

‘Don’t crush my dream!’ A thematic analysis of appeal letters written by students who have been asked to ‘show cause’ for academic poor performance

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Abstract

This project thematically analysed the letters written by students who were asked to explain their poor academic performance, hence being asked to ‘show cause’ under the university’s student progress policy. The letters were received by the administrative committee whose members assess the merits of the individual student case for progressing with their studies. The de-identified letters were analysed for various factors or events which contributed to the student’s poor academic performance. The sample of students was drawn from programs in the Faculty of Health Science, with letters submitted in the 2010 calendar year. Being able to identify the various factors from a first hand account will assist administrators, academics, and counsellors on matters relating to the first year experience, student support, retention and attrition in enhancing a successful experience and transition to university.

Research into student performance focuses on positive self-regulating behaviours such as goal setting, time management, social connections and study behaviours (Wilson & Lizzio 2007). These behaviours are important in the transition into higher education where there is a shift to being responsible and self-directed for their learning goals. In order to achieve success, students are advised to regulate their behaviours by limiting their paid employment, creating supportive networks, and connecting with the online learning environment amongst others (Wilson & Lizzio 2007). This project examines those factors impact upon student progress which will be beneficial for university academic and administration staff in the transition experience and ‘at risk’ of attrition (Kift 2009; Nelson, Duncan & Clarke 2009).

The various undergraduate programs in the Faculty of Health Sciences include: nursing, midwifery, paramedic, nutrition, dietetics, speech pathology & audiology, health promotion, health management and disability studies. In addition, post-graduate programs include medicine, and more recently occupational therapy and physiotherapy. These programs are highly competitive and scientifically based requiring the student to achieve a high grade point average to transfer or remain in their chosen program.

The 2009 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) report indicates that Flinders University students are on average spend 12 hours / week studying, with only 16% spending 20 hours / week on their learning (Flinders University 2009). On average complete 3 pieces of work with less than 1 hour / week spend time on task, with 94% completing 1 piece of work spending more than 1 hour on this task. The majority (82%) of Flinders University students say that they keep up to date ‘most of the time’, similarly 80% ‘usually complete’ their readings & assignments. Over 75% of Flinders University students are engaged in paid employment of an average of 11 hours / week, while spending 15 hours on campus and 7 hours on campus when not in class (Flinders University 2009).

The Faculty of Health Science Student Progress Committee is an administrative committee which has as its terms of reference to assess the individual merits of students who have been asked to demonstrate why they should continue in their program of study. The committee is comprised of academics from the various schools in the faculty as well as a student representative. The committee meets seven times a year, typically after the relevant examination periods. Under the relevant teaching and assessment policy, the committee has a number of possible options for consideration: no action taken; restricted or amended program of study; deferring re-enrolment for a period of time with automatic right to recommence or preclusion from study up to a period of five years. Students have the right to appeal these decisions (Flinders University 2010).

Background of developmental theories

Various social, emotional and cognitive developmental theories can provide a basis when analysing the data collected in this project. Drawing on the work of Erikson's (1980) life cycle developmental psychology, Arnett (2000) describes the period of 'emerging adulthood' in today's modern society has distinctive characteristics. These characteristics include delays in marriage, frequent job changes and liberal sexual attitudes and practices. Key transitional milestones to adulthood, including leaving the parental home and marriage are now noted to be into occurring from an individual's late 20's (Arnett 2004).

'Emerging adulthood' as conceptualised by Arnett, is now filled with ambiguity as they navigate through demographic diversity and instability due to associated financial and emotional pressures. What becomes apparent to the emergent adults are two key characteristic qualities: acceptance of responsibility for one's self and making independent decisions, with financial independence also a factor (Arnett 2000).

With failure, in this case academically, the implications for responsibility, independent decision making and ultimately future financial independence challenges the key development of adolescence of identity formation (Arnett 2010; Erikson 1980). Identity formation and self esteem runs parallel to goal attainment (Arnett 2006). Therefore, success at university is important for the learner, as failure to regulate their life with instability and competing demands of paid employment, social activities and family responsibilities (Arnett 2006).

Method

Research phases

This study was conducted in four phases which consisted of:

- (1) University Research Committee ethics approval for the study and access to de-identified letters from the 2010 calendar year;
- (2) thematic data analysis of letters;
- (3) development of a conceptual framework from which describes the inter-relationships between the various factors which impact upon student academic performance.

Participant Sample

The letters were drawn from the 2010 calendar year which were received by the Executive Officer of the student progress committee. As part of the conditions of ethics approval, the Executive Officer was required to de-identify the letters to protect the identify of the student.

Thematic analysis

Miller and Alvarado (2005) have listed three approaches when analysing organisational documents: content analysis; commentary analysis; and analysis of documents as actors. For the purposes of this project, it was decided to adopt a content analysis approach using documents as commentary which was consistent with the interpretative approach. The analysis of the letters allows for an examination of how learning experience and associated impacting issues are constructed. The emergent key themes were gathered as a primary data source were paraphrased and entered into the computer. These records were then included in the collective data pool which were then commenced analysing.

These ‘official’ documents serve to document how students produced both textual and pictorial accounts of their life. When reading through the letters, these documents provide historical accounts of the relationships with university and significant others. Importantly, these letters show how they engaged and regulated their life over time, albeit with limited success.

Findings

Initial findings indicate that students experienced a range of complex issues which adversely impacts on their studies. Emerging from the data were issues such as health, family, work / study balance, misunderstanding expectations and isolation.

Students explained that they experienced either a major acute episode or an ongoing exacerbation of a chronic illness. Acute episodes included incidents such as fractures which required a period of hospitalisation and ongoing rehabilitation which impacted on their ability to attend lectures and tutorials. Whereas, those students who had an exacerbation of a chronic illness such as depression, anxiety or chronic fatigue syndrome also took time away from attend classes. Students with chronic health issues also disclosed that time away from their studies due to hospitalisation or the adverse effects from medication changes.

A sudden, often unexpected death of a close family member was also mentioned as a reason as adversely impacting academic performance. Typically this would be a parent or grandparent of a student, who had close family ties, and was required to assist in funeral preparation or supporting other family members. Similarly, students who had a family member with a terminal or palliative condition where death was expected also explained that supporting other family during this time adversely impacted on their studies.

For international students who experienced a sudden unexpected death of a family member having to travel back to their home country for the funeral often at short notice, impacted on their studies. However, those international students who were unable to travel to their home country for the funeral explained that they experienced a prolonged episode of grief at being absent which caused additional stress and loss of ability to concentrate on their studies.

Students who underestimate the impact of their paid employment, sporting commitments, religious and / or family commitments on their ability to meet satisfactory academic performance, time management and balancing competing demands emerged as an issue.

Students reported that they were unable to maintain attendance at lectures or classes, and found it increasingly difficult to catch up on their learning and assessments.

Some students reported that they were unsure about the topic content and requirements of the various assessment tasks as they were unclear in what was expected of them in the topic. This was apparent for those students who were unfamiliar with the science based topic material. Of concern, students stated that they were unable or unwilling to access support for their learning as they were not confident contacting teaching staff or were unfamiliar with various student support services available such as academic skills and health and counselling services. International students often cited that the feelings of isolation due to English language requirements, change in learning context, shy personality made it increasingly difficult to ask for assistance.

Discussion

Adding to the existing body of knowledge of first year experience, this project will assist with bringing to light the various factors which impacted on making adequate progress through their university studies. The findings will be explained using Arnett (2000) 'emerging adulthood' developmental theory to highlight those factors associated with independence, regulation and identity formation.

Many of the challenges facing students are a result of a failure in self regulation (Wilson & Lizzio 2007). From the findings of this project, the voice of the student highlights the increasing complexity of their lives as they attempt to move to become independent and self-regulate their behaviours. Further support in this transition from first year teachers and support services to continue this journey will ensure their success.

Outcomes of FYHE11 session

Given that previous FYHE conferences have addressed a number of issues in this paper such as transition experiences, by drawing on the uniqueness of this in-progress research will highlight the early findings as they emerge from the data analysis. This project is unique in being able to draw first hand from the student account in the form of letters to the relevant administrative committee regarding their enrolment

Session outline

Whole group discussion ice breaker (5 mins): Consider the question: what is the experience for a student who has not adequately progressed through their studies? Drawing from participants, what has been their experience of university students who have failed to adequately progressed?

Facilitators (7 minutes): Outline of Flinders University Assessment and Learning Policy as it relates to academic progression and report initial findings from the data analysis.

Paired discussion (10 mins): Ask pairs of participants to brainstorm the issues as they relate to findings which link with the key themes from Arnett (2000) about 'emerging adulthood'.

Facilitators + Whole group discussion (7 mins): Draw together ideas from floor – what has raised that has not been part of Flinders University experience? Given Arnett's (2000) developmental theory of 'emerging adulthood' how does this explain the factors which have

impacted upon student progress? What are the implications for university academics, administrators and support services in supporting a positive transition experience?

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