and clear style so that students do not need to continually adapt to the very different styles of individual lecturers. In addition, online support materials could be developed to sit alongside the basic course materials, accessed by students on a needs basis. In the words of a participant lecturer in a related study '*Having good materials and maintaining contact with students coupled with lecturers who are effective in providing support are crucial factors for teaching externally*' (Whittington et al., 2006).

The present study provided insight into the reasons why TAFE entry students had left the ECE degree program, and the challenges they encountered. Participants left the program for a variety of reasons which included having to manage their studies alongside existing family and employment responsibilities, to facing the obstacles associated with meeting university and academic expectations. Consistent with Dickson, Fleet and Watt (2000), undertaking early childhood teacher education programs at an older age, part-time, and via distance delivery mode puts students at risk, particularly if they are working long hours. Students begin with the expectation that they will be successful in their studies and that they will be able to effectively manage the demands of university study alongside their existing work and family responsibilities. In practice, the 'culture shock' experienced in the transition from TAFE to university study, coupled with, for some, the difficulties encountered in studying by distance can leave students feeling isolated and overwhelmed. Although having fiscal implications for universities, these students need a well resourced capacity building framework upon entry that continues to a lesser degree throughout their program. As Melanie, 28, stated, '*I guess that the whole network [of support services] is needed [for us] to complete the degree*'.

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