STUDENT TRANSITION IN THE AUSTRALIAN DUAL-SECTOR ENVIRONMENT: ASSUMED TO EXPLICIT?

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Abstract

Policy changes in the Australian Higher Education sector have prompted the need to review student transition, particularly the transition from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) to university to ensure movement between the two sectors is more accessible. A Guaranteed Entry Scheme (GES) was implemented in the dual sector institution where this case study is located to enable TAFE students to seamlessly move between the two divisions. This transition from TAFE diplomas to a degree program presents its own set of challenges. Acting on results from a survey, a targeted orientation program was developed for articulating TAFE students. The outcome of this event and the subsequent student evaluation led to the recommendation that orientation and transition activities be made explicit rather than assumed, even for students who believed they knew their institution due to the geographical co-location of TAFE and university campuses.

Keywords: Transition to higher education, student orientation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The changes in the higher education sector recommended by the Review of Australian Higher Education [1] have resulted in many Australian universities exploring strategies to ensure that they consolidate or enhance their position in an uncapped undergraduate market. Also arising from this review are new targets that universities will be required to meet regarding the numbers of participating students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, a traditionally under-represented group at Australian universities [1], [2]. While less than 20% of low SES students apply directly for university courses, the rate of participation in Vocational and Education Training has been found to increase relative to the decrease in SES [3]. The advantage of the dual sector institution where the present research is located is that there is the opportunity for students to seamlessly articulate from Diplomas offered in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector of the institution, to the university sector of the same name, and graduate with a degree. This potentially offers a pathway for non-traditional students, that is, students who do not progress straight from secondary school to university, to enter the higher education sector. To capitalise on the nature of being a dual-sector institution, students entering the current institution's TAFE sector in 2011, were guaranteed a commonwealth supported place in a university degree program with pre-established block credit upon completion of a Diploma or Advanced Diploma. The introduction of the Guaranteed Entry Scheme (GES) led to an overview of student transition between the two sectors, because it is acknowledged that TAFE and University have different educational pedagogies, assessment practices and expectations. [4]. potentially making transition between the two forms of learning challenging for some students.

The different educational pedagogies employed in the TAFE and university sectors potentially result in a variety of student transition issues. For example, students have identified adapting from competency based assessment practices at TAFE to criteria based assessment at university, as well as a shift to more independent learning at university, as challenging [4]. In addition, TAFE articulating students have reported a perceived lack of social support at university due to no longer being in daily contact with the same teacher or academic who may have reminded them of deadlines and been pro-active in taking a wider interest in their well-being [5]. It has also been noted that the greater theoretical content and expectation of high level thinking skills in university subjects, as well as greater workload expectations, have been raised as issues for TAFE students who articulated to university degree programs [4], [5].

The change proposed by the GES is that on enrolment into their TAFE Diploma students will be guaranteed a university place providing they complete their Diploma or Advanced Diploma. The students will also be guaranteed a block credit, usually equivalent to one-third of the required subjects.
in the degree. It is also a shift in the application process, no longer requiring that students take the initiative to apply for a place in their degree of choice, as they are now guaranteed a university place and need complete no other hurdle than graduate their Diploma. This strategic change is based on earlier research indicating that students are over thirty percent more likely to progress if they have been given an offer early in their lifelong learning journey; thereby raising expectations, aspirations, engagement and attainment [6]. With this offer comes the responsibility to ensure that articulating students are provided with sufficient transition support.

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF SUCCESSFUL STUDENT TRANSITION

There is an extensive body of literature that provides evidence based strategies to help students' transition to university learning as well as to minimise attrition rates and maximise student achievement. These strategies introduce students to the academic discourse of their discipline and help them adapt to the role mastery required for success at university [7], [8].

Some key messages from the student transition research are that successful students have a substantial degree of engagement and feelings of connection towards their institution [9]. Further, [9] made the observation that developing feelings of connection with an institution is likely to be influenced by a student’s demographic factors, with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds typically having less prior exposure to university culture. With increased access to higher education, the gaps between the cultural capital of high and low income students could be an equity issue if students are not supported effectively as they transition. Ten years later the same researcher commented that access without support does not provide opportunity [10] and that it is particularly important to enhance the transition support for students from non-traditional backgrounds. This suggests there is a particular need to evaluate and enhance the transition for TAFE articulating students.

To explore the factors that assist in a successful student transition, [11] investigated universities that ranked highest in the National Survey of Student Experience (NSSE) in the USA. It was found that three common principles were evident at the high achieving institutions. Firstly, the institutions held a shared vision with a focus on student learning and success as a priority. Secondly, there was an abundance of explicit student ‘guideposts’ explaining what to do and when to do it. The third common principle was a series of early warning systems and ‘safety nets’ embedded into the curriculum, to ensure that students who were having difficulties were identified and encouraged to seek help and support [11]. Further, in the highest achieving NSSE institutions, students were assigned advisors to create an interactive network of high expectations. Importantly, in all these institutions it is evident that student transition support came from multiple sources, that is not just academic faculty, but also adjunct units within the institutions such as the Library or Student Services areas (Kuh, 2005). It is apparent that successful transitions are likely to be facilitated by a ‘whole of institution’ response.

In Australia, student transition was the focus of a 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Fellowship [12]. [12] found that there was a need to "focus on what intentional and holistic first year curriculum design might optimally entail" [12 p.1]. In response to this Kift developed a set of first-year transition strategies such as regular monitoring of students; acknowledgement of the variety of skills, attitudes, and learning styles that students bring to university; curriculum designed to provide scaffolding for learning success; and the inclusion of challenging, interactive, collaborative, peer to peer and co-curricula engagement opportunities [12]. Similarly, [13] suggested that all universities need to make academic expectations explicit to students, especially regarding assessment tasks. She proposed that the best strategy to achieve this is to provide an integrated curriculum drawing on students' life experiences. Devlin recommended to 'normalise and not pathologise expectations by clarifying instructional language. For example, in regard to accessing services for assistance, utilising language such as: ‘the following resources are vital in completing this task’, rather than ‘if you are having trouble go to...' [13]. Like [7] and [8], she emphasised the need to regularly articulate the discourse and the rules of the discipline, to ensure that the tacit is made explicit and to help students’ master the role of becoming a university student.

The common themes in this body of literature are recommendations to embed transition strategies in the culture of the institution, as well as to encourage academic faculty and adjunct staff to collaborate with students to gain a better understanding of the learning process. In successful institutions, the job of assisting with the transition of students is shared by both academic units and support units within
the university such as the library and student associations. [12] goes on to suggest that transition pedagogy should be a synchronous relationship between policy development (top down) and the development and implementation of strategies and resources by academic and professional staff responsible for the students transition (bottom up).

In this context, the current research was undertaken to inform and develop a set of transition strategies that would provide an integrated and multifaceted approach to supporting students. After consultation across the university and a survey of TAFE students who had articulated to Higher Education the previous semester, four initiatives were developed to address different aspects of the student lifecycle. At the first stage students transitioning from TAFE were offered an intensive (10 day) preparation for university course run by TAFE in conjunction with Higher Education and language support staff. The second initiative was a dedicated orientation program for TAFE students that focussed on addressing gaps identified by a student survey. The third initiative was the development of a personal best program to assist students in developing new learning skills and improving the proficiency with which they can enhance their learning. The fourth initiative was the appointment of a dedicated transition coordinator to work specifically with first and second year convenors on the development of assessment and curriculum materials to scaffold students as they transitioned to Higher Education. This paper reports on the original survey and the development of the second initiative, the dedicated transition program for TAFE students in light of gaps identified by the students.

3  RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Traditional action research methodology was employed because it is considered to be well suited in situations of institutional change [14]. For this project there was active and regular engagement with stakeholders therefore our research has also been informed through a number of other activities. Consistent with the action research approach taken in this project, the team consulted regularly reflecting on the research outcomes and research process making changes based on these reflections.

The institutional change consisted of implementing the GES for articulating TAFE students. Prior to implementing this institutional change, it was deemed necessary to evaluate the current state of the existing transition arrangements and identify gaps. Once identified, changes would be proposed and implemented. Further, the changes would be evaluated and further adjustments made if necessary.

The data collection was carried out in three stages:

3.1  Stage one

TAFE articulants in their first year of university study were invited to take part in a research project exploring their transition to university. Volunteers were initially invited to participate in focus groups, however students responded to the original email request saying they were happy to give their opinion but would rather do so via email than in face to face focus groups. Consequently the focus group questions were converted into open ended survey questions. When a student indicated that they were willing to participate in the study, and volunteered their email address, they were emailed the questions in an email attachment. The responses were returned via email to the second investigator who de-identified them and saved the attachments in a separate file before forwarding this to the primary investigator for analysis.

3.2  Stage Two

The feedback from the first survey was sorted and sifted to identify similar phrases and then inductive coding methodology was used to identify themes. A thematic matrix [14] was created to determine common themes and perceived gaps in the transition preparedness of students. Three themes emerged from the data: firstly that the majority of students had not attended any formal orientation sessions; secondly, that they felt under prepared for the learning environment at university and thirdly, that most students found it difficult to keep up with the workload.

In response to the gaps identified in the survey a specialised TAFE Pathways Orientation day was developed which was piloted with incoming TAFE articulants at mid-year. The day focused on addressing issues raised in the initial survey results. The second data collection consisted of an evaluation sheet at the end of this day where the students were requested to provide feedback on the activities. The results of this survey are presented in the next section.
3.3 Stage Three

The third stage of data collection was a survey of students who had participated in the mid year TAFE Pathways Orientation day, using the same series of questions as those used with the original cohort in semester one, to determine if the targeted orientation initiative had a positive impact on the transition experiences of the mid year cohort. This survey was issued in week six of semester two to the fifteen students who had participated in the TAFE Pathways Orientation day. The results of this survey, in conjunction with evaluation of the Pathways Orientation day, were used as the basis to refine subsequent iterations of the program.

These three stages of data collection have provided some insight into transition experiences of TAFE articulating students. The first stage provided eleven student responses, the second stage seven responses and the final stage only three responses. While generalisations cannot be made from such small numbers in this localised study, the present findings mirror those of larger studies and provide an insight into Australian students' transition from TAFE to university.

4 FINDINGS RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current findings will be presented in chronological order, highlighting common themes as they emerged. Although responses from the first survey were few in number, the students had almost completed their first semester at university, so could reflect on the transition experience. An initial finding was that the majority of participants struggled with the transition from TAFE to Higher Education, particularly in the first few weeks. This may have been exacerbated because very few TAFE transition students had engaged in the university's Orientation program. Only one student reported that they fully participated in Orientation activities and enjoyed the experience. Four wrote that because they had been students of the institution for two years, albeit in the TAFE sector, they did not feel the need to attend. Three said they participated in some activities but felt they had nothing in common with younger students, despite the university having a substantial mature aged cohort. Five students said they were time poor due to work and family commitments and did not consider Orientation a priority.

It was apparent from this feedback that the current university orientation program would benefit from redevelopment to specifically meet the needs of the TAFE transition cohort. Further, it was evident that the importance of attending Orientation needed to be explicitly stated and explained to the articulating students.

The second outcome from the initial survey was that the participants reported a lack of preparedness for the different learning pedagogy of university study. When asked to describe their academic experiences 'so far' the majority [n=8] reported that it was "very different [than expected]", "confusing", "harder than I thought". The remaining three respondents said they found the experience "fulfilling", "easy", and "favourable however the challenges are greater". Overall, no student indicated the experience was what they anticipated and generally this difference was perceived in a negative manner, suggesting they could have been better equipped. In particular, there was a clear need for TAFE articulating students to be prepared prior to the transition as to what changes they could expect and what they could do in response. The third finding was that all participants reported that transition had been a difficult and challenging experience. In particular, students reported that they were having difficulty "keeping up with the reading", "writing essays", "getting clear directions", [with the] "difference in teaching styles" as well as with the "faster pace" of learning and the perception that the coursework is harder. It was apparent that there was a need for the institution to do more to assist these students in their transition to university.

These student responses mirror gaps that have been identified in the general student transition to university literature [11], [15], [16], [10] in particular reported university students' feelings of being overwhelmed with the workload as well as with the lack of familiarity with the processes (academic and administrative) of university. The results of the first stage survey highlighted that while there was a tacit staff belief that transition strategies were embedded into subjects, perhaps this was more ad hoc, and less successful, than anticipated.

The survey results also raised questions about the adequacy of a 'one-size-fits-all' orientation. The first stage of the project indicated a need for a targeted orientation program for articulating TAFE students to provide greater direction in how they could manage the differences in pedagogy and to normalise the changes they could expect with the transition.
Stage two of the research project was the implementation of a specific Orientation day for students articulating from TAFE at the start of semester two. The schedule for this day was to address areas identified by students in the semester one survey as lacking or not clearly explained.

The program content had 3 key objectives:

1. To prepare students academically for university study
2. To align student expectations with the realities of university education
3. To inform students of the available support services

For the first objective students participated in a two hour workshop entitled "Surviving your first university assignment" The session was presented by academics from the Faculty's Language and Learning Lab and emphasised the core concepts of report and essay writing, Harvard referencing and research techniques.

For the second objective, two sessions were held. The first, "Ask a Pathways student" provided the students with an opportunity to hear and ask questions about the experience of transitioning from TAFE to university from a current student who had articulated from TAFE the previous year (a Pathways student). The second part focussed on the academic differences between TAFE and university study from an academic's perspective. Through the use of practical examples the workshop covered: class structures and expectations, project units, learning guides, how to use the learning management system, assessment, mark allocation and opportunities for industry based learning and studying overseas.

To meet the final objective students were given a tour of the Student Information Centre and the locations of available support services. Explanation and promotion of these services were integrated throughout all workshops.

Of the fifteen students who attended on the day, seven completed and returned an evaluation of the sessions. Completing the evaluation was not compulsory and the low response rate may be a product of this. All seven responses were positive and focused on the value of the practical information provided, such as how to reference correctly, as well as the differences in assignment expectations. All who attended reported that they now felt better prepared for university. Interestingly, four of the seven suggested that a campus tour would have been a useful addition to the day. A tour had not been considered necessary given that the TAFE buildings are geographically co-located alongside the university buildings. However, the assumption that students were familiar with both sides of the campus appears to have been misplaced and underlines the importance of not making assumptions regarding what students' know.

The third and final data collection activity was a follow up survey of the fifteen TAFE articulating students six weeks into semester, to determine if they reported similar transition issues as articulating students in semester one. Unfortunately the response rate was again very poor, with only three surveys being returned. Once more, participation was voluntary and therefore out of our control. Of the three responses, students nominated the most striking differences between studying at TAFE and university was an increased workload, less explanation around assessment tasks and a greater emphasis on theory than at TAFE. One student commented that the atmosphere was livelier and another reported that they found it friendlier than expected, indicating that there were positive aspects as well as potential difficulties. The greatest challenges nominated were time management, the requirement to work in teams, assignment expectations and keeping up with the workload. This suggests that while the orientation was a successful component of transition assistance, this was only one aspect of a more integrated approach required to support student transition.

In contrast to the first stage responses from an earlier cohort of students, when asked what could improve their transition experience, all three respondents commented on the added value of the targeted orientation day. One student suggested:

"The best way to make a steady transition is to attend the pathways orientation which demonstrated what to expect"

and a second:

"since I found out about those services [learning support services], I have used them a fair bit with my assignments, such as referencing help for example".

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While the number of responses was too small to provide generalisable conclusions, these comments suggest that the targeted transition day was a valuable first step towards embedding transition initiatives across the student lifecycle.

5 CONCLUSION: IMPACT OF PROJECT AND ONGOING RESEARCH

The GES scheme has the potential to substantially increase the number of students completing an undergraduate degree and to assist non-traditional students' transition from TAFE to higher education. As the findings from this research suggest, making tacit assumptions about the different expectations at university explicit, will assist students to adjust to the expectations of a different learning pedagogy. It is apparent that there is value in seeking feedback from the students themselves to clearly understand the challenges they are facing and to tailor the support to meet their needs.

The findings from this research project emphasise the need to strategically approach and monitor student transition, both within faculties and across the university. As indicated by [11], and supported by the current research, student transition is enhanced by a whole of institution approach. In response, the findings in this paper are one part of a multifaceted approach which is currently being developed throughout the institution and will be evaluated as the components are piloted. Further, the implementation of these recommendations will assist all students embarking on their university journey as good transition for one group is likely to contribute to a good transition for all.

REFERENCES


