

‘Wanna be’ tertiary transfer students: The experience of two transitions

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Abstract

Increasing tertiary entrance scores and competition for niche programs results in undergraduate students looking for alternate pathways to their preferred program. One such program at Flinders University has seen an increase in students using the first year of the Bachelor of Health Science (BHS) as pathway to the paramedic major. Students who self-identify as ‘tertiary transfers’ were asked about their tertiary transfer experience as they endeavoured to realise their aspirations of ‘wanna be’ paramedics or dietitians¹. These students utilised the Flinders Link policy, whereby if they achieve a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 6.0 or greater after completing a full time load (36 units) they have a guaranteed place in their destination program. This research project uses a questionnaire, interviews and focus groups to determine the support required for tertiary transfer students. This presentation reports the initial findings of this project.

Following on from Reynolds & Kutileh (2010), this ethics approved project seeks to further research the experience of tertiary transfer students. To our knowledge there has been little Australian based research on the experience of students transitioning to other undergraduate programs. Some research has been undertaken in the United States of America (USA) on students moving from vocational or community colleges to four year degree programs (Berger & Malaney 2003). Berger & Malaney (2003, p 15) describe a ‘transfer shock’ experience which can be countered by supporting students with academic and peer programs.

At Flinders University, with the Flinders Link Policy, students who enter various programs are eligible to transfer to another program after a full year (36 units) after achieving the stipulated GPA. Increasing the flexibility and alternate entry points and paths into university recognises students who come from non-traditional backgrounds (Bradley et al.2008). Further, the recommendation from Bradley et al. (2008, p xxiii) suggesting uncapped student numbers into programs is yet to be realised nor is the full impact on university programs. Despite Bradley et al.’s (2008) premise of broadening participation in higher education this practice will increase the numbers of students transfer to other courses after the completion of there first year..

This project documents the student experience as they transition from the Bachelor of Health Science to their preferred program. By documenting the student experience, this research will understanding the various issues of student support, curriculum development, assessment and learning as students attain their desired objective. Reynolds & Kutieleh (2010) highlighted the successful relationship building between a pathway program and student support service such as the Student Learning Centre.

In order for students to realise their aspirations, in this case, transferring to their destination program, in light of widening participation, specific teaching and learning support needs to be

¹ Entry into the Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics (BNS) is not eligible for the Flinders Link policy however students are able to apply for a lateral transfer after their second year in the BHS program

in place. The results from 2010 student cohort, of the 28 students who identified as ‘wanna be²’ paramedic program aspirants, 25 were successful. Of the 25 students, 15 achieved a GPA of 6.0 or greater and were guaranteed a place in the BHS(P) program, with 10 students gaining entry through the competitive general admission based on their GPA which was less than 6.0. Given these results, a research project is in place aims to describe the transition experience of those students who gain entry into a pathway program with a view to transfer to another program.

Background of developmental theories

Research into student performance focuses on positive self-regulating behaviours such as goal setting, time management, social connections and study behaviours (Wilson & Lizzio 2008). Students who enter into the pathway programs are firm in their espoused desire and aspiration to transfer into their designation program. Arnett’s (2000) developmental theory ‘Emerging Adulthood’ draws on the work by Erikson’s (1980) life cycle stages. While Erikson suggested that identity formation occurs in late adolescence, Arnett’s (2000) ‘emerging adulthood’ theory now suggests that this stage is filled with ambiguity as they navigate diversity and instability due to associated financial and emotional pressures.

From 2012 with increasing diversity and wider participation in higher education, students will be looking for alternate pathways to their destination and preferred degree programs. Therefore as students navigate through the various stages of their study program, this journey can be conceptualised and theorised as not one, but two transition experiences. The first transition will be gaining entry into their pathway program, with the second transition being gaining entry into their destination and preferred program. Arnett (2006) suggests for the ‘emerging adult’ identity formation occurs parallel to goal attainment, which for this demographic is filled with instability and competing demands.

Methods

This study was conducted in four phases which consisted of:

- (1) University Research Committee ethics approval for the study and access to students;
- (2) a mixed methods data collection approach including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaire which included Likert responses and short answer responses to students who intend to transfer and those that have successfully transferred into their preferred program
- (3) data analysis including thematic analysis of interview and focus group transcripts and statistical analysis of the questionnaire
- (4) development of a conceptual framework from which describes the student experience as they transition from one program to another.

In previous years, approximately 40 students self-identify as ‘tertiary transfers’ at the BHS Orientation session. These students will be contacted to volunteer as participants in the

² ‘Wanna be’ in this context is not intended as spurious connotation or imply ludicrous aspiration or intention; rather it highlights their ambition and is seen as a term of endearment.

research project. In addition, those students who were successful in gaining entry into their preferred program in 2011 will be also be contacted such as those in the BHS (Paramedic).

Findings

Initial findings indicate that tertiary transfer experience, that despite being hard work and stressful, ultimately rewarding. Emerging from the data were issues such as time management, remaining focussed on the goal and connections. .

Balancing paid employment and study commitments was a strong theme for a successful tertiary transfer experience. Students commented they had to make various decisions to sacrifice attending or participating in various social commitments with friends, especially those that were not studying, was particularly difficult. However, what was apparent was the strong focus on the goal of achieving their transfer was central to the decision to forgo the short term social commitment for the need to commit to their studies.

At times the demands of paid employment became overwhelming which significantly impacted on their sense of managing their workload. Having a strong sense of purpose and the goal of high academic achievement meant the decision to reduce paid employment hours was required to keep up to date especially with high workload topics. Various study strategies were used to successfully manage the demands of second year topics which were more academically challenging for those students in their first year at university. This included collecting research material around a central theme which could be used in their various topics.

Forming a strong support group with their tertiary transfer peers was particularly important for not only their first year transition but for their second year experience when commencing in their preferred program. The strong focus of the collective experience of being a transfer student or 'wanna be' meant that students were able to form partnerships in topics which required group work. What was challenging for some students who were unable to form groups with other transfer students was the additional pressure of ensuring the other students were empathetic to the need to perform well. Developing good relationships with teaching staff, especially tutors, was seen as beneficial in assisting students in clarifying assessment expectations.

The support of their fellow 'wanna be's' after transferring into their preferred program was equally important. For many students, the remaining program of study condenses a three year major into two years. The additional pressure of taking first and second year major topics was eased by having the support of other tertiary transfer students, both in class and for additional study sessions which involved practicing clinical skills.

Implications

In light of the Bradley Review of Higher Education (2008), the widening of participation in higher education, the BHS program is not unique in being a feeder or pathway program for students who are seeking to enter their preferred or destination program. Therefore, this research, to our knowledge, this pathway has been increasingly popular over the last five years as the entry score for niche vocational programs has become increasingly competitive. In gaining an understanding of the student experience, insight for course administrators, academics, student support services can then assist in enhancing a successful first year

experience for this group of students. This will have a flow on effect of ensuring that students are retained and attrition rates are minimised.

This cohort of tertiary transfer students have demonstrated mature highly regulated behaviours which ensure their success (Wilson & Lizzio 2007). For these students, they have a strong sense of purpose as they work incrementally toward their goal of achieving the desired grade point average to ensure that they have a guaranteed place in their desired program.

Outcomes of FYHE session

Given that previous FYHE conferences have addressed a number of issues in this paper such as transition experiences, building partnerships, academic support programs, by drawing on the uniqueness of this case study highlights how first year student's transition experience can occur more than once. Further it is perhaps an indication of the importance of not isolating one such issue, but realising that the multiplicity of issues which first year students experience. In revisiting existing principles of the first year experience – creating supportive environments for success as well as pedagogically - this paper highlights the importance of the totality of the transition experience.

Session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 mins): Consider the question: what is the experience of a tertiary transfer student? Do we need to change the way we think about the transition experience for first year at university tertiary transfer student given their change in program?

Facilitators (7 minutes): Outline of tertiary transfer policy and program initiative at Flinders University and the reporting of initial findings from the project.

Paired discussion (7 mins): Ask pairs of participants to brainstorm the issues of tertiary transfer students within their own institutions and discuss how the initial findings can add value to participant's programs and their home institutions.

Facilitators + Whole group discussion (10 mins): Draw together ideas from floor – what has come up that has not been part of Flinders experience so far that may be incorporated in Flinders' and participant's programs to assist the tertiary transfer student experience.

References

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